

Playing Rough: Racial and Gender Stereotypes,
Performance and Misreading in the Fiction of Junot Díaz
and Dany Laferrière

by

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Abstract

Stereotyping involves the hasty, simplistic reading of a person, situation, or thing, based on a few, salient features. My dissertation examines stereotypes at four interconnected levels: (1) racial and sexual stereotypes applied to human bodies in fictional literary texts; (2) stereotypes applied to authors' bodies, based on features of their identities; (3) stereotypical readings of texts that conform to popular and/or academic reading practices; and (4) literary genres as stereotypes that direct reading. In the works of fiction I examine, contemporary, Caribbean diasporic male writers of color write first- and second-person narratives that deploy, with irony, a similar principal stereotype. Haitian-Quebecois Dany Laferrière, in his novel *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, plays with the figure of the *Nègre*, an exotic, hypersexual, black male immigrant to Montreal who drives white female *Blanches* wild with desire. Dominican-American Junot Díaz deploys the stereotype of the Dominican stud in his short fiction, *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*. There we witness the narrator learn, imitate and perfect the macho, womanizing role that causes female partners to leave him. These texts engage self-reflexively with the stereotypes they deploy and with the writing and reading of texts. They parody the instruction manual genre in their form while, in their content, they depict the subtle

mechanisms of male-to-male instruction that form men into the racialized stud role they problematize.

My dissertation examines the intersections and ironies of race, gender, sexuality and class in texts that are at once ironic and dead serious. I argue that the writers' parodic play with a racialized stereotype of masculinity is attractive yet risky, critical yet complicit, for their ironic deployment of stereotypes necessarily reinforces them, even as it seeks to deconstruct them. Furthermore, these provocative, tongue-in-cheek narratives reproduce sexism as they critique racism.

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Introduction

The idea of self in the land of self-help is a slippery one.

-Mohsin Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

What to read and what to do with that reading, that is the full form of the question.

-Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

1 The Identity Police Strike Again

Beyoncé's performance of her recent track, "Formation," at the 2016 Super Bowl provoked quite a buzz, as does nearly everything relating to this pop star and African American icon. Her performance represented black women's power in an unsurprisingly sexualized way, and her troupe of black women dancers faced off with Bruno Mars' all-male troupe in a contest between the sexes. Ostensibly, that was not the feature that provoked reactions. Rather, the artist's lyrical celebration of blackness and her visual references to discourses of black power¹ elicited negative reactions from white, right-wing constituencies. They protested that Beyoncé's performance of black pride and black power was 'too black,' meaning anti-white, and therefore

¹ In the version performed at the 2016 Super Bowl, Beyoncé sang, "I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros, I like my Negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils." The halftime performance paid tribute the 50th anniversary of the Black Panther Party, visually referenced by dancers in black leather jackets and berets who danced in an X formation and raised fists in the air, a large golden X across Beyoncé's chest and strings of ammunition down her sleeves. The performance involved an all-female, all-black troupe of dancers and marching band musicians and therefore referenced black *women's* power (sexual and otherwise), in addition to the 1960s militant black power movement.

See "Super Bowl 50 Halftime Show - Bruno Mars & Beyonce ONLY [HD] 2016," YouTube video, 4:22, from a performance televised by CBS on February 7, 2016, posted by "Online Trends," February 7, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_Hgh7sPDLm.

excluded non-black audiences at this, most all-American of performance venues.² We can wonder to what extent this display of black *women*'s power contributed to the outcry; empowered black women are certainly disruptive to the patriarchal, white supremacist ideology. I imagine, however, that a similar display of black *men*'s power, which would echo more closely the visual iconography of the Black Panther Party, would have only elicited even stronger, more anxious racist reactions. Those who critiqued Beyoncé's performance for its 'too blackness' exposed their sense of entitlement to white privilege and their assumption that 'Americanness' equates with whiteness, which equates with neutrality. Given demographic projections of a non-white majority in the United States in the coming decades, such notions of Americanness are certainly due for revision.

The policing of identity categories directs the work of the two authors I examine in this project: Dany Laferrière and Junot Díaz play with racial and gender stereotypes and use irony, parody, inversion and subversion to examine notions of Americanness, Québécois, Dominicanity, blackness, brownness, whiteness and heterosexual masculinity. Specifically, I examine parodies of 'How To' instruction manuals and self-help texts that deploy a similar central stereotype of racialized heterosexual masculinity: the black or Dominican stud. In Laferrière's *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer / How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired* and in Díaz's short story collections *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*, the men of color who narrate both struggle with and exploit the stereotypes assigned to them, learning, teaching and performing identity roles in both sincere and duplicitous ways.

² Right wing reactions to her performance consistently gloss the Black Lives Matter Movement (referenced in the "Formation" music video) and its protest of police brutality against blacks as 'racism' against white police. On the *Fox and Friends* morning show the following day, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani called for "decent, wholesome entertainment" oriented to "middle America," a place where, it is implied, black pride and black power have no place. A protest was organized outside the NFL headquarters several days after the Super Bowl, though turnout and press coverage were low. See Diana Falzone, "Backlash to Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance continues to grow," *FoxNews.com*, February 12, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2016/02/12/backlash-to-beyonce-super-bowl-performance-continues-to-grow.html>.

Seizing upon the right-wing protests of Beyoncé's black pride, *Saturday Night Live* aired a sketch parodying whites' panic upon discovering that Beyoncé was black.³ In the sketch, white parents race to protect their children and white office employees run for cover upon hearing the shocking news of Beyoncé's racial identity. When one white woman denies that her black female friend is black because, as she says, "you're, like, my girl!", or when two white men realize in horror that women can also be black, we see blackness associated with otherness and undesirability, and whites denying the blackness of people they like or desire. A white mother, in her panic, thinks her white daughter has become black and says tearfully, "Oh God, you're black, too!" Upon realizing that the little girl she is seeing is her black friend's daughter, she cries, "Oh, thank God!" The sketch ends with another white mother moving to smother her son with a pillow, to protect him from this new black and dangerous world. In the meantime, black onlookers are unsurprised, if perturbed, at whites' reactions, illustrating how commonplace such anti-black racism is. This parodic sketch, clearly tongue-in-cheek, clearly in mockery of white fear of blackness's blackness, offers a pop culture example of the ironies and pleasures of race in contemporary North America. Laferrière and Díaz in turn make literary interventions along similar lines: both critique racism in North America, at times using irony, mockery and parody as their modes of critique, while they also teach serious lessons on the subject.

The *SNL* sketch mocks white racism and white racist fear, thereby critiquing these; at the same time, however, it ambivalently authorizes white people to repeat racist viewpoints aloud and on national television, but protects their racist speech behind the shield of irony, couching it in parody. This sketch is both funny in its self-reflexive, self-deprecating mode whereby whites mock their own racism and stupidity, and deeply discomfiting, as in it, white people repeat and reiterate racist discourses. One may accept the mode of parody and receive the racist enunciation as mockery; or one may hear white people, with a long history as proponents of racism, echoing and reinforcing that racism. I do not doubt that the writers of the sketch intend to critique racism via parody and irony. However, in any parody of an oppressive discourse, the oppressive discourse is necessarily repeated; and as I will argue, regardless of intent, racist values are reinforced when racist discourse is repeated. Furthermore, if the directional flow of the parody or

³ See "SNL – The Day Beyoncé Turned Black," Vimeo video, 3:24, from a performance televised by NBC on February 13, 2016, posted by "Kevin Genus," February 14, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/155287084>.

joke follows historical patterns of oppression (i.e., white people making anti-black racist jokes, straight people making anti-gay jokes, or men mocking women in a parody of sexism), the reinforcement of the oppression gathers force commensurate with the historical precedent of (non-ironic) racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. In the *SNL* example, I read irony and parody as modes that authorize members of groups historically guilty of racism to repeat racism again, and to get away with it, since it is now enacted in the context of a joke.⁴ But some jokes are not funny; or more accurately (since humor is very subjective), some jokes should not be made, in light of the harm they can do, in light of the harm already done in the sum history of racial and gender oppression. I would argue that white people joking about racism – a centuries-old, systemic, institutional problem that has brought about slavery, genocide, and oppression in myriad ways – is one such instance. When the white mother is appalled to discover her daughter is black, she repeats discourses of black inferiority and undesirability. Despite the hyperbolized nature of her racist fear (imagining that her daughter, as a result of enjoying black culture, could become phenotypically black)⁵ and the parodic, self-mocking tone of the sketch, her racism nonetheless echoes sincere racist viewpoints advanced by whites throughout history and in the present day. The white, right-wing reaction to Beyoncé’s Super Bowl performance is one recent example of unironic, unparodic anti-black racism, which Beyoncé’s black pride- and black power-oriented performance sought to address. The *SNL* sketch’s parodic mode, however apparent, may be too weak compared to the historical force of anti-black racism to unambivalently perform its critique.

⁴ This is not to imply that those making the enunciation *are* racist and wish to surreptitiously circulate racism. In the *SNL* sketch and in moments in Laferrière’s and Díaz’s work where racist and sexist viewpoints are recirculated with some degree of irony, parody or humor, I do not assume the writers intend the racist or sexist enunciation as such. However, the irony can be thin, the subversive counterforce weak or even absent. Even when irony or parody is apparent, when the enunciation traces the dynamics of historical racism and sexism, the second-degree dimension easily collapses into a first-degree reinforcement.

⁵ Blackness is many things beyond phenotype, including cultural expressions and practices. My discussion of performativity in the opening of Part One will elaborate on the performative dimensions of all identities. In the sketch, the white mother mistakes the black mother’s visibly black daughter for her own, thus exaggerating and parodying white fear of blackness, which is represented in this scene through phenotype. This inverts the earlier scene wherein a white woman is blind to her black friend’s phenotypic blackness. Irony and inversion abound here.

In my analysis of Laferrière's and Díaz's parodic, ironic and serious engagement with racial and gender stereotypes, this boundary between acceptable jokes and unacceptable jokes guides my interpretations. Both writers play rough with sensitive topics; their play is at once enjoyable, edgy, provocative and risky. As men of color, these writers can make jokes about race that, I argue, they should not make about gender. Their 'jokes' are more accurately parodic, ironic and at times, dead serious representations of contemporary racial and gender power relationships, the intricacies of which my analysis will track. When their first- and second-person narrators – straight men of color like their authors – receive whites' racism or themselves manifest racism toward whites or toward other people of color, the authors' critical thrust is palpable. It is clear that, when Laferrière's narrator ironically plays the role of the hypersexual African savage, he is mocking whites who believe in such a stereotype. Similarly, when Díaz's narrator laments his black hair and prefers white girls, in seriousness and sincerity, we can sense that the author's representation of racial self-hatred and colorism within African diasporic communities is a form of critique. However, when these same characters manifest sexism toward women (white, in the case of Laferrière, and of color, in the case of Díaz), I find myself in the same discomfited position I was in while watching the *SNL* sketch: like whites playing at and parodying white racism, men playing at and parodying sexism strikes me as uncomfortably familiar, as too close to an un-critical replication of dominant discourses of oppression to be its opposite. The distance between the second-degree parody of racism or sexism and the first-degree racist or sexist enunciation easily disappears.

In the most simplistic terms, one central question guiding my project is this: who can make which jokes? Who can parody or ironize what? Since I am examining the deployment of racial and gender stereotypes, which encapsulate and perform familiar modes of oppression, who can deploy these and in which ways? In literature, with its particular constraints and capacities, how should stereotypes be treated? *Can* they be treated in a way that resists, rather than reinforces, their reductive, oppressive power? When irony, inversion and parody are the modalities used to treat stereotypes and their oppressions, what consequences does this have for the literary intervention, on the one hand, and the political intervention, on the other?

Stereotypes are all around us and in us; it seems impossible to avoid them, for they are constantly reiterated, and they provide communicative shortcuts to relay information, albeit simplified, reductive, and possibly inaccurate, about individuals. When we seek to critique them,

in ostensibly critical representations of stereotypes that resemble uncritical representations, the effect can be insidious and dangerous. As accustomed as we are to uncritical deployments of stereotype, the critical deployment is a volatile maneuver with unpredictable results, for the subversive intent can easily be lost. My project examines this perplexing dynamic in the able literary hands of two savvy, politically engaged, self-reflexive writers of fiction. My analysis of their *literary* treatment of stereotypes connects to a broader problematic: the potential for recuperating and redefining established symbols and discourses of racial and gender oppression, and the efficacy of irony, inversion and parody as modalities with which to do so. Important in my analysis of such recuperations, subversive or ironic deployments and the progressive or regressive potential of these, is the identity of the speaker, for this always shapes how the enunciation is received. The identity of the receiver (or in this case, the reader) likewise shapes her/his interpretation.

2 Laferrière, Díaz and the Self in Self-Help

Dany Laferrière and Junot Díaz were born on the island of Hispaniola, fifteen years and roughly a generation apart. Both migrated to northeast North America in the mid-1970s. Laferrière, born in 1953 in Haiti, emigrated to Montréal at age 23, fleeing potential persecution as a journalist under the Jean-Claude Duvalier regime. Díaz, born in the Dominican Republic in 1968, emigrated to New Jersey at age seven with his family. Both writers address dictatorship and its aftermath in their work. Indeed, their fathers were employed by the dictatorial François Duvalier and Rafael Trujillo regimes that the writers oppose. We know them as straight men, as men of color of African descent, as immigrants whose immigration was shaped by political and economic concerns, as brilliant writers who win literary prizes, honors and accolades, and as social critics with outspoken political views and visible public presences. In the texts I examine, both also create first- and second-person narrators who are also straight men of color and writers, like their creators. Laferrière and Díaz both write postmodern metafiction, rife with ironies, inversions, jokes, jabs, and self-reflexive techniques. Each writer has a distinct, consistent, recognizable narrative voice across his oeuvre. By virtue of their recognizable voices and their metafictional devices, both play at the permeable boundary between fiction and autobiography, as their narrators are writer-doubles ostensibly writing the texts we read.

The two writers' many similarities – biographical, thematic, formal and stylistic – beg that that their work be studied together. This project is the first such effort.⁶ Laferrière and Díaz's fictional parodies of instruction manuals or self-help texts have at their center the hypersexual black or black Dominican American male stud, who serves as our narrator. Laferrière's 1985 debut novel *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se déshonorer* plays with the 'How To' genre in its title. Díaz's 1996 debut short story collection *Drown* first plays with the 'How To' form in the story "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl or Halfie"; in his 2013 collection *This Is How You Lose Her*, the author takes up the 'How To' form again in the collection's title, and in several second-person stories. Inherent in this genre is the notion of instruction: the text instructs the reader to learn a skill or improve in some manner. My analysis will link this pedagogical aspect of the parodied genre with the performative mechanisms by which identities and stereotypes are transmitted: taught, learned and performed. Also recalling the self-help genre are the diaristic, intimate tone of the texts' narration and their narrators' process of writing themselves into better selves, which echo the dynamics of self-help culture; so, too, does the avowal of and reckoning with guilt we see at the end of Díaz's recent collection.⁷ I argue that, like the self-help books and instructional manuals they parody, these texts offer lessons to their readers: lessons about the interconnected histories of slavery and colonialism, lessons about self, identity and processes of stereotyping, and lessons about reading.

Díaz and Laferrière are not the only contemporary writers of fiction playing with this genre. Over the last thirty years, a number of humorous or ironic fictional texts parodying the self-help genre have been published; I highlight a few relevant titles here. Lorrie Moore's 1985 short story collection *Self-Help* opens with the story "How to Be the Other Woman," a second-person, present-tense tale that prefigures Díaz's work: 'you' is a masked form of 'I' telling an

⁶ Several pages of Rosamond S. King's "Sheep and Goats Together: Interracial Relationships from Black Men's Perspectives" address interracial sex between men of color and white women in Laferrière's novel and Díaz's story, "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie." This is the only scholarship I have found linking and comparing the two writers. See Rosamond S. King, "Sheep and Goats Together: Interracial Relationships from Black Men's Perspectives," in *Free at Last? Black America in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Juan José Battle, Michael Bennett, Anthony J. Lemelle, Jr. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 232 - 235.

⁷ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 180.

autobiographical tale, disguised as instruction for others. Héctor Abad Faciolince's 1996 *Tratado de culinaria para mujeres tristes/ Recipes for Sad Women* offers short vignettes with recipes, remedies and reflections, written in the first person by an implied male narrator addressing sad women in the second person and demystifying male behavior for them. Mayra Santos-Febres' 2011 *Tratado de medicina natural para hombres melancólicos/ Treatise on Natural Medicine for Melancholic Men* seems to respond to Abad Faciolince's text by offering its ironic mirror image: short vignettes from a female narrative voice offering second-person instructions and recipes for melancholic men. Mohsin Hamid's 2013 *How to Get Filthy Rich In Rising Asia* is structured into chapters whose titles indicate steps toward reaching the goal announced in the novel's title. It opens by addressing the reader as 'you' and offering general advice, as a self-help book would. But it then moves to define the "slippery" self mentioned in my epigraph as a very specific 'you' who is not the generic reader, but rather a Pakistani boy shivering under his mother's cot. In all of these second-person parodies of self-help manuals, the capacious signifier 'you' signals flexibly multiple selves: multiple reader identities – the actual reader and the implied reader (in Faciolince's and Santos-Febres' texts, target audiences of sad women or melancholic men) – as well as in Moore's, Hamid's and Díaz's texts, a specific character whose tale we follow. Laferrière's first-person novel likewise tells the tale of our central character, offering lessons not suggested by its ironic title. Instruction, irony and identity characterize these parodic 'How To' texts.

This trend in fictional parodies of self-help books mirrors, in the second degree, the advent of self-help culture, in the first degree. The term first gained prominence in 1859, with Englishman Samuel Smiles' popular book *Self-Help*, a series of biographies about self-made men rising from obscurity to fame and fortune. It transmitted Victorian notions of individual responsibility and optimistically claimed that upward mobility was in one's own hands.⁸ Following a number of important shifts in the field of psychology and its notion of self, as well as the "paperback revolution" of 1939 which made paperback books affordable and accessible, the self-help genre as we know it grew dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s, with sales rising 96% between 1991 and 1996.⁹ This dramatic rise coincides with Laferrière's and Moore's 1985

⁸ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 152-154.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

fictional parodies, and with Díaz's 1996 story. The writers responded to the increase in popular psychology texts and the booming self-help industry. Among the many branches of knowledge self-help texts tackle, 'How To' guides addressing sex, love and relationships are certainly one popular category that Laferrière and Díaz play with.

Moving further back in time, the fifteenth-century Catalan text *Speculum al foderi* (translated as *The Mirror of Coitus*) offers a precedent for modern sex guidebooks and for Laferrière's and Díaz's risqué stories of studs. The small sex handbook combined medical knowledge, practical health advice, and erotic discourse from Christian and Arabic sources and "claimed to be written in a non-technical form for anyone who desired to read it."¹⁰ By making its practical advice "available to readers in the vernacular,"¹¹ it thus prefigures today's self-help genre. Pointedly, the *Speculum* was "a treatise on andrology¹² and sexual hygiene"¹³ directed at men. As my analyses will reveal, Laferrière's and Díaz's first- and second-person fictions also target an implied male reader who shares the heterosexual male perspective and priorities of the narrators and learns how to date, seduce, dupe, manipulate, and/or lose women. Much as *Speculum*'s anonymous author limited his comments on women to those that "facilitate the benefits of coitus for the male partner,"¹⁴ much of the obvious instruction offered in Díaz's and Laferrière's texts is meant to help men meet their sexual objectives with women. This focus on male perspectives places the real reader, whatever her/his identity, in the position of these heterosexual male narrators, and entices the reader into complicity with their sexist values and behaviors.

I seek to highlight here how the writers' play with the instruction manual genre and its didactic intent and tone speaks back to the broad colonial phenomenon of representing, studying, mastering and instructing the racial/ethnic other. The colonial-era gazetteer is one branch of such

¹⁰ Solomon, *Literature of Misogyny*, 51.

¹¹ Solomon, Introduction to *Mirror of Coitus*, vii.

¹² "the branch of physiology and medicine that deals with diseases and conditions specific to men." *New Oxford American Dictionary Online*, 3rd ed., s.v. "andrology, n.", accessed June 7, 2016,

http://www.oxfordreference.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780195392883.001.0001/m_en_us1413570?rskey=nCYf9f&result=1.

¹³ Méndez Cabrera, review of *Speculum al foderi*, 110.

¹⁴ Solomon, Introduction to *Mirror of Coitus*, x.

textual representation and domination. These pamphlets offered geographical, historical, demographic and cultural information about colonized regions and peoples; Herbert Hope Risley's 1894 *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* is one such text, offering a compendium on the history and cultures of Sikkim.¹⁵ The census-taking and surveying aspects of gazetteers and other colonial period texts are reflected obliquely in the structure of Díaz's *This Is How You Lose Her*, as each story explores one woman lost by the narrator, his father or brother, thereby taking a census of these and a survey of the field, if you will.

Hispaniola's position as an important site for Europe's early colonizing endeavor in the Americas, and as the locus of the first anti-colonial revolution and first black republic give it a privileged role in discussions of colonialism and anti-colonialism. *Comment faire l'amour*¹⁶ engages explicitly with French colonialism and slavery from the novel's epigraph onward, although Haiti is never mentioned and the immigrant narrator's nationality never provided. In his later books, Laferrière returns regularly to Haiti. Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is deeply engaged with Dominican history, including its colonial legacy and the period of the Trujillo dictatorship in the mid-twentieth century. References to colonialism and slavery are few but nonetheless present in *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*; Díaz is, however, eloquent and vocal about these forms of oppression and their contemporary manifestations in his public statements. I will trace the lessons Laferrière and Díaz teach readers about slavery, colonialism, and their contemporary consequences for men of color in North America. It is primarily through the narrators' heterosexual relationships that lessons are transmitted. Thus the writers' deployment of a central male stereotype – the black or black Dominican stud – always operates in relation to female stereotypes, which these parodic instruction manuals demystify as they instruct men like their narrators about the gendered other. Inverting colonial texts' demystification and therefore domination of the racial/ethnic other, these postcolonial texts ultimately demystify and dominate the gendered other.

¹⁵ See Herbert Hope Risley, *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1894).

¹⁶ Henceforth, I will abbreviate the text's title this way.

3 The Risky Business of Stereotype

I must here distinguish between two terms that are central to my discussion and have some overlapping features: *stereotype* and *identity*. A stereotype is a “preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person, situation, etc.; [...] a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type.”¹⁷ Noah M. Collins offers a more thorough definition that attends to the role stereotypes have in reinforcing power hierarchies:

A stereotype is [...] a consciously or unconsciously held rigid belief or expectation about a group that does not easily permit exceptions. Stereotyped beliefs [...] involve an agenda that benefits the ingroup at the expense of the stereotyped group ([...] or target group). Stereotypes help the ingroup members feel good about their group and themselves relative to the target group. A stereotype often concerns a trait that is important to the ingroup’s identity and emphasizes the distinctness and inferiority of the outgroup. Relatedly, stereotypes maintain sociopolitical hierarchies in society. They can serve as a justification for believing that certain groups are superior to others and as a rationale for oppressing target groups. [...] Sociopolitical factors and cognitive factors interact in both developing and maintaining stereotypes. Stereotypes emerge from the sociocultural context and are driven by power differentials between groups. [...] From the sociopolitical perspective, stereotypes grow out of a need to rationalize oppression and subjugation rather than simply out of cognitive processes and errors.¹⁸

Identities function via perceptions of otherness or difference, just as stereotypes do. Stereotypes involve externally-directed labeling, in that they set others apart from one’s own group by recourse to a limited number of rigid beliefs. Identity formation processes, on the other hand, can move in both directions: they can set apart those perceived as different, and include those perceived as similar. Stereotypes seize upon a limited number of features associated with a group and posit these as a norm against which individuals are measured. Identities tend to be understood with more complexity so as to accommodate diversity within a given identity group. They are, however, also typically grounded in a small number of features perceived to be common among group members, and also rely on norms. Through different processes of exclusion and/or inclusion, both stereotypes and identities foster a sense of collective belonging.

¹⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “stereotype, n. and adj.”, accessed December 23, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/189956?rskey=q2LLOj&result=1>.

¹⁸ Collins, “Stereotype,” 1334-40.

Both have political ramifications and are resources that groups draw upon to valorize themselves at the expense of others. Identity certainly has many features in excess of stereotype, but this cursory summary shows the degree of overlap between the two categories.

Richard Dyer, in “The Role of Stereotypes,” shows that “it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve.”¹⁹ Though stereotyping is part of a universal cognitive process of ordering one’s environment, it is not divorced from existing power relationships and structures of knowledge:

The effectiveness of stereotypes resides in the way they invoke a consensus. [...] The stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group, as if that agreement arose before, and independently of, the stereotype. Yet for the most part it is *from* stereotypes that we get our ideas about social groups. The consensus invoked by stereotypes is more apparent than real; rather, stereotypes express particular definitions of reality, with concomitant evaluation, which in turn relate to the disposition of power within society. Who proposes the stereotype, who has the power to enforce it, is the crux of the matter.²⁰

As we will see in Part One, Laferrière’s narrator deploys the *Nègre* stereotype – one originating in white domination and applied to him – self-consciously, thereby inverting the power structure, appropriating the label for himself and defusing it of its power. He asserts his power of self-definition and, in doing so, exits the realm of stereotype for that of identity. A stereotype applied from the inside, to oneself, with mockery and irony, can be defused of its power; alternatively, its power can be strategically deployed. A stereotype applied from the outside, by someone else, remains a threatening force. However, even in the former case, there is an ambivalence at the heart of any *critical* deployment of stereotype, for the stereotype’s enunciation necessarily calls up its uncritical meanings at the same time.

Mireille Rosello engages with this ambivalence in her study, *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures*, which analyzes how stereotypes function in literary and comedic practice. Given that stereotypes are difficult to avoid, she asks what artists

¹⁹ Dyer, “The Role of Stereotypes,” 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

do with stereotypes in their work. Her conception of stereotype involves a constellation of qualities: a stereotype is a “repetitive,” “memorable,” “recognizable norm,” and it is “iterative”:²¹

An ethnic stereotype is like a form of contamination: it is a strong element of iterativity that insinuates itself like some sort of bacteria to a general statement about a group or community. The stereotypical infection then turns this nondemonstratable statement into an instantly memorable formula that parades as common sense, truth, and wisdom.²²

Stereotypes are abstract and formal, and their mode of functioning must be distinguished from their content. She argues that it is easy to confuse content – “what the stereotype says about a certain racial or ethnic group [... – with] the stereotype itself”²³ – the stereotype’s memorable, easily repeated *form*. We are wrong to react to the *content* of stereotypes, she claims; instead, we can contest stereotypes on formal grounds. Since any reference to a stereotype entails its repetition, then the stereotype can be repeated differently, in a different form – rewriting, recontextualizing, reappropriating – so as to defuse some of its power.²⁴ If we can see through the “ruses of the stereotyping machine”²⁵ to observe how stereotypes form and operate, then these formations and operations are the real problems to address, rather than stereotypes’ content. This is because the content of a stereotype cannot be fought. Rosello cites Anne Herschberg-Pierrot’s claim that repeating and denouncing stereotypes are but two aspects of the same enunciation.²⁶ Rosello continues:

The decision to denounce a stereotype leads inexorably to a moment when the stereotype has to be uttered and that even this type of meta-utterance, this distanced repetition of a framed stereotype involves a minimum, unconscious yet unavoidable element of allegiance.²⁷

²¹ Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype*, 14 (“repetitive”), 37 (“memorable”), 15 (“recognizable norm”), 37 (“iterative”).

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

²³ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

Her argument goes further: counteracting the content of a stereotypical claim by a counterclaim – say, by claiming the *Nègre* is *not* a savage brute – not only fails to weaken the stereotype, but reinforces it by virtue of repeating the negative stereotype in the process of discrediting it. Following this logic, a stereotype cannot be quoted or invoked in the second degree, because its very nature is that of a first-degree, simplistic generalization. Rosello writes that “there is no possible innocent reference to a stereotype,”²⁸ a statement with serious implications for my dissertation about the figure of the black stud in literature. This position also troubles gestures of appropriation, as in cases where slurs like *nègre* or the ‘N’ word are adopted and redefined by speakers previously subjected to the slur: the word’s appropriated use nonetheless remains contaminated by its original, oppressive meaning. The difficulty with the second-degree uses of stereotype likewise has serious ramifications in the domains of comedy, irony and parody. Indeed, Rosello writes,

The stereotype is a form of enunciation that thrives on the possibility of confusion between the descriptive and the prescriptive – that is, on the death of irony. The erosion of irony is a tremendous risk to assume when the stereotype in question is malevolently racist.²⁹

A mocked stereotype can transform into an adopted stereotype when the distance between the first- and the second-degrees disappear; this risk is particularly worrisome when the stereotype in question is a damaging one. Irony can erode, and parody can crumble, when the stereotypical enunciation in question is steeped in centuries of oppression.

Grim as her prognosis may seem, Rosello is not without hope; stereotypes are not entirely invincible and we should think carefully about how to respond to them. In some cases, non-intervention is the best course of action. Refusing to repeat a stereotype is a form of resistance to it. In other cases, when a given stereotype is harmful enough, we can intervene by addressing its *form* primarily, rather than its content, for “a stereotype can be turned into a *relatively* harmless event, or at least deprived of most of its effectiveness.”³⁰ Her study examines writers’ different ways of managing stereotypes: by riskily reappropriating them, by refusing to intervene, by

²⁸ Ibid., 38.

²⁹ Ibid., 38.

³⁰ Ibid., 40.

caricaturing them, or by using language to undermine their memorability.³¹ In their own unique ways, I see Laferrière using primarily the first and the third of these techniques, and Díaz using the second and fourth. As I interrogate and evaluate the writers' use of stereotype, I heed Rosello's warning: that a mocked stereotype can surreptitiously transform into a confirmed stereotype.

Stereotypes participate in the art of representation and thereby influence reality as much as they might reflect it (or not). Stereotype threat – the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about one's group – is well documented. Media images of African Americans successful in sport and not in upper level management, for example, influence the activities individuals pursue and the goals or outcomes they perceive to be within their grasp. Indeed, numerous sociological studies of stereotype find that individuals indeed *perform* according to others' expectations of them; this applies in scholastic aptitude, disciplinary orientations, personal and professional choices.³² Here again, the boundary between identity and stereotype blurs, insofar as both can elicit specific performances in response to external expectations. Stereotypes are applied to certain identity groups and may in turn influence group members' behaviors as they respond to the pressures of stereotype; these shifts likewise affect group members' perceptions of themselves and of their identities.

In this project, my objects of study are stereotypes in works of literature, not stereotypes out on the street, in interactions between individuals. However, these works of fiction *perform* interactions between individuals, *citing*, *reiterating*, and *replicating* patterns of speech, voice, behavior, gesture, attitude and relation. Rosello's study of stereotypes in literature, film and stand-up comedy and Richard Dyer's work on filmic stereotypes guide my analysis of Laferrière's and Díaz's often humorous play with stereotype. Stereotypes in literature and in comedy pose a particular problem: storytellers and comedians have often relied on clichéd,

³¹ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

³² Among others, see Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson, "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African-Americans," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69 (1995): 797-811; and Joshua Aronson, Carrie B. Fried and Catherine Good, "Reducing the Effects of Stereotype Threat on African American College Students by Shaping Theories of Intelligence," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (2002): 113-125.

predictable characters with recognizable voices (whether written or spoken) to transmit identity content and to achieve comic effect. The humorous novelists whose work I examine here must resort to recognizable stereotypical voices and behaviors to represent race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality and to do so humorously.

My task here is to explore racial-gender stereotypes as they operate in works of fiction. How, then, can we distinguish racial and gender *stereotypes* from racial and gender *identities* specifically in *literature*, a form of textual representation that invokes the visual via the textual and that relies heavily on voice (narrative or dialogic) to construct character? To start, I identify three principal indicators of identity apparent in fictional form, all of which can also be interpreted more narrowly as signs of stereotype. I present them here in order of most direct to most subtle, though all function as very clear identifiers:

1) **explicit textual content** that identifies certain characters as belonging to racial and gender categories. For example, the narrator of *Comment faire l'amour* refers to certain characters explicitly as *Blanche*, *Noir*, or *Nègre*; the narrator of one of Díaz's stories moves to hide embarrassing pictures of his family's poverty in the Dominican countryside, thereby illustrating Dominicanness more obliquely but no less clearly.

2) **the body**, which may be described in details that index racial and gender features. For example, Laferrière's protagonist fantasizes about the white skin of his lovers; Díaz's characters feel ashamed of their 'Afro' hair.

3) **the voice**, which may deploy recognizable dialects, tones, accents, registers, slang, and so forth to index racial and sexual features. Díaz often uses a recognizable African American idiom and Dominican slang to signal racial, ethnic and cultural content. Laferrière, though a master of narrative voice in his own right, less often exploits narrative and dialogic voice for its racial or ethnic potential. In *Comment faire l'amour*'s dialogues and narration, there are rarely identifiable accents, slang, or other purely linguistic indicators of speakers' racial or ethnic identity. Instead, everyone speaks with standard French; this supports Laferrière's typification and generalization of the two principal stereotypes. It is instead through the explicit, performative gesture of naming *Blanches* and *Nègres* as such that the reader understands the racial and ethnic valences of these interactions.

4 Parody, Irony and the Stud Stereotype

Parody and irony are modes these anti-colonial postmodern writers use to write playful texts and to engage with political issues. Some discussion of these two related terms is necessary here. Parody is one of many forms of intertextual allusion in which “one utterance alludes to or takes its distance from another.”³³ Simon Dentith defines it as “any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice.”³⁴ Linda Hutcheon defines parody as “a form of imitation [...] characterized by ironic inversion” that “play[s] with multiple conventions.”³⁵ Dentith explains: “Parodies may respond to, imitate, satirize, play with or mock another statement or form; they may also build upon the authority of that earlier statement or form to play with or mock elements of the contemporary world.”³⁶ Laferrière’s and Díaz’s texts parody the self-help genre, but do not parody a specific earlier self-help text. Their parodies sometimes move against the grain of the genre (i.e., Laferrière’s text does not offer the instruction its title suggests) or with the grain of the genre (i.e., Díaz’s story “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” narrates the self and its suffering, organizing stories about the self so as to make sense of and thereby improve it, thus keeping with the conventions of self-help texts³⁷). In their parodies of the genre, they cite, repeat, and imitate its conventions, either reinforcing or challenging them. Beyond the genre, Laferrière’s and Díaz’s texts can also be read to parody features of our contemporary world, “another form of coded discourse,”³⁸ namely racial and gender stereotypes (Laferrière more than Díaz) and norms of masculinity (Díaz more than Laferrière). The texts I examine qualify as parodic metafiction, for as they parody the self-help genre, they take the form of self-reflexive fictions ostensibly ‘written’ by their narrators and therefore hold up a mirror to the texts’ own fictional practices.³⁹

Dentith notes that parody (along with imitation, pastiche and plagiarism) is particularly commonplace in postmodern texts, for postmodernism advances “a particular ‘take’ on the

³³ Dentith, *Parody*, 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 6, 7.

³⁶ Dentith, *Parody*, 9.

³⁷ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 178.

³⁸ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 16.

³⁹ Rose, *Parody/Metafiction*, 13.

formal repertoire available to novelists” and “a move towards novelistic self-consciousness which drags into view other modes of discourse, other possible ways of understanding the world.”⁴⁰ For writers from formerly colonized nations who have migrated to other formerly colonized nations that are now neocolonial powers (U.S.) or to nations that still feel colonized within their state (Québec), the shift of national, cultural, linguistic, geopolitical and discursive frames that accompanies migration occasions self-consciousness about discourses of oppression: imperialism, colonialism, racism, sexism, and heteronormativity, to name a few.

Still, parody (like the irony that animates it) can be conservative or subversive of traditions. It can “mock literary and social innovation, policing the boundaries of the sayable in the interests of those who wish to continue to say what has always been said;” or it can “[attack] the official word, [and mock] the pretensions of authoritative discourse.”⁴¹ Parody, like irony, is not necessarily critical of the dominant mode and can be used to change or maintain the status quo. Linda Hutcheon describes parody in metafiction, architecture, music, film and painting as “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the heart of similarity. [...] Parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity: the Greek prefix *para* can mean both ‘counter’ or ‘against’ AND ‘near’ or ‘beside.’”⁴² My analyses of Díaz’s and Laferrière’s interventions around stereotypes will tease apart the aspects of the status quo their works challenge from those they reinforce, and signal when I see parody working in conservative or progressive ways. Yet parody, like irony, may go unnoticed, in which case its effect is “neutralize[d]” and “naturalize[d],”⁴³ its “polemical allusion” lost. Much like stereotype, the proximity between first-order representation and second-order parody or critique makes it easy for the distinction between the two to collapse.

Irony is a mechanism that animates parody. Following Hutcheon, I treat irony as a discursive strategy operating at the level of language or form; it is “the mode of the unsaid, the unheard, the unseen”⁴⁴ – subtly suggested secondary, second-degree meanings that join explicit

⁴⁰ Dentith, *Parody*, 175.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴² Hutcheon, “The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History,” 185.

⁴³ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 27, 34.

⁴⁴ Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 9, 10.

first-degree ones to make an enunciation double, and indeed, double-edged. Irony's "critical edge," as Hutcheon articulates it, "provoke[s] emotional responses in those who 'get' it and those who don't, as well as in its targets and in what some people call its 'victims.'"⁴⁵ Since it involves relations of power via relations of communication, it is always political. Since it is a weapon, it is risky for it can be intended and received as harm (i.e., a veiled put-down or satiric barb); it is also risky because it can 'misfire' and be received in a way the speaker did not intend. Irony happens in the space between the said and the unsaid (where the unsaid is not always a simple inversion of the said⁴⁶) and in the space between the speaker and receiver:

The 'ironist' [...] is the one who intends to set up the ironic relation between the said and the unsaid, but may not always succeed in communicating that intention (or relation). From the point of view of [...] the *ironist*, irony is the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented. [...] From the point of view of the *interpreter*, irony is an interpretive and intentional move: it is the making or inferring of **meaning** in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an **attitude** toward both the said and the unsaid. The move is usually triggered (and then directed) by conflictual textual or contextual evidence or by markers which are socially agreed upon.⁴⁷ (emphases original)

Both the ironist's *and* the interpreter's *intentions* matter in this formulation of irony, for the ironist intends irony and the interpreter intentionally interprets additional or different meaning from the statement she/he finds ironic. Indeed, irony is "risky business"⁴⁸ for its volatile openness to different (mis)understandings, and for the issue of intentionality: if the *SNL* writers *intend* to critique white racism and threat, is that adequate to confirm that a critique has been performed, and performed successfully? If viewers of the sketch interpret it in light of our own biographies, sensitivities and interpretive lenses and find it dangerously close to unironic white racism, is the writers' intended critique thereby undone?

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 11.

Hutcheon explains irony's double bind: despite its presumed status as counterdiscourse, it is by its very second-degree nature intimately aligned with the first-degree utterance it seeks to counter. Hutcheon explains:

Irony's intimacy with the dominant discourses it contests – it uses their very language as it's said– is its strength, for it allows ironic discourse both to buy time (to be permitted and even listened to, even if not understood) and also to “relativize the [dominant's] authority and stability” in part by appropriating its power. This intimacy, then, is what makes irony potentially an effective strategy of oppositionality. But intimacy can also be seen as complicity: one is always “vulnerable to being reassimilated to the modes of power and knowledge which one seeks to disrupt.”⁴⁹

Just as Rosello warns against the “erosion of irony” in a stereotype critically repeated, Hutcheon warns against irony's “reassimilation” by the first-degree discourse it seeks to disrupt. Similarly, parody can go unperceived and thus be naturalized and neutralized. All of these risks – of second-degree modes being received as first-degree ones – operate in the volatile province of interpretation; the ironist, critic of stereotype, or tongue-in-cheek writer of fiction cannot control how her/his enunciation will be received, and it may well be interpreted in a way opposite to how she/he intends.

Hutcheon therefore deems irony and parody “transideological”: “even if an ironist intends an irony to be interpreted in an oppositional framework, there is no guarantee that this subversive intent will be realized.”⁵⁰ If the *SNL* sketch seeks to critique by virtue of the oppositional framework implied by the parodic form and venue in which it is performed, but if I find the sketch's subversive intent inadequate or misplaced (i.e., ironic racist enunciations issued from white mouths), then for this viewer at least, the subversion has failed. Nonetheless, irony proves a common mode for oppositional politics in oppressive contexts. Despite its unpredictability, it may be the mode of choice precisely because, in its coded double-speak, it protects the speaker who can take cover behind the unironic, first-degree meaning *or* behind the ironic, second-degree meaning, as it suits her/his circumstances. Toril Moi notes, “Politically speaking, the ironist is extremely hard to assail precisely because it is virtually impossible to fix her or his text

⁴⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 15-16.

convincingly. In the ironic discourse, every position undercuts itself.”⁵¹ Irony may not be the most politically expedient way to make one’s political point, in light of its potential for misfiring and misunderstanding, but its ambivalence is a virtue for the ironist who wants or needs to avoid being pinned down. Indeed, Laferrière insists we take everything he says with “a grain of salt,”⁵² thereby sidestepping any and all criticism. Díaz claims to “hide behind”⁵³ his misogynist characters, making the distinction between author and misogynist blurry and making his intervention around misogyny politically fraught.

My analyses of ironic invocations of racism and sexism will address this vexed nexus of ironist’s and interpreter’s intentionality. In this dissertation, I am the interpreter, and my own very personal, subjective boundaries about what is acceptable are routinely crossed by the writers’ provocative play with sexism and misogyny. My interest, however, extends much wider than my own interpretations, and I do consider, in my inclusion of interviews where the writers announce their intentions, and of book reviews where readers offer their interpretations, both how the writers want their works to be received and how they are actually received. This project involves a great deal of close reading and comparative literary analysis to evaluate how each writer treats the central stud stereotype; it is therefore not a project rooted in reception studies. However, the interest that subtends my guiding question (about who should make which jokes, or who should parody and ironize which oppressions) lies in the political effects these politically engaged artworks have on others beyond myself. I am therefore concerned with how such representations of racism and sexism are received—even if I offer no statistics as to actual readers’ reactions, and even if my interpretations derive from critical reading practices that involve greater detail and slowness than most pleasure readers use. I will not be able to offer conclusions as to how the writers’ interventions are democratically evaluated by the masses of readers who read them. I will, however, examine what these texts and writers *do* with the stereotypes they invoke, and with the oppressions attached to these stereotypes. In their often ironic, parodic mode, they wield a dangerous weapon with unpredictable results. They are also at

⁵¹ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 40.

⁵² Laferrière, *J’écris comme je vis*, 155.

⁵³ Díaz, “*BWL: Questions for Junot Díaz*.”

times serious, Díaz much more often than Laferrière, and the social problems both writers address are serious indeed.

Laferrière makes provocative use of sexism, repeating its values and practices, in order to critique and avenge racism. Part One will examine his treatment of the *Nègre* stereotype and his critique of racism via a deliberately provocative, overblown repetition of sexism. Díaz, on the other hand, critiques sexism, patriarchy, male privilege and heteronormativity in his public statements and claims to critique or at least represent these *as social problems* in his fiction. However, like Laferrière's novel, Díaz's stories also portray sexism in an uncritical manner. Part Two will explore the Dominican stud's developmental trajectory and trace Díaz's treatment of the stud's often self-directed, internalized racism alongside his sexist objectification of women. The stereotypical black studs created by both writers are victims of racism (though they may recirculate that racism against other people of color) and perpetrators of sexism.

Since both stereotypical stud figures – the *Nègre* and the Dominican stud – are of African descent, they connect to the stereotype of black male hypersexuality, although Díaz's Dominican stud is also Latino and of mixed ethnicity. Black masculinity has garnered increasing attention as an area of study in the last two decades,⁵⁴ often measured against white masculinity (typically referred to simply as 'masculinity'); Laferrière's novel neatly articulates this contest. Within this vast and evolving field of black masculinity studies, I seek to highlight here several features of the stud stereotypes my project focuses on. Hypermasculinity (physical and emotional toughness, street smarts) and hyper(hetero)sexuality both characterize the black and Dominican stud stereotypes operating in Laferrière's and Díaz's texts; however, the stereotypical hypermasculine qualities of aggressiveness and violence do *not* characterize their protagonists. Their hypermasculine, hypersexual qualities are stereotypes that condense others: the muscular athlete, the street thug, the Mr. T tough guy, the African savage, the Latin lover, the Don Juan – all figures prominent in popular media and therefore the popular imaginary, and references

⁵⁴ For a survey of important scholarship in the field, see Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775–1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 1-5; and Jana Evans Braziel, *Artists, Performers and Black Masculinity in the Haitian Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 216.

deliberately called up by these fictional stereotypical studs.⁵⁵ Both writers show the negative effects stereotypes about men of color have on their narrators, who receive racist words and reactions that are always predicated on stereotype, rather than on the individual's behavior. At the same time, both writers depict their protagonists in stereotypical ways, thus reinforcing stereotypes.

My analysis will examine each writer's play with and challenge to stereotype, and examine the black/Dominican stud's racial and ethnic features in relation to his gender and sexual features. I follow bell hooks and others in noting how black men's challenge to racism too often has recourse to sexism; black men's empowerment is framed as the right to participate in patriarchy as white men do.⁵⁶ Patricia Hill Collins notes that "in the context of the new racism in which miseducation and unemployment have marginalized and impoverished increasing numbers of young Black men, aggression and claiming the spoils of urban warfare gain in importance"; women are the "sexual spoils" of this war, where "sexual prowess [is] a marker of black masculinity."⁵⁷ Collins notes what these writers' fictions likewise highlight: the ways class interacts with race, which in turn generates behaviors of gendered domination. This impoverished, urban context takes a certain shape in Díaz's setting of the multicultural, immigrant community in New Jersey his African diasporic Dominican immigrant narrator inhabits, and another shape in Laferrière's impoverished, immigrant Montréal setting; however, the 'conquest' of women is a common goal for the narrators of both texts. My analyses will explore in greater detail the particular notions of hegemonic masculinity to which Laferrière's and Díaz's representations respond: the African savage *Nègre* stereotype in Laferrière, and the Dominican *tiguere* and *mujeriego*⁵⁸ in Díaz. Both writers play with loaded stereotypes of racialized masculinity in provocative, risky ways.

⁵⁵ My dissertation ultimately repeats stereotypes at least as much as the texts it studies do, although my audience, and therefore the risk attached to these repetitions, are considerably smaller.

⁵⁶ hooks, *Yearning*, 75-6.

⁵⁷ Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 151.

⁵⁸ tiger, connoting cunning skills of survival; and womanizer

5 The Stereo in Stereotype

Part One will begin with a theoretical discussion of performativity, the central lens through which I conceptualize identity and stereotype. Then I will examine the history and etymology of the word *nègre* as it shapes Laferrière's deployment of the stereotype. Next I will illustrate how *Nègre*-ness is a performance the narrator simultaneously adopts and interrogates, always operating in relation to the white gaze and to his racial and gender opposite, the white female *Blanche*. Here I will begin to tease apart Laferrière's critique of racism from his reinforcement of sexism, as we see sex as a form of racial revenge the narrator enacts. I will align the figures of *Nègre* and writer with one another, and then pit them against the figures of *Blanche* and reader in a competition that *Nègre*/writer wins. I will also explore the absent figure of the black woman alongside the self-reflexively interrogated 'Myth of the Black Stud' and reveal Laferrière's multiple, ambivalent moves around the *Nègre* stereotype and its stereotypical sexual prowess. Finally, I will demonstrate the ways in which Laferrière provokes, anticipates and preempts certain readings within his self-aware metafiction, counteracting and responding to the critic's critiques ahead of time. In a final contest of many in this novel, I will show how the narrator 'beats' the critic and the reader by finally actualizing himself as a writer.

In Part Two, I will trace the Dominican stud's development from adolescence, where he is first a sympathetic figure unsuccessful with girls, anxious, insecure, and isolated, into adulthood, when he has become the confident, sexually successful stud he had aspired to be. I will first sketch the contours of the Dominican stud's identity particularities, his *Afro-latinidad* and multiple forms of exclusion in the U.S. These exclusions, as well as the lack of male role models in his family and community, compel his adoption of the stud role, for it serves the vital function of homosocial belonging. I will explore a number of doublings and maskings between male characters in Díaz's fiction and between Díaz and his narrator Yunió, and reveal that male relationships and male-to-male instruction are more important than the sexual relationships the stud so actively seeks. As in Laferrière, sex is a cover for other relationships of power and other interpersonal dynamics. Díaz's sympathetic treatment of the stud's trials and tribulations continues once the stud has reached adulthood and inhabits a confident masculinity. The adult stud is now a confirmed misogynist, and problematically, Díaz often represents the stud's sexism and misogyny in celebratory or uncritical ways, despite the author's public condemnation of these ideologies. I will track the intricacies of Díaz's ambivalent, critical but complicit

intervention around the stud's sexism as I examine his parody of the self-help and instruction manual genres. I examine the discrepancies between Díaz's publicly stated politics, which critique sexism, patriarchy and heteronormativity, and the reinforcement of these I discern in his fiction. I conclude my examination of both writers' political interventions around stereotypes and their associated oppressions with a discussion of complicity that interrogates the extent to which unambivalent critique and counterdiscourse are possible.

One aspect of the writers' political ambivalence derives from their deliberate blurring of their own identities with that of their narrators. The creation of writer-doubles biographically similar to writers Díaz and Laferrière suggests an equation between writer and narrator; simultaneously, the definition of fiction demands that what is written be made up and therefore not necessarily reflect the writer's biography or worldview. By such clever, ambiguous play with their narrative personae, Laferrière and Díaz both suggest and resist the slippage between writer and narrator. The worldviews these writers' narrators advance, then, are presented ambiguously as both fictional inventions and as thinly veiled statements from the authors themselves. This ambiguity, in turn, makes for pleasure, readerly as well as writerly, as multiple interpretations become possible. Indeed, in playing ambiguously with seemingly autobiographical fiction, both writers offer the rhetorical equivalent of a double entendre. A double entendre is funny when a secondary meaning – distinct from the first, most obvious one – is uncovered; this duplicity is clever, fun, funny and pleasurable, and the receiver delights in her/his cleverness detecting it, as the creator delights in her/his cleverness inventing it. But this ambiguity has consequences for the writers' political interventions, as the stud narrators' sexist viewpoints sound like their writers'. Such interpretative openness and ambiguity characterize Díaz and Laferrière's literary interventions, whose clearly politically-engaged fictions leave their readers with some politically ambivalent or problematic lessons.

In evaluating what is politically efficacious or problematic, I re-enter the debate about appropriateness and political correctness. What is or is not acceptable, appropriate, or funny is, of course, a matter of personal taste and sensitivity. Comedians tend to traffic in the politically incorrect by trade, since what is 'inappropriate' can be shocking and therefore funny. Many lament the increasingly policed atmosphere of comedy; comedian Jim Norton qualifies Western

culture as “an increasingly reactionary mob of self-centered narcissists who all have their own personal lines drawn in the sand.”⁵⁹ I recognize that, in questioning the acceptability of certain kinds of literary representations, I am drawing a line in the sand. At the risk of sounding sanctimonious, my line is one in the service of justice, and at the expense of humor. But the humor (or irony or parody) I seek to critique is of a very particular kind: that which retraces and reinforces historical and contemporary dynamics of oppression. If whites, men, and heterosexuals are thus those most often subject to the limits I suggest, it is because their forms of privilege are established and need no reinforcement; on the contrary, they should be challenged.

Linda Hutcheon describes irony’s two opposing camps: those who “see irony as a powerful tool or even weapon in the fight against a dominant authority, which irony is said to work to destroy,”⁶⁰ and those who see irony as destructive. The latter view is held

by almost anyone who has been on the receiving end of an ironic attack (or missed the irony completely) or by those for whom the serious or the solemn and the univocal are the ideal. Obviously, this last group would include not only the humorless, but those whose political commitments lead them to desire, perhaps for *didactic purposes*, an unambiguous discourse of engagement.⁶¹ (emphasis mine)

Laferrière and Díaz do treat irony as a weapon to resist a dominant authority; their texts also serve both sincere and parodic didactic purposes,⁶² which my analyses will explore. I will also show how, by using irony, parody and stereotype as modes with which to critique forms of oppression, those critiques can become ambivalent, yielding *ambiguous* discourses of engagement rather than clear, politically progressive lessons. Indeed, as my discussion of parody, irony and stereotype critique has shown, all three of these second-degree modes problematically entail the repetition and therefore reinforcement of the first-degree utterance. Moreover, this structural ambivalence in the writers’ challenge to racist and colonial discourses of oppression is

⁵⁹ Norton, “Trevor Noah.”

⁶⁰ Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 27.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶² Hutcheon also draws a connection between parody and didacticism, noting “the didactic value of parody in teaching or co-opting the art of the past by textual incorporation and ironic commentary.” Applied to Laferrière and Díaz, it is less the self-help genre that their parodies comment upon, even as they utilize its form, but rather the dominant discourses of racism, colonialism and heterosexual masculinity that they seek to instruct readers about. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 27.

compounded by their weak or absent critique of sexist discourses of oppression. Their depictions of patriarchy, sexism and heteronormativity are rarely, if at all, critical and therefore teach lessons that reinforce these gendered/sexual oppressions. The critique of racism, therefore, relies on perpetuating sexism, and we are trapped in a circuit of oppressions.

In my concluding discussion of complicity, I will elaborate what I have suggested here: that the formal feedback loop inherent in the second-degree modes of irony, parody and stereotype critique mimics the feedback loop inherent in critiquing discourses that inhabit us. Like stereophonic echoes, the parody cannot escape the original; the ironic meaning depends on the unironic to be said; the critique of stereotype necessarily repeats the stereotype in its critique; and the discourses of oppression we may wish to critique inhabit us for eternity. We cannot step outside to critique them purely or unambivalently. Laferrière and Díaz may choose these ambivalent, second-degree modes to instantiate formally our collective complicity in discourses of oppression. While I do not endorse the reinforcement of sexism in their slippery, ironic, parodic texts, I also acknowledge that the critique cannot be separated from the critiqued, and that the critic, like the writer, cannot step outside the discourses of oppression she/he examines. Complicity is a box we are trapped inside, and any weapons we wield from within are at once inadequate, ambivalent and yet essential if any progress against oppression is to be made.

Part One: The Stud with a Grain of Salt: Dany Laferrière's Performative Pedagogy in *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se □inite□*

6 Introduction

In his novel *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se □inite□* (in English, *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*), Dany Laferrière parodies the instruction manual and self-help genres. Unlike the 'How To' and 'For Dummies' series intended for amateurs retiling their bathrooms, this text purports to instruct in the elusive methods of seduction and sex. However, the title is a cover – quite literally – for other forms of instruction and exploration. Though *Comment faire l'amour*⁶³ claims to instruct white women in how to manage their black male lovers' sexual stamina, the reader will find nothing of the sort. The title is a teaser, a clever marketing ploy by an even cleverer writer who plays on the cliché: sex sells. Indeed, this novel, Laferrière's first, has met with great success and put Laferrière on the map in both Caribbean and Québécois literature. Laferrière's play with cliché and provocation begins with his title and continues throughout the text. In *Comment faire l'amour*, Laferrière tirelessly provokes his readers through the deployment of identity stereotypes that wed race with gender and sexuality. The black male *Nègre* and the white female *Blanche* are the principal stereotypes Laferrière invokes, tied to one another in a relationship of sexual desire and taboo. The lessons Laferrière offers are not about love-making, though there is some of that in the novel. Rather, Laferrière lays bare the consequences of slavery and colonialism on contemporary interracial, heterosexual relationships, and uses sex as one example of how uneven power plays out. His ironic title is a playful hook masking pedagogy of another kind.

There is a parallel here between Laferrière's choice of a fictional form that is ostensibly pedagogical and the fact that identities are learned and performed. Mimicry and repetition are entailed in all social behavior. As Judith Butler describes with her notion of performativity, normative identity behaviors are modeled and then replicated. Performativity, writes Gail Boldt, is predicated on the idea that human reality is

⁶³ Henceforth, I will refer to the title this way, and as *CFL* in parenthetical citations and footnotes.

produced not through a natural truth but through the constant repetition of discourses that perform our understandings of what is true or real. From this perspective, identities are not natural attributes; rather, they are the result of mundane practices of social norms and represent compulsory social practices.⁶⁴

Though identities are felt as ‘natural’ and therefore ‘real,’ they result from social norms and constraints that are very real, and that individuals manage with various degrees of awareness and obedience or resistance. Following Butler, I conceptualize identity as performative, constituted by repetitive acts that *appear* to reflect a stable, interior self but in fact *create* this sense of self through repeated action. The illusion of a stable, coherent identity, be it gendered, sexual, or racial, is produced by replicating gestures, behaviors, postures and attitudes associated with that identity. Butler writes,

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.⁶⁵

The stylized acts that index male or female gender are the products of a normative heterosexual system of desire that reinforces itself via gendered modes of being. Butler writes, “this system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed [...] through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions.”⁶⁶ The performances that signal ‘maleness’ or ‘femaleness’ have sedimented over centuries (with historical and cultural variations, of course), and their repetition serves to both legitimate and perpetuate these gender norms.

We can extend this argument to a centuries-old discourse of race, which presents racial difference as innate and racial hierarchy as ‘natural.’ The alleged ‘science’ of race evolved alongside the projects of slavery and colonialism, in ideological service of these primarily economic endeavors. Although the notion of race as biological reality has been debunked, this

⁶⁴ Boldt, “Performativity,” 639.

⁶⁵ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 519.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 524.

understanding persists in many cultures' popular imaginaries. In contrast, the idea of race as social construct advances race as a notion engrained in individuals' belief systems that, for better or for worse, parses individuals into groups from which human responses ranging from genocide to revolution can proceed. I borrow from Mark Sawyer's formulation here: "race is a pseudoscientific fact that has no existence outside of its social and political context."⁶⁷ Race is not a biological fact; it is an imagined reality: it "involves both lived experience and constructed concepts that have become very real over time"⁶⁸ and has social, political and economic consequences that "can structure interactions and life chances."⁶⁹ If its original, biological valences have been discredited, the notion of race remains ever-present and important in individuals' material, social and psychic existences. As a concept, it has shown a great deal of adaptability and resilience over time and space; so, too, has racism. Nancy Stepan writes,

Racial distinctions [...] have constantly been renegotiated and experienced in different ways in different historical periods. We should think, then, of the races [...] as "artifactual" aspects of human sciences, [...] object[s] of knowledge that [are] constructed as biological and social "fact[s]" grounded in what is taken to be empirical nature. At the same time, [...] we do not experience human variation or human difference "as it really is, out there in nature," but by and through a system of representations which in essence creates the objects of difference.⁷⁰

The legacy of race is real, even as it is an artifact of outdated 'science.' Borrowing from Dorothy Lander's phrasing above, race is a discourse repeated over and over, if in variable forms, that ultimately performs our understanding of race as true or real. It is from this pliable, resilient notion of race that equally pliable racisms proceed. Ann Stoler articulates this viral adaptability of racisms, which "take on the form of other things, wrap themselves around heated issues, descend upon political pulse points, appear as reasoned judgments, beyond sentiment, as they penetrate impassioned bodies."⁷¹ Race, like gender, is predicated on certain forms of embodiment that are given value above and beyond anatomical or phenotypic details.

⁶⁷ Sawyer, *Racial Politics*, 70.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁰ Stepan, *Hour of Eugenics*, 13.

⁷¹ Stoler, "Racial Histories," 200.

Given the sedimented quality of race as a notion and therefore a locus of identity, many aspects of gender performativity theory can be applied to race. Racial identities are also performative, constituted by repetitive acts that *appear* to reflect a stable, interior self but in fact *create* this sense of self through action. Race is not a thing itself, but rather “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding [racial] self” (Butler). Racial identities result from “social norms and [...] compulsory social practices” (Lander) and are composed of stylized gestures, behaviors, postures and attitudes that are learned and repeated, often unconsciously and through social pressures. This echoes Paul Gilroy’s formulation of blackness:

it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires. [...] Racialised subjectivity [is] the product of the social practices that supposedly derive from it.⁷²

Race is the consequence, rather than the origin, of practical activities, gestures, attitudes, and desires typically associated with a particular form of embodiment. Analogous to the system of compulsory heterosexuality, the system of white privilege and compulsory racialization “is reproduced and concealed [...] through the cultivation of bodies into discrete [races] with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ [racial] dispositions.”⁷³ The performances that signal blackness or whiteness, just like those that signal maleness or femaleness, have gained solidity over time, and their repetition legitimates and perpetuates these racial norms.

In line with Homi Bhabha’s conception of mimicry,⁷⁴ identity roles are always repeated imperfectly, with dissonance and difference, and therein lies the potential for an *active*

⁷² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 102.

⁷³ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 524; citation replaces “gender” with “race.”

⁷⁴ Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of mimicry is a strategy of colonial power and knowledge in which the colonizer, seeking the colonized’s subservience and assimilation into the colonizing culture and ideology, strives to make the colonized “a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.*” Mimicry is “a complex system of reform, regulation and discipline which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power.” An ambivalence inheres in processes of mimicry in that the colonized mimic colonizing modes imperfectly, with a difference. Therein lies the potential for the colonized to turn mimicry – a strategy of colonial power – against the colonizer and into a strategy of resistance. For in the difference between the colonizer’s mode and the colonized’s mimicry of it, there lies a space for resistance, for an

construction of self and possibly a subversive performance of an identity, beyond the *passive* absorption of normative identity behaviors to which we are all subject. Gendered heterosexuality and race, the two features of identity that concern me here, are materialized in the body. As Butler demonstrates, “the body is a field of interpretive possibilities, [... and] ‘existing’ one’s body becomes a personal way of taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms;”⁷⁵ this applies to racial norms as well. Racial and gender norms inevitably interact to shape the identity a given body enacts. Although Butler at times uses both ‘performativity’ and ‘performance’ to describe the non-resistant, passive acquisition of identity norms, scholars following Butler have come to distinguish these; I follow suit here by using ‘performativity’ to refer to this passive, unconscious acquisition of identity norms, and ‘performance’ to refer to the active, deliberate, at times resistant interpretation of these.

Laferrière’s text depicts racial, gender and sexual roles in a narrative of intimate relationships between black men and white women. I examine instantiations of identity performativity and performance in the novel and the tensions between a ‘real’ self and a ‘false’ performance of a role in my assessment of the *Nègre* and *Blanche* types. At times, Laferrière shows identity roles as passively, unconsciously absorbed (thus illustrating performativity); at others, they are actively, explicitly taught and consciously enacted (thus illustrating performance). Both cases entail a pedagogical component. Pedagogy refers to the occupation, practice or method of teaching.⁷⁶ As a phenomenon of constrained repetition, performativity is predicated on the social laws of gender or racial identity being taught (if implicitly) and in turn

ostensible repetition of colonizing discourse and practices that in fact moves subversively *against the grain*, and in which the colonized asserts her/his agency and power in whatever capacity possible. Butler likewise articulates the resistant potential of mimicry (or, in her terms, of the constrained repetition of gender norms) in the ever-present space between a norm-ideal and its imperfect replication. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” 86.

⁷⁵ Butler, “Sex and Gender,” 45.

⁷⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “pedagogy, n.,” accessed June 3, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/139520?redirectedFrom=pedagogy>.

obeyed.⁷⁷ The social constraints that compel individuals to unconsciously adopt behaviors, poses, and actions that signal maleness or whiteness are coercive pedagogical forces, enforced by social taboo. Performance, as active, self-aware identity enactment, likewise derives from the teaching of identities that are in turn deliberately performed; we will see one example of explicit identity instruction and performance. The identity performativity and performance Laferrière engages with, whether seriously or playfully, entail modeling, itself a kind of pedagogy; and this occurs in a textual form that ironically professes to instruct. The modeling of the *Nègre* role therefore entails a subtle pedagogy that is reinforced by the overt but ironic pedagogy suggested by the novel's title. As my analysis will show, I also see Laferrière offering a number of (unironic) lessons to readers. Laferrière's parody of the pedagogical instruction manual genre deploys identity as performativity or performance, thereby playing with the coercive pedagogy inherent in identity norms. Furthermore, his parody of the pedagogical genre entails a parody of the *Nègre* stereotype; multiple parodies and multiple pedagogies are compressed here.

On its cover, *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired* seems to appeal to white women who need instruction regarding their black male lovers. The bravado of the title is shocking and titillating at the same time that it is visibly ironic. On a second pedagogical level, the text models the racist *Nègre* stereotype in 1980s Montréal, in the first person, presumably for readers similar to the narrator, and shows those labeled *Nègres* how to seduce *Blanches*. However, this latent pedagogy is not to be taken any more seriously than the overt, ironic pedagogy it is couched within. As we will see, Laferrière's *Nègre*, and his work broadly speaking, involve layers of irony and contradiction and are deliberately difficult to pin down. In an interview, Laferrière says, "il faut toujours prendre ce que je dis avec un grain de sel" / "you must always take what I say with a grain of salt."⁷⁸ This clever remark by our clever writer

⁷⁷ Butler writes: "the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame. Understood in pedagogical terms, the performance renders social laws explicit." Butler, "Performative Acts," 526.

⁷⁸ Laferrière, *J'écris comme je vis*, 155. Subsequent references to this text will be abbreviated in parentheses with the abbreviation *J'écris*. Henceforth, all translations not otherwise indicated are mine. The same narrator figure in a later Laferrière novel also advises us: "Faut pas prendre ça trop au sérieux tout de même" / "You musn't take it too seriously now." These invitations to receive the writer's endeavor ironically make its politics difficult to establish. See *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit ?* (translated as *Why Must a Black*

insists that we can never take him at face value, that his words can always be turned on their heads and read against the grain.

Laferrière's more sincere intervention, if we can presume one, is to highlight 1) the socially conditioned and performed features of identity; 2) the historical and contemporary power dynamics that govern these performances; as well as 3) those power dynamics that govern the reading and reception of texts by writers of color. On a third, non-ironic pedagogical level, then, Laferrière instructs readers in the intertwined histories of slavery and colonialism and their contemporary effects, and in relationships of uneven power, be they grounded in differences of race, gender, or class, or even in the difference between writer and reader.⁷⁹ Indeed, I find that he offers a lesson in reading to his readers. Ever aware and disruptive of social (and readerly) expectations, Laferrière remarks in an interview: "What society expects gives me a pain in the ass."⁸⁰ He teaches readers how to think past stereotypes of racialized, gendered bodies, at the same time that he exposes readers' stereotypical reading practices as they read this tale of racial-sexual relationships. However, as I will show, his intervention bears some significant shortcomings, for his challenge to racism has recourse to sexism, which is never problematized in the text. At the same time, the novel's sexism may constitute another ironic jab, dealt in a second-degree manner so as to elicit stereotypical readings and critiques from certain reading constituencies; I will return to this possibility at the end of this chapter.

In this chapter, I will first outline the principal identity types Laferrière deploys in his novel: the *Nègre* and the *Blanche*. Identities and stereotypes are transmitted in the text via three

Writer Write about Sex ?, though its literal translation would be *Is that grenade/pomegranate in the young Nègre's hand a weapon or a fruit?*, the French double entendre of *grenade* as grenade and pomegranate being impossible in English), 351.

⁷⁹ Laferrière states: "Je n'écris pas pour instruire les gens sur quoi que ce soit." / "I don't write to instruct anyone about anything" (*J'écris* 223). The first two pedagogical levels I identify are ironic, and the third is my articulation of Laferrière's intervention as a self-proclaimed "analyste social" / "social analyst" (*J'écris* 172). His social and political engagement is clear and explicit, though it is not deliberately pedagogical in a strict sense. When I call his intervention 'pedagogical,' it is to highlight his play with different forms of lesson-giving, from the ironic to the more serious, in the form of his novel.

⁸⁰ Laferrière, "An Interview," 911.

principal indicators: explicit identification, voice, and the body. I will show how Laferrière manipulates perspective, gaze and voice in his narrative to deploy identity stereotypes and to signal the power dynamics that govern them. Indeed, I find that, in both form and content, Laferrière treats the two types unevenly: the *Nègre* is ultimately de-stereotyped, while the *Blanche* is re-stereotyped. This constitutes a form of discursive revenge that parallels the racial revenge the *Nègre* exacts against the *Blanche* via aggressive sex. My reading will demonstrate how Laferrière's anti-racist intervention here problematically relies upon sexism and misogyny, encouraging the reader to uncritically accept these as retribution for racism. In the narrative's anti-racist logic, Laferrière draws upon historical and contemporary instantiations of racism to show how these animate intimate relationships. As he traces the connections among history, desire, and fantasy in the *Nègre-Blanche* relationship, anti-black racism serves to 'justify' anti-*Blanche* misogyny. The reader is either coaxed into complicity with this logic, or provoked into stereotypical critiques.

Throughout my analysis, I borrow from Laferrière's play with pedagogy to enumerate a number of 'lessons' his text transmits to his readers. Indeed, there are a number of different imagined readers who would receive these lessons in different ways. I will analyze how different readerships are explicitly or implicitly targeted and how Laferrière's edgy provocations can impart lessons, chastisement or mockery aimed at certain groups. Provocation, like irony, parody and humor (all techniques Laferrière deploys), depends on who is reading. Furthermore, my reading depends on my position: white female critic. People like me are, I find, one target of Laferrière's lessons, chastisement and mockery; my interpretation and evaluation of these are certainly shaped by my own sensitivities to racism and sexism, and my assessment of Laferrière's intervention around stereotypes is shaped by my own white guilt. Ultimately, the outcome of Laferrière's risky play with racial and sexual stereotypes varies depending on how such deployments of stereotype are received; such reception is bound up with the practice of reading. I will show how, just as characters in the novel anticipate certain things of the *Nègre*, the novel itself anticipates certain things of its readers, who have certain expectations of its Haitian Québécois black male author. Laferrière has written the reading of his novel into the text itself, anticipating stereotypical readings and preempting stereotypical critiques of his text, which itself traffics so heavily in identity stereotypes. I will argue that the relationship between the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* allegorizes the relationship between the writer and the reader. The *Nègre*

narrator is himself a writer writing the book we read, therefore Laferrière's writer-double; this collapses the *Nègre* and writer positions into one. The *Nègre*/writer reacts against stereotypes that systems of white hegemony and white hegemonic readers apply; the *Nègre*/writer exacts punishments in sexual and discursive forms against the *Blanche*/reader. The reader, like the *Blanche*, gets fucked (with): her racist stereotypes are exposed, she is held responsible and punished for her predecessors' failings, as well as her own, and she is manipulated into complicity with misogyny. *Nègre*/writer attains his goal by publishing this tale of sexual conquest, conquering "l'Amérique"⁸¹ via its *Blanches* and its readers. He outwits both in the process and, in a sense, 'kills' the reader and renders the critic impotent. My reading will expose the ideological problems and blind spots I find in Laferrière's edgy play with stereotype; a significant one is his effacement of the black woman from the narrative. I argue that the black woman is a threat to the black man's sexual prowess, the basis for his power, and so in order to confirm the black man's power and the reader's sympathy for him as the sole victim to racism, the black woman is problematically negated.

7 *Négritude*: Writing the *Nègre*

7.1 The Etymology of the word 'nègre'

In *Comment faire l'amour*, Laferrière deploys the stereotypes of the *Nègre* and the *Blanche*.⁸² The *Nègre* type, capitalized in Laferrière's text, connotes sexual virility, barbarism, cannibalism, physical laborer status and laziness.⁸³ For some speakers of contemporary French,

⁸¹ The narrator claims: "JE VEUX L'AMÉRIQUE. Pas moins." / "I want America. Not one iota less." Laferrière, *Comment faire l'amour*, 31 / *How to Make Love*, 25. Subsequent citations from the primary text will be indicated in parentheses with the abbreviation *CFL*, the page numbers of the French text followed by those of the English translation.

⁸² I keep the French terms untranslated here to preserve their connotations in the original French. *Nègre* and *Blanche* are gendered racial identifiers, unlike the gender-neutral 'black' or 'white.' *Nègre* carries with it a particularly dense semantic genealogy that does not transfer seamlessly into an English translation. David Homel, the novel's translator, uses three words – 'Negro,' 'Black' and 'Nigger' – in different instances to translate *Nègre*; *Nègre* can be situated at the confluence of these terms, but cannot be captured by one term alone.

⁸³ This enumeration of the *Nègre* stereotype's qualities, like Laferrière's treatment of the stereotype, builds upon one Fanon offers in *Peau noire, masques blancs/ Black Skin, White Masks*, listing the qualities European whites associated with 'Nègre' on free association tests: "Nègre = biologique, sexe, fort, sportif, puissant, boxeur, Joe Louis, Jess Owen, tirailleurs

both in France and in Québec, *nègre* bears the weight of the ‘N’ word in English. It used to be synonymous with “slave,” and the novel’s epigraph confirms this connection. Laferrière starts the novel with an infamous line from the *Code Noir*, the 1685 French law regulating slavery in the colonies: “Le nègre est un meuble.” / “The *nègre* is property.”⁸⁴ From his novel’s first page, Laferrière demonstrates the trope’s origin in the ideologies that authorized slavery and colonialism and thereby establishes the historical context for the narrative to follow. As a writer who was born in one former French colony (Haiti/Saint Domingue) and emigrated to another (Québec), Laferrière signals the manner in which the French history of slavery and colonialism continues to inform the existence of a black man in contemporary Montréal.⁸⁵ His epigraph introduces the older sense of *nègre* as slave, property, laborer and subject of ill treatment that, we will see, continues to animate white imaginaries in contemporary Québec.

Brent Hayes Edwards notes that mid-sixteenth century French translations of narratives by early Spanish and Portuguese explorers and slave traders used *noir* (black), and not *nègre*, to describe people of African descent.⁸⁶ Simone Delesalle and Lucette Valensi’s study of the history and lexicography of the word *nègre* traces how it evolved over time to refer to inhumane treatment.⁸⁷ They show that, in the French dictionaries of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, there is a lexicographical progression from *nègres* as people of Africa, to *nègres* as slaves, to *nègres* as those who were traded and made to labor in plantations; this last definition accords with the *Code Noir* cited above: “The nègre is property.” Ultimately, *nègre* was codified in the eighteenth century to index a certain kind of treatment – that of being treated like a slave – and not a category of humans or even laborers. The expression “traiter quelqu’un comme un nègre” /

sénégalais, sauvage, animal, diable, péché.” / “Negro = biological, sex, strong, athletic, powerful, boxer, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, Senegalese infantrymen, savage, animal, devil, sin.” Fanon, *Peau noire/ Black Skin*, 134/144.

⁸⁴ The epigraph is strangely absent from the English translation.

⁸⁵ Laferrière says, despite Haiti’s great anti-colonial victory, “Our colonial past cannot be written off just by a war.” Laferrière, “An Interview,” 916.

⁸⁶ Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 26.

⁸⁷ Delesalle and Valensi, “Le mot ‘nègre’,” 85-90.

“to treat someone like a *nègre*” meant to treat someone with harshness and scorn.⁸⁸ French abolitionists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries adopted the designation *noir*, rather than *nègre*, “attempting to invest [*noir*] with connotations of humanity and citizenship.”⁸⁹ Black French citizens in the early twentieth century, particularly the elite, in turn called themselves “noirs,” if not “hommes de couleur” (men of color). Fanon later articulated and critiqued the value distinction between the Antillean *noirs*, aligned more closely with Europeans and therefore superiority, and the African *nègres*, seen as physical laborers and therefore inferior, that held in the 1920s and 1930s.⁹⁰

The term *nègre* still had extremely negative connotations in the early 1920s.⁹¹ However, the meaning began to shift later that decade. In 1927, Lamine Senghor rejected the imposed French colonial tripartite system of racialized designation – *homme de couleur*, *noir*, and *nègre* – and reclaimed the latter:

Nous nous faisons honneur et gloire de nous appeler Nègres, avec un N majuscule en tête. C’est notre race nègre que nous voulons guider sur la voie de sa libération totale du joug esclavagiste qu’elle subit. Nous voulons imposer le respect dû à notre race, ainsi que son égalité avec toutes les autres races du monde, ce qui est son droit et notre devoir, et nous nous appelons Nègres !

We do ourselves honor and glory by calling ourselves *Nègres*, with a capital N. It is our *nègre* race that we want to guide on the path of total liberation from its suffering under a yoke of enslavement. We want to demand the respect due to our

⁸⁸ The 1772 and 1798 editions of *Le Dictionnaire des Arts et des Sciences* of the *Académie française* define *Nègre/Nègresse* as follows: “C’est le nom qu’on donne en général à tous les esclaves noirs employés aux travaux des colonies. *Il y a cent Nègres dans son habitation. La traite des Nègres. On dit familièrement, Traiter quelqu’un comme un Nègre, pour dire, Traiter quelqu’un comme un esclave* [1772 edition] ou *traiter quelqu’un avec beaucoup de dureté et de mépris* [1798 edition].” / “It is the name given to all the black slaves employed in the colonies. *There are 100 Nègres in his plantation. The trade of Nègres. It is said colloquially To treat someone like a Nègre, meaning To treat someone like a slave* [1772 edition] or to treat someone with much harshness and scorn [1798 edition].” Delesalle and Valensi comment: “Le Nègre n’existe que dans notre façon de nous traiter.” / “The *Nègre* exists only in our manner of treating ourselves.” Delesalle and Valensi, “Le mot ‘nègre’,” 87.

⁸⁹ Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 27.

⁹⁰ Fanon, “Antillais et Africains,” 26. See also Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 27.

⁹¹ Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 28.

race, as well as its equality with all the other races of the world, as is its right and our duty, and we call ourselves *Nègres!*⁹²

Lamine Senghor here attempts to recuperate the term of derision and advance the cause of black liberation, a process continued with the advent of the *Négritude* movement in the late 1920s and 1930s. The movement's founders, Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor⁹³, appropriated the racist slur *nègre* as grounds for racial unity, resistance and empowerment.⁹⁴ Césaire describes how the *Négritude* movement adopted the term:

Léopold Sédar Senghor a dit: “On s’en fout! Nègre ? Mais oui, je suis un nègre ! Et puis après !” Et voici comment est née la négritude : d’un mouvement d’humour. Autrement dit, ce qui était proféré et lancé à la figure comme une insulte amenait la réponse : “Mais oui, je suis nègre, et puis après !”

Léopold Sédar Senghor said, “We don’t give a damn! *Nègre?* Well, yes, I am a *nègre!* And then what!” And this is how *négritude* was born: from a movement of humor. In other words, what was proffered and thrown in our faces as an insult summoned the response: “But yes, I am a *nègre*, and then what!”⁹⁵

The term *nègre* under *Négritude* indicated an identity based on shared experiences of oppression and upon which resistance could be founded. It also entailed defiance and provocation. Laferrière’s use of the term is likewise grounded in shared experiences of racism and is also provocative, but in a different manner. For while *Négritude* went a certain distance in articulating *nègre* as a term of collective identity and dignity rather than one of racial hatred, its racist valences persist; hence the taboo on its usage in contemporary French. Laferrière provocatively deploys *Nègre* to signal an outdated racist slur’s continued (if silenced, taboo) purchase in the present and to articulate a community created through this racist appellation. The *Négritude* scholars, on the other hand, appropriated the slur, imbued it with positive meaning, and, for some speakers at least, *nègre* has become a fairly neutral designation of blackness over time.⁹⁶

⁹² Lamine Senghor, “Le mot ‘Nègre,’” 1.

⁹³ Despite their shared last name, Lamine and Léopold Sédar Senghor were not related.

⁹⁴ Césaire, *Nègre je suis*, 27-8, 97; Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 89.

⁹⁵ Césaire, “La culture,” 119.

⁹⁶ In *Nègre je suis et Nègre je resterai*, published in 2005, Césaire speaks of “la population nègre,” “la révolte nègre,” and “des mouvements nègres” / “the *nègre* population,” “the *nègre* revolt,” and “*nègre* movements” (55). He uses *nègre* as a neutral designation for a collectivity,

Laferrière thus signals the trope's continued contemporary relevance: when the protagonist plays the *Nègre*, credulous whites take him at face value, thus illustrating the trope's persistence in white Québécois cultural imaginaries. Laferrière's use of *Nègre* therefore moves through that of the *Négritude* movement, but does not mimic it. His protagonist writes, "On dirait la période de la NÉGRITUDE terminée, *has been, caput, □inite, rayée*" / "The black period is over, has-been, kaput, □inite, whited out" (17/13). "Négritude" (lost in the English translation) joins *Négritude* and its *écritures* (writings) and illustrates how these are now passé. The racist notion of the *nègre*, however, remains, despite *Négritude*'s interventions. Laferrière's *Nègre* is thus a contemporary intervention around the trope that returns to its origins as racist slur and illustrates its continued purchase post-*Négritude*.

In the novel, the black male *Nègre* is paired with his perceived opposite, the white female *Blanche*. The *Blanche* is typically from a wealthy neighborhood of Montréal, culturally naïve if sexually mature, intelligent in her studies yet credulous when it comes to the stereotype of the *Nègre* described above. Her class power is often emphasized. The desire fueling their relationship is socially and historically produced, conditioned by uneven power relationships that play out in sex and in fantasy. The dynamics governing their interactions are derived from the matrix of sex, race and class, or what Jana Evans Braziel calls "a racialized erotic economy."⁹⁷ This economy has been shaped by slavery, colonialism, contemporary immigration and white privilege – decidedly unsexy topics that, here, manifest principally in heterosexual terms. As *stereotype*, the *Blanche* is comparatively weak, for it lacks the long-range historical and racist punch that the *Nègre* stereotype carries. Indeed, the definitions of *nègre* we have just seen do not

speaking in the present day about the past. This observation is corroborated in the *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé* entry for 'nègre' (definition 1A): "Actuellement *nègre* semble en voie de perdre ce caractère péj., probablement en raison de la valorisation des cultures du monde noir (v. *négritude*)." / "Currently *nègre* seems to be losing its pejorative character, probably a result of the valorization of black cultures of the world (see *négritude*).". *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*, s.v. 'nègre' (definition 1A), accessed January 2014, <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/n%C3%A8gre>. In contrast, Laferrière's contemporary usage in *CFL* deliberately calls up racist connotations, all the more so when white characters use the term. A reappropriated usage is only conceivable when spoken by members of the community.

⁹⁷ Braziel, "Trans-American Constructions," 881.

frame it in terms of an opposition to the female *Blanche* specifically, though the fundamental contingency of (gender-neutral) *nègre* and *blanc* certainly obtains. The opposition Laferrière signals in situating the *Blanche* as the *Nègre*'s converse relates specifically to North American manifestations of interracial sexual relations, although these cannot be divorced from slavery and colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean. Laferrière offers a plethora of cultural references throughout his novel, the vast majority of which connect to America and African American culture, and to Québec and Montréal. His North American frame is clear, and we must read his treatment of the *Blanche* and the *Nègre* within this frame. His attention to the desire that fuels these relationships, and the sexual violence that can characterize them, is not without literary and critical precedents: canonical works of African American literature like Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* are three examples. Indeed, many of the novel's cultural references draw from African American culture, and Laferrière's rendering of the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* triangulates Canada and Africa through the United States.⁹⁸

Laferrière's *Blanche* and his treatment of the *Blanche-Nègre* combination must also be connected to the French Caribbean, and to Martiniquais Frantz Fanon's well-known examination of this pairing in *Peau noire, masques blancs / Black Skin, White Masks*. Laferrière gestures toward Fanon indirectly multiple times in *Comment faire l'amour*. Following Fanon, he draws on Freud and psychoanalysis⁹⁹ to explore interracial relationships, and to understand the unique appeal the *Blanche* has for the black man as a means of upward social mobility within a racial-sexual hierarchy. Here and elsewhere, race and class blur, in the particular social-sexual alchemy that Fanon describes. We will look more closely at Fanon's work and how Laferrière engages

⁹⁸ Laferrière's text has in turn influenced others: black Québécois writers Stanley Lloyd Norris, in *La Pucelle* (Saint-Laurent: Edition du Club Québec loisirs, 1993), and Max Dorsinville, in *James Wait et les lunettes noires* (Montreal: Editions du CIDIHCA, 1995), have likewise taken up the *Nègre* stereotype and its coupling with that of the *Blanche*. For a discussion of these texts' subversive treatment of the *Nègre*, see Susan Ireland, "Declining the Stereotype in the Work of Stanley Lloyd Norris, Max Dorsinville, and Dany Laferrière," *Quebec Studies* 39 (Spring/Summer 2005): 55-77.

⁹⁹ Laferrière makes ample use of Freud in *CFL* (see pages 13, 14, 35, 78, 155); Fanon also does in his work. Laferrière also explicitly references castration (17, 48) and the infamous racist slogan for the French drinking chocolate "y'a bon *Banania*" (147), tropes that Fanon explores in *Peau noire/ Black Skin*.

with it below. For now, suffice it to say that Laferrière's *Blanche* builds on both the North American paradigm for interracial relationships and on Fanon's influential work on the subject, itself shaped by French colonialism in the Caribbean and in Africa.

Though the narrative voice shifts to various perspectives in *Comment faire l'amour*, the prevailing position explored is that of our narrator and, by extension, others like him: black men in Montréal who are labeled *Nègre* and who are interested in white women. The text reads more like a memoir or autofiction than the 'How To' manual its title ironically suggests. It is not particularly action-driven; instead, we follow the narrator in his thoughts and conversations and observe his relationships with white women. He is a writer writing a novel – *Paradis du dragueur nègre*¹⁰⁰ / *Black Cruiser's Paradise* – so much like the one we read that we can assume they are one and the same. The narrative's sonorities are often more oral than written, as if the first-person narrator is speaking his thoughts, actions and feelings in the present tense. This technique lends an immediacy to the narrative, as it encourages intimacy and, significantly, complicity between reader and narrator. The autobiographical dimension, manifest in the prevalence of first-person statements and the uniform use of the present tense – I think this, I feel this, I do this, and then I do that¹⁰¹ – indexes the second pedagogical level identified above. The narrator models

¹⁰⁰ The narrator's novel in progress echoes in French the title of Carl Van Vechten's 1926 *Nigger Heaven* (New York: Knopf, 1926), which was translated as *Le Paradis des Nègres* (Paris: Editions Kra, 1927). This novel was controversial for its ambiguous use of the word "nigger" by a white author; see Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 329 for a discussion of this polemic. Laferrière's narrator's novel can thus be seen as a parody of Van Vechten's.

¹⁰¹ As one example of many:

UNE CHRONIQUE DE MA CHAMBRE AU 3670, RUE SAINT-DENIS [...]

J'écris : LIT.

Je vois : matelas poisseux, drap crasseux, sommier grinçant, Divan gondolé.

Je pense : dormir (Bouba dort douze heures d'affilée), baiser (Miz Sophisticated Lady), rêvasser au lit (avec Miz Littérature), écrire au lit le *Paradis du dragueur nègre*, lire au lit (Millers, Cendrars, Bukowski). (106) /

A description of my room at 3670 rue St-Denis [...]

I write: bed.

I see: dank mattress, dirty sheet, pounded-out pillow, corrugated couch.

I think: sleep (Bouba sleeps twelve hours straight), make love (Miz Sophisticated Lady), daydream in bed (with Miz Literature), write in bed (*Black Cruiser's Paradise*), read in bed (Miller, Cendrars, Bukowski). (98)

certain behaviors – behaviors that I read for how they are gendered, sexualized and racialized, in a text that engages pointedly with these dimensions. Though there is rarely explicit instruction here, this kind of narration suggests that the narrator sets an example to follow, offering behavioral guidelines for the racial, gender and sexual roles available to young men like him. He becomes a model of the stereotype he represents, and a latent (if also ironic) pedagogy is discernable here. Laferrière’s parody of a pedagogical genre interacts with his parodic pedagogy of identity stereotypes.

7.2 Teaching and Performing the *Nègre*

From the very first, and throughout the novel, the narrator refers to himself excessively as a *Nègre*.¹⁰² The excessive repetition of the term makes him a model *Nègre*, even as it problematizes this racist stereotype. A performative utterance is one that “effects an action by being spoken.”¹⁰³ J.L. Austin, the linguist behind the first formulation of the performative utterance, describes it in *How to Do Things With Words* (a title that prefigures Laferrière’s): “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action;” “in saying these words we are doing something.”¹⁰⁴ Here the narrator *makes* himself a *Nègre* by virtue of speaking or writing the word over and over. He constitutes and creates his *Nègre*-ness by the speech act, repeated like a mantra in a Butlerian performative ritual.¹⁰⁵ References to *the* or *a Nègre* often replace the

¹⁰² Laferrière most often writes *Nègre* with a capital letter N, to refer to the historicized concept and to signal the trope under examination; I follow him in indicating the trope this way.

¹⁰³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “performative, adj. and n.”, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.oed.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/140785?redirectedFrom=performative>.

¹⁰⁴ Austin, *How to Do Things*, 6, 13.

¹⁰⁵ The excessive repetition of the word *Nègre* is explained by the narrator of Laferrière’s later novel *Cette grenade*, which turns self-reflexively around *CFL*: “Je voulais faire quelque chose de différent des autres ... [...] Je n’ai pas dit que je ne voulais pas aborder la question raciale, mais je rêvais de l’aborder en esquivant la propagande. Dire le mot ‘*Nègre*’ si souvent qu’il devienne familier et perde tout son soufre ... Me vautrer là-dedans, me rouler dans le racisme, devenir en quelque sorte LE NEGRE comme le Christ a été L’HOMME.” / “I wanted to do something different from these others ... [...] I didn’t say I didn’t want to address the racial question, but I dreamed of addressing it by dodging propaganda ... Saying the word ‘*Nègre*’ so often that it became familiar and lost all its fire ... To wallow in it, to roll around in racism, to become in some way *LE NÈGRE* like Christ was *THE MAN*.” Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, 350. This strategy echoes Richard Pryor’s fifteen years earlier, who pioneered a comedic yet critical excessive

pronoun *I*, and the identity of the narrator is thus distilled to this recurrent qualifier. There are many different kinds of *Nègre* presented in the novel, some of them making for contradictions: the narcissistic *Nègre*, the nostalgic *Nègre*, the animal, poet, Cartesian or moralist *Nègre*. Many of these are self-descriptions on the part of the narrator, as he tries on different identities for size, playing at and performing *Nègre*-ness in different forms. Some of these correspond to the pejorative stereotype of the *Nègre* (i.e., “*Nègre animal, primitif, barbare*” / “animalistic, primitive, barbarous *Nègre*” (48/42), “*Dragueur nègre*” / “*nègre* cruise artist” (121/115)) while others contradict the stereotype (i.e., “*Nègre cartésien*” / “Cartesian *Nègre*” (35/29), “*Nègre moraliste*” / “moralist *Nègre*” (37/31), “*Nègre végétarien*” / “vegetarian *Nègre*” (141/133)). However, the incessant repetition of the designation *Nègre* as noun or adjective drives home the resilience of this imposed designation: *Nègre* is how the narrator labels himself, with obvious irony, for this is how he and others have been labeled by whites. In this manner, Laferrière subverts the *Nègre*, exposing the racist assumptions concealed within the designation, by giving us a *Nègre* who both exceeds and confounds expectations.

In adopting this anti-black racist label for himself, the speaker highlights how certain others see him – indeed, read him – and how it is impossible to insulate one’s sense of self from others’ perceptions, categorizations, and assumptions. Meanwhile, he self-consciously explores the *Nègre* type that he *must be*, hoping to uncover the truth about the role. Laferrière plays with the figure of the *Nègre* rather than that of the *Noir* (black). Though both are designations for blackness, they carry different connotations. *Noir* serves as a neutral or positive description of an individual’s racial identity, while *Nègre* refers to the historically constructed trope that is necessarily racist and therefore negative. The narrator admits: “En tant que Noir, je n’ai pas assez de recul par rapport au Nègre.” / “As a black [*Noir*], I don’t have enough distance from the *Nègre*” (49/42¹⁰⁶). *Noir* is what he is, and how he describes others, while *Nègre* is the racist

repetition of the ‘N’ word, overusing it “like a preacher singing hallelujah” so as to “numb [listeners to] its wretchedness.” Pryor, for his part, ultimately renounced this strategy later in his career, finding the word’s power to invoke centuries of humiliation and pain could not be attenuated. For a discussion of Pryor’s career, see Carpio, “The Conjuror Recoils”, 81-95.

¹⁰⁶ Translation modified. Due to the difficulty translating this sentence poses, Homel abbreviates it: “As a black, I don’t have enough distance.” (42)

stereotype problematized throughout the text and troubling to the narrator.¹⁰⁷ He uses the term to refer to the category or to himself only; he does not call other individuals *Nègres*, opting instead for *Noir* or for nationality as an index of race/ethnicity. Laferrière's use of *Nègre* is thus *strictly* in reference to the trope and stereotype: its invocation *always* indicates a shift away from the protagonist's own perspective, to an external, othering, white hegemonic gaze that collapses an individual into a stereotype constituted through racism. A white readership likewise mobilizes a gaze that the writer anticipates. In both ways, the *Nègre*/writer manifests a Du Boisian double consciousness,¹⁰⁸ seeing himself at once through his own perspective and through the othering perspective of whites. He is split and doubled, his sense of self riven by the white gaze upon him.

¹⁰⁷ In Haitian Kreyòl, *neg* is a neutral, non-racialized designation roughly synonymous with 'man' or 'human,' although it has connotations of masculinity. It can refer to people of any skin color. Moreover, the Kreyòl adjectives (*blan* and *nwa*) that derive from the French adjectives for white and black (*blanc* and *noir*) have lost their racial connotations and instead refer to citizen or foreigner status. Therefore a *neg blan* in Kreyòl refers to a foreigner, regardless of race/ethnicity, while a *neg nwa* refers to a Haitian citizen, again regardless of race/ethnicity. See Braziel, *Artists, Performers*, 4-5. Laferrière's use of *Nègre*, not *neg*, in his French-language text thus situates it within the French language and Montréal cultural contexts and justifies an interpretation of the term's connotations within these contexts. Though the French language is also spoken in Haiti, there is no explicitly Haitian content in this novel beyond the reader's extratextual knowledge of the writer's birthplace. The narrator's nationality is never disclosed; rather, he and other black men in the novel are framed as *Noir* and *Nègre* immigrants to Montréal, irrespective of nationality. Laferrière does play, however, with the idea of "*Nègres blancs*" ("white *Nègres*") put forth in Québécois Pierre Vallières' 1968 text, *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (translated as *White Niggers of America*). In this text, Vallières draws parallels between French Canadians' inferior status in Canada and the oppression and disenfranchisement of American blacks in the United States. He uses examples from the United States Civil Rights Movement to call for a revolution in Québec. In his text, *Nègre* signals not race, but inferior social class: the Québécois are disempowered on cultural and linguistic grounds in Canada. Laferrière rephrases Vallières when his narrator imagines the latter's comment on the novel he is writing: "VOICI, ENFIN, LES NÈGRES NOIRS D'AMÉRIQUE!" / "Finally, the true *Black Niggers of America!*" (151/142). Laferrière's play here with black and white *Nègres* serves not as Haitian Kreyol content (though the word likely calls up multiple meanings and cultural frames for our cosmopolitan author), but rather as a specifically Québécois cultural reference.

¹⁰⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois' description of an African American (or "Negro," in his terms) double-consciousness highlights the split between one's sense of oneself and one's awareness of the harsh white gaze looking on: "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness [...]." W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45.

The narrator's view of himself is refracted through the white racist gaze upon him, and this is a gaze he cannot ignore, for it stares him in the face at every turn – on the street, at the post office or the nightclub. The narrator uses the label both in provocative, mocking ways, and in seriousness. While he may mock the “African savage” stereotype quite blatantly, he questions other aspects of the *Nègre* type with sincerity, for these are not questions about his self, but about how racist others view him. Even when the term appears to be invoked unproblematically, as when one man refers to “l'âge d'or nègre” / “the *nègre* golden age” (90/81) when there were six *Blanches* for every *Nègre*, *Nègre* signals the white gaze that the *Blanches* bring to bear on the courtship situation, a gaze that the speaker has internalized. Although the speaker here celebrates a positive feature of the *Nègre* type, that of successful *séducteur*, this feature, like *Nègre* generally speaking, remains contaminated by racist undertones, making a neutral or celebratory usage impossible. In another instance of a black man's self-description as *Nègre*, a different speaker claims:

“Je ne peux entendre parler de Blanches. [...] Nous autres, Nègres, [...] nous avons plutôt besoin qu'on nous foute la paix. [...] Qu'on m'adore ou qu'on me vomisse, j'en ai rien à cirer. C'est la même saloperie. La même hypocrisie. Marre, j'en ai marre, frère.” (91)

“I can't stand this talk about *Blanches* anymore. [...] We *Nègres* need to be left alone. [...] You can love me or you can spit on me [...] I couldn't care less. It's all the same to me. The same hypocritical bullshit. I'm fed up, brother, fed up.” (82)

Here again, the designation *Nègre* crystallizes an external gaze, a manner of being treated by whites. Poignantly, this moment connects back to Deleselle and Valensi's finding that *nègre* came to signify inhumane treatment in the eighteenth century. Here, the speaker rejects the *Blanches* and the gaze they transmit, for whether this gaze is of desire or scorn, racist stereotype is at its root. The speaker's use of *Nègre* in this instance does not necessarily signal an unproblematic, neutral or reappropriated use; instead, this instance can be read to signal a collectivity produced by the racist white gaze and into which the speaker is interpellated. In this case, the “we” in “We, *Nègres*” is produced in large part by the “they” who adore or hate. His disgust is clear. The tone here is very much in line with Senghor's statement from which

Négritude was coined: “We don’t give a damn! *Nègre*? Well, yes, I am a *nègre*! And then what!”¹⁰⁹ These instances are reactionary exclamations that invoke the racist slur to defy its originator’s attack, or to reject the power and gaze that it implies. Laferrière illustrates here the trope of the *Nègre* as a product of colonial discourse, a construct of its racist project, and a restrictive, dehumanizing gaze that black men must manage.

Comment faire l’amour gives voice to black male speakers as a collectivity with shared experiences of oppression and racism. It also teaches lessons in black experience for non-black readers. Instances of direct discourse like this contribute to the pedagogical tenor of Laferrière’s text. In this first-person narrative that is autobiographical in tone and principally focused on the narrator’s own thoughts, feelings and actions, moments of direct discourse are infrequent. When the narrative breaks into direct discourse, it is almost always to cite conversations around blackness, whiteness, heterosexual relationships, and immigrant-other status. In these moments, other speakers – black males, for the most part – offer their opinions in declarative statements. These are not pleasantries about the weather or how-are-you, but conversations in which black men offer strong opinions about their racial, sexual and class status in Montréal. In effect, racism reduces these characters to one topic of conversation. Their statements have pedagogical undertones that corroborate the text’s ostensible (if parodic) didacticism.

The narrator tries to understand how he is seen by whites, occasionally shifting into male and female white narrative voices to represent their racism. The narrative relates,

Ce n’est pas tant baiser avec un Nègre qui peut terrifier. Le pire, c’est dormir avec lui. Dormir, c’est se livrer totalement. Le plus que NU. [...] On a déjà vu des jeunes filles blanches, anglo-saxonnes, protestantes, dormir avec un Nègre et se réveiller le lendemain sous un baobab, en plein brousse [...] Méfiez-vous. Baiser avec un Nègre, c’est bien (c’est même recommandé), mais dormir avec... (83-4)

Making love to a *Nègre* isn’t frightening; sleeping with him is. Sleeping is complete surrender. It’s more than nude [...] It’s happened before: young, white, Protestant Anglo-Saxon girls sleep with a *Nègre* and wake up under a baobab tree in the middle of the bush. [...] Be careful. Fucking with a *Nègre* is all right (it’s even recommended), but sleeping with one... (74-5)

¹⁰⁹ Césaire, “La culture,” 119.

Here we hear a black voice mocking that of the racist white male, issuing a warning to the *Blanche*. The passage's parenthetical recommendation – the black voice interrupting and disrupting the white male voice he is mocking, and that white male's warning – signals Laferrière's play with multiple perspectives, as his polyphonic narrative moves through different voices, roles and stereotypes. Importantly, narrative voices are performances, and when the narrative shifts in voice or echoes other voices, these shifts and echoes are performances of other identity positions, and parodic ones at that. Dentith notes that postcolonial parodies often "[play] ironically with the authoritative, instructive modes colonial discourse uses to dominate others."¹¹⁰ Shifting back to his own voice, the narrator asks:

Peut-on rêver l'autre? Peut-on pénétrer le rêve de l'autre? L'Occident dit: territoire inconnu. Attention: DANGER. Danger d'osmose. Danger de véritable communication. Ce qui était une simple baise érotique pourrait bien devenir... (83)

Do we dream our lover? Do we penetrate his dreams? Shifting sands, says the Western world. Danger. Beware. Danger of osmosis. Danger of true communication. What started out as a simple roll in the hay can turn into... (74)

Our narrator is already dreaming of *Blanches*, and they are dreaming of him. On a first level of reading, the danger the West (read: white men) fears for its white daughters is not in "a simple roll in the hay" but rather something more: true communication, a genuine exchange, made possible, following the narrator's paradoxical logic, by *dreaming* the other. The ellipses here and in the preceding quote suggest a hidden, secondary meaning not spelled out here: sex is not simply sex, but something more. I take these as warnings to the reader about something deeper happening here. On a second level of reading, when the white narrative voice warns *Blanches* to "Be careful," this is also a message from the writer to the reader, directly addressed. **Lesson Number One:** Be careful. You can fuck with the *Nègre* writer but don't let down your guard, or else... Or else he will fuck with you. This writer has lessons to teach, lessons that seek to exact revenge for history's injustices and to correct the reader's racist thinking. In the recommendation provided above, and in the allegory I draw between the *Nègre-Blanche* relationship and the writer-

¹¹⁰ Dentith, *Parody*, 164.

reader relationships, the phrase “fuck with” has two possible meanings: to have sex with, or to mess with, dupe, and screw over. The white male narrative voice being mocked above advises his white female interlocutor to mess with, dupe and screw over the *Nègre*; historically speaking, this is what whites have always done to blacks. This first lesson presents the racist white male perspective parodically, ironically and therefore critically, filtered through a mocking black voice. The ironic lesson is passed from the racist white male to the racist white female about how she can screw over the black man and set the stage for the vengeance to come: the *Nègre* will (sexually) fuck and (mentally) fuck with the *Blanche*, while the writer will mentally fuck with and fuck over the reader. This allegory of revenge will be spelled out further below.

These shifts in voice, perspective and identity call up another meaning of the French word *nègre*: that of ghostwriter. Interestingly, a ghostwriter labors anonymously in the service of someone else’s project and progress.¹¹¹ The notion of *nègre* as slave laborer, stripped of his own identity and denied the fruits of his efforts, connects to the notion of *nègre* as ghostwriter.¹¹² Through shifts in narrative voice, as in each deployment of the term *Nègre*, Laferrière (via his narrator) ghostwrites the racist white gaze, but ironically and critically – in the service of his *own* project and progress rather than whites’. These voices may belong to female *Blanches* or to male *Blancs*; sometimes they are in the form of newspaper headlines or public service announcements; always they signal a broader, white hegemonic, anti-black discourse; always they reveal a

¹¹¹ The *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé* entry for *nègre* includes: “Auxiliaire qui prépare le travail de quelqu’un et *en partic.* personne anonyme qui rédige pour une personnalité, qui compose les ouvrages d’un auteur connu. [...] Homme à tout faire; personne exploitée sans limites.” / “An auxiliary who performs work for someone else, in particular an anonymous person who writes for a public figure, or who writes the works of a known author. [...] A man of all-trades; a person exploited without limits.” *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*, s.v. ‘nègre’ (definition 4A and 4B), accessed January 2014, <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/n%C3%A8gre> .

¹¹² In *J’écris comme je vis*, Laferrière quips that he needs a *nègre* – here, in the sense of ghostwriter – in order to write books more quickly. “J’ai voulu être le Carl Lewis de la dactylo, faire un bouquin en moins de dix secondes, disons dix jours dans le cas d’un roman. [...] Je n’ai pas de temps à perdre. L’idéal, ce serait d’avoir un nègre, comme d’autres ont une femme de ménage.” / “I wanted to be the Carl Lewis of the pen, to write a book in ten seconds, let’s say ten days for a novel. [...] I have no time to lose. It would be ideal to have a ghostwriter, like other people have a cleaning lady.” (*J’écris* 174-5). His joke is of course in relation to the figure of the *Nègre* in *CFL*, the subject of much discussion in this subsequent publication.

perspective and gaze on black men that the narrator explores by trying them on. This “linguistic imitation,” typical of postmodernist novels, enables them to “work in at least two cultural registers at once, engaged in the typically parodic procedure of ‘double-coding.’”¹¹³ Laferrière performs a kind of critical ventriloquism in his parodies of the authoritative and instructive racist white voices typical of colonial discourse.

The various voices that inhabit the narrator’s narration index social positions he must navigate as a black man in Montréal. Braziel writes that this novel “points to the ways in which black masculinity and black male sexuality are always already *framed* by a racialized erotic economy defined within [...] white, masculine, heterosexual parameters that trap black men.”¹¹⁴ Here the narrator tries out different positions within this matrix, attempting to understand them from the inside, though these are only projections and performances of others’ positions. Indeed, he cannot escape his own position to truly understand another’s:

Si je deviens subitement Blanc, là, juste en le souhaitant, que se passera-t-il? Je ne le sais pas. La question est trop grave pour faire des suppositions. Je verrai les Noirs dans les rues et je saurai à quoi ils pensent quand ils regardent un Blanc. Je n’aimerais surtout pas que quelqu’un me regarde avec une telle convoitise dans les yeux. (79)

If my wishes were granted and I suddenly turned white, what would happen? I have no idea. The question is too important for suppositions. I would see blacks in the street and know what they think when they see a white. I wouldn’t want people staring at me with that covetous look in their eyes. (69)

The narrator finds himself in a hall of broken mirrors.¹¹⁵ He tries, but fails, to see himself fully through the white gaze, and to see himself fully despite it. His own sense of self is fractured by the white gaze he can neither ignore, nor fully grasp. He catches glimpses of his likeness, refracted through different social positions and racial perspectives that yield imperfect reflections. It is through narrative polyphony that Laferrière renders multiple gazes and multiple perspectives, at once ghostwriter and ventriloquist. He demonstrates here the contingency and

¹¹³ Dentith, *Parody*, 165.

¹¹⁴ Braziel, “Trans-American Constructions,” 881.

¹¹⁵ I borrow the image of “broken mirrors” from Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” 11.

relation between identity types – man/woman, black/white, writer/reader – always in relationships of uneven power.

Laferrière plays with the type and trope, giving us an alleged *Nègre* who isn't entirely certain what that means, but who *must be* a model *Nègre* given the fact that his *Nègre*-ness is mentioned at every turn. The narrator's introspective moments aside, when it comes to action, he plays the role that is expected of him, rendering the *Nègre* in a theatrical way that unveils the performative features of the identity. For example, playing the stereotypical African savage, he threatens to eat his lover's cat. His interrogation and his playful exaggeration of the *Nègre* type reveal it as a construction, a set of expectations, and a deliberate performance, rather than something natural. This is a performance that, by exaggerating, deliberately fails to perform so as to reveal the stereotype as artifice – to the critical reader, not to the dupable *Blanche*.¹¹⁶ These two positions are aligned, if not identical. The *Nègre* as role is exaggerated and caricatured, by simultaneous corroboration and contradiction. Laferrière's irony lies within this internal contradiction in his treatment of the *Nègre*: the *Nègre* doesn't exist and over-exists, all at once.¹¹⁷ This internal ambivalence, which makes his play with the *Nègre* ironic and entertaining, also signals a larger ambivalence in his subversive deployment of stereotype in the novel, for the stereotype risks reinforcement with each repeated utterance. I will return to this problem below.

The artifice of the stereotype is highlighted by moments when it is revealed as a performance, as a role taught, learned and performed. One *Nègre*-in-training is taught how to

¹¹⁶ This gesture therefore exemplifies Butler's notion of counterperformativity – a repetition that reworks or subverts discourses; scholars building on Butler's work might call this resistant performance. See Lander, "Performativity," 1109.

¹¹⁷ Bhabha qualifies mimicry as an "*ironic* compromise." Indeed, the conscious way in which *CFL*'s narrator subverts the *Nègre* clearly entails deliberate irony on his part (and therefore on Laferrière's). Bhabha writes: "in order to be effective [for the colonizer], mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference." Laferrière's protagonist performs mimicry in a resistant manner, playing up the slippage, the excess, the difference between the ideal role-stereotype of the *Nègre*, and the *Nègre* that he pretends to be *when interacting with Blanches*. They call forth this performance from him, and he uses it strategically, ironically, subversively, in a sense beating them at their own game. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 86.

perform the role by an older, more experienced man who offers a lesson in stereotype performance. Here, the First *Nègre* and the Second *Nègre* chat in the washroom of a nightclub:

LE PREMIER NÈGRE

Avec ces filles, frère, il faut être vif, sinon elles te filent entre les doigts. [...] Elles sont ici pour voir du Nègre, il faut donc leur donner du Nègre.

LE DEUXIÈME NÈGRE

Qu'est-ce que c'est que "du Nègre"?

LE PREMIER NÈGRE

Ecoute, frère, fais pas le malin. T'es ici pour baiser, c'est ça? T'es venu ici pour baiser une Blanche, n'est-ce pas? Eh bien, c'est comme ça.

LE DEUXIÈME NÈGRE

Pourquoi est-ce qu'une femme...?

LE PREMIER NÈGRE

IL N'Y A PAS DE FEMMES ICI. IL Y A DES BLANCHES ET DES NÈGRES, C'EST TOUT. (127-8)

FIRST *NÈGRE*: You'll have to be quick with these girls, brother, or they'll slip through your fingers. [...] They came here to see some *Nègre*. We've got to show them some *Nègre*.

SECOND *NÈGRE*: What's this 'some *Nègre*'?

FIRST *NÈGRE*: Listen, brother, cut the innocence. You're here to fuck, right? You're here to fuck a *Blanche*, right? That's how it works.

SECOND *NÈGRE*: But a woman can be...

FIRST *NÈGRE*: There's no women here. There's *Blanches* and *Nègres*, that's all. (119-20)

This example neatly captures the nexus of performance and pedagogy as they relate to identity. Laferrière, excessive and provocative as ever, exaggerates the scene to the extreme of caricature, and of deliberate stereotype performance. Here the "Premier Nègre" is an authority about the *Blanche* and *Nègre* types and instructs the "Deuxième Nègre" in the rules of the game and the roles the game requires. The *Blanches* came to see "some *Nègre*" – like one goes to see some sport or some comedy – so "we've got to show them some *Nègre*." *Nègre*-ness is, following Butler, "a stylized repetition of acts,"¹¹⁸ something that one does, rather than something that one is. A certain kind of spectacle is expected; the performers must therefore satisfy their audience. The Second *Nègre*'s resistance to such reduction to stereotype will not be heeded here. These are

¹¹⁸ Butler, "Performative Acts," 519.

not women and men; these are *Blanches* and *Nègres*, the First *Nègre* instructs the Second in a pedantic, authoritative tone. In a parallel movement, Laferrière gives his reader lessons in history and sociology. **Lesson Number Two:** a word that may be largely obsolete in everyday parlance is alive and well as trope and type animating people's understandings of racial difference – and their sexual fantasies. Here, Laferrière illustrates identity as constructed by pedagogy and performativity: something learned and then performed. He exaggerates identity *performativity* to the extreme of stereotype *performance*; here, a stereotype explicitly recognized as such is consciously taught and strategically performed to attain certain objectives, namely the seduction of the *Blanche* (another stereotype) and the racial victory that results. By exaggerating the *Nègre* as performance and artifice, it is revealed as stereotype and subverted.

8 The *Nègre* and the *Blanche* in Relation

8.1 Stereotype vs. Identity, Stereotype vs. Novelistic Character

Each of the three principal identifiers of race and gender in fiction defined in the Introduction – explicit identification, body, and voice – can operate in the service of either identity or stereotype. How can we determine which is being evoked? In the case of *Nègre* and *Blanche*, Laferrière's treatment of these figures *when they are named as such* signals his invocation of stereotype, rather than of identity. Both terms are capitalized, indicating their function as trope and fixed object rather than labile, flexible identity. These tropes are returned to repeatedly throughout the text in a manner that recalls the rigid, static, repetitive qualities of stereotype. Given the visible symmetry advanced by the *Nègre/Blanche* opposition, we can extend this argument: if *Nègre* is stereotype, so is *Blanche*, though these terms call up different histories and significations. The narrator's metanarrative about the *Nègre* type he questions and explores confirms that *Nègre* is deployed to index stereotype, not identity. However, part of Laferrière's subversion is to invoke the *Nègre*'s status as stereotype only to then reveal the individual's status as identity.

Laferrière subverts stereotype so as to free individuals from stereotype's oppressive constraints and instead allow them (in his fictional representation) full humanity, complexity, individuality and dignity. In effect, Laferrière portrays his *Nègre* as a complex individual evolving and growing in his unique way, not following the scripted, predictable, stereotypical path others in his group are assumed to take. We recall that, despite the significant degree of

overlap between the two terms, a stereotype is always outwardly directed (when one stereotypes others) or imposed from outside (when one is stereotyped oneself), while an identity can describe others as well as oneself. Stereotyping is steeped in power relationships and the power differential between “who proposes [...] and has the power to enforce”¹¹⁹ the stereotype, on the one hand, and who is stereotyped, on the other. In taking up the *Nègre* stereotype, one originating in white domination, Laferrière attempts to invert the power structure by appropriating the label, exaggerating and parodying it. His *Nègre* is instead an identity, multiple and complex, as the many qualifiers used to describe him (e.g., animal, primitive, Cartesian, moralist) indicate. The narrator proposes the stereotype and enforces it about himself, with much self-reflexivity, irony and sarcasm, thereby asserting his power of self-definition. This gesture instantiates one of the strategies Rosello identifies: riskily reappropriating the stereotype. A stereotype applied from the inside, to oneself, with mockery and irony, is defused of its power. A stereotype applied from the outside, by someone else, remains a threatening force.¹²⁰ In playing with the *Nègre* stereotype as he does, from the inside and the outside, the narrator reflects once again a Du Boisian double-consciousness, split and doubled. Following Bhabha, his mimicry is also disruptive, resistant and critical. However, as the analyses to follow will reveal, Laferrière’s intervention around stereotype is difficult to label as pure critique, both for how the *Nègre* himself is represented, and for how the stereotype of the *Blanche* is treated. As Rosello has shown, there is an ambivalence at the heart of any *critical* deployment of stereotype, for the stereotype’s enunciation necessarily calls up its uncritical meanings at the same time.

As I examine Laferrière’s subversive play with stereotype, I seize upon what he *does* with the stereotype of the *Nègre*. Laferrière plays with both the content and the form of this stereotype. With respect to content, for example, he confirms aspects of the *Nègre* stereotype (e.g., the *Nègre* is a stud) and disconfirms others (e.g., the *Nègre* is uneducated). As I will show toward the end of this chapter, Laferrière treats the *Nègre*’s stereotypical hypersexual masculinity ambivalently, both confirming and disconfirming it in the text. In moments when he

¹¹⁹ Dyer, “The Role of Stereotypes,” 14.

¹²⁰ Here I build on Lori Saint-Martin’s logic: “Miné de l’intérieur par le supposé inférieur, le stéréotype éclate; reconduit de l’extérieur, il demeure.” / “Undermined from the inside by the supposed inferior, the stereotype breaks apart; reapplied from the outside, it remains.” Saint-Martin, “Une oppression,” 62.

confirms it, the space between first- and second-degree utterances shrinks. Rosello warns that the death of irony is a real risk when racist stereotypes are deployed ironically. Indeed, Laferrière's irony can be easily eroded and lost, for his second-degree enunciation can quickly degrade to a first-degree repetition of a racist stereotype. Of course, the stereotype of black male studliness is, relative to some other aspects of the *Nègre* type, a comparatively 'positive' one, for the narrator uses it to his advantage throughout this tale of sexual conquest. Such moments that reinforce the *Nègre*'s sexual prowess serve as intentional jabs at white men's sexual prowess. The jab is clearly orchestrated; however, the critique of the stereotype disappears and the stereotype is dangerously confirmed.

Rosello nonetheless suggests that stereotypes can be deprived of some of their power by intervening in their *form* rather than in their *content*. Laferrière intervenes formally by fleshing out his narrator's character: the caricaturesque *Nègre* actively performing his *Nègre*-ness proves to be a complex fictional character who evolves over the course of the narrative. The character must be therefore distinguished from the stereotypical category he is self-consciously interrogating. When the narrator claims, "As a *Noir*, I don't have enough distance from the *Nègre*" (42), we see that *Noir* is the identity he inhabits, while *Nègre* is the stereotype imposed from outside, produced in the racist white gaze. The character labeled *Nègre* (stereotype) is in fact *Noir* (identity), and he self-reflexively interrogates the *Nègre* label he has been assigned. In other words, the character tries on the stereotype for size, and repetitively, performatively offers himself up as an archetypal, stereotypical *Nègre*; at the same time, in the line above and in his characterization throughout the novel, he reveals himself as exploding the stereotype and instead embodying a more dynamic, evolving, fleshed out character. (As we shall see below, the *Blanche* is not afforded the same complexity in Laferrière's characterization.) Indeed, the distinction between stereotype and identity in life parallels the distinction between stereotype and fully developed character in fiction.

Richard Dyer offers a means with which to distinguish fictional stereotypes from the fictional equivalent of identities, what he calls the novelistic character:

Stereotypes are a particular sub-category of a broader category of fictional characters, the type. [...] The type is any character constructed through the use of a few immediately recognizable and defining traits, which do not change or 'develop' through the course of the narrative and which point to general,

recurrent features of the human world [...]. The opposite of the type is the novelistic character, defined by a multiplicity of traits that are only gradually revealed to us through the course of the narrative, a narrative which is hinged on the growth and development of the character and is thus centred upon the latter in her or his unique individuality, rather than pointing outwards to the world.¹²¹

Dyer demonstrates that stereotypes in fiction are constructed through a limited number of verbal and visual traits and are used in a narrow, inflexible manner; this contrasts with novelistic characters that are, by definition, developed, dynamic, and round. Importantly, “stereotypes always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative.”¹²² Clearly, Laferrière invokes the *Nègre* stereotype we are familiar with in order to subvert it, which he does, in part, by placing the narrator at the center of the narrative and depicting him in his dynamic, unique individuality (i.e., intellectual, artistic, Cartesian, moralist, Muslim, sexually successful, etc.). The narrator’s development throughout *Comment faire l’amour*, as he writes and completes his own novel, characterizes (literally) the text’s narrative arc. The *Nègre* narrator, invoked explicitly as stereotype, is ultimately moved out of stereotype territory and into that of a fully developed character. Laferrière’s intervention, to undo the *Nègre* stereotype, operates thus via the formal device of characterization. His treatment of the *Blanche*, however, smacks of stereotype rather than identity, and of cliché rather than character development. Laferrière treats these two ostensible stereotypes in an asymmetrical way.

Laferrière’s text relates a tale of individuals *who live through* the stereotypes they are assigned. The only character in the novel with a name is the narrator’s roommate, Bouba. The protagonist never provides his own name, and the *Blanches* all have descriptive nicknames in English instead of first names: Miz Snob, Miz Suicide, Miz Sophisticated Lady, Miz Littérature, et al.¹²³ In effect, these are sub-types within the *Blanche* stereotype. This uniform namelessness

¹²¹ Dyer, “The Role of Stereotypes,” 13.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹²³ The narrator justifies the ‘Miz’ form of address: “Pour ne pas se mettre Gloria Steinem [*sic*] sur le dos, on écrit Miz.” / “So as not to get Gloria Steinem on our case we say ‘Miz’” (26/20). Mockingly referring to a famous feminist (a gesture to be repeated at the end of the novel with respect to Simone de Beauvoir), her feminist magazine *Ms.*, and the feminist preference for this form of address, the narrator anticipates, mocks and undermines a feminist ideology here. This is an early jab at feminist discourse, one of many to come in the novel.

corroborates the anonymity with which we are meant to understand the type they represent. These are supposed to be generalized *Blanches* and *Nègres*, performing their respective racial, gender, and sexual roles for the other as they interact. To further instantiate these anonymous, generic types, the individuals interacting are represented physically *only in relation to their skin color, and only in relation to sex*: breasts, bellies, and vaginas are always white; penises are always black.¹²⁴ Despite being depicted principally in relation to his (hyper)sexuality, the so-called *Nègre* is rarely embodied through physical descriptions in the text; the *Blanche*, in contrast, is often embodied and *always* in simultaneously racialized and sexualized terms: the parts of her body that are mentioned are sexual parts whose whiteness is emphasized. Laferrière relates actions taken by bodies while emphasizing the racial identities of said bodies, thus reinforcing the *typical* nature of the bodies involved rather than the individuals acting. These techniques of anonymity and typification contravene novelistic conventions of characterization, in the service of Laferrière's larger project of problematizing stereotypes and thereby challenging them. However, his challenge is unevenly dealt. *Blanches* are always embodied in sexualized ways, while *Nègres* are rarely embodied at all. The woman is here a sex object, the man a thinking agent. The first-person narrator sees himself as a dynamic, unique, thinking agent with an *identity*, but *Blanches* remain merely sex objects and static *stereotypes*.

The narrator plays (with) the *Nègre* stereotype, which is different from the *Noir* identity he announces. He in turn sees his white lovers as stereotypical *Blanches*: English speakers from the wealthy, colonial England-inspired neighborhood of Westmount, who go to McGill University but speak French with the narrator. We are never privy to the *Blanches*' interiority; the text is never focalized through their perspective. Certain *Blanches* have voice in direct

¹²⁴ Some examples of racialized, sexualized body parts belonging to the *Nègre* and the *Blanche*: “Qu’est-ce qu’elle fait ainsi au bout de ma pine nègre ? Ca ruisselle entre ses cuisses blanches.” / “What is she doing at the end of my black rod? The juices flow between her white thighs” (80/70); “Je regarde du coin de l’œil mes cuisses huilées (à la noix de coco) le long de ce corps blanc. Je prends fermement ses seins blancs. Le léger duvet sur le ventre blanc (marbre). [...] mon sexe célèbre ces poils dorés, ce clitoris rose, ce vagin interdit, ce ventre blanc, ce cou ployé, cette bouche anglo-saxonne.” / “I catch a glimpse of my oiled thighs (coconut oil) against this white body. I take her white breasts firmly in my hands. The light down on her white marble body.[...] My sex celebrates your golden hair, your pink clitoris, your forbidden vagina, your white belly, your bowed neck, your Anglo-Saxon mouth” (81/71-2). There are far fewer representations of the *Nègre*'s physical body than there are of the *Blanche*'s.

discourse in the novel, though they are then promptly outwitted by the narrator. The narrative's forays into various white *narrative* voices are always implicitly male and, furthermore, are clearly second-degree parodies rather than 'sincere' transmissions of a white character's position. Following Dyer's criteria for fictional stereotypes, the *Blanches* are depicted negatively by "a few immediately recognizable and defining traits, which do not change or 'develop' through the course of the narrative": they are loose, gullible, dupable, dispensable, and interchangeable, easy to fuck and to fuck with. The *Nègres* are lucid and self-aware about their performance of a role; the *Blanches* are not. Following Dyer's criteria, *Comment faire l'amour*'s narrative hinges on the growth and development of its ostensibly *Nègre* narrator, while the *Blanches* he seduces are mere accessories to his evolution and are not themselves developed.

Lori Saint-Martin argues:

le stéréotype de l'homme noir est retravaillé de l'intérieur par un narrateur spirituel, raffiné, ironique, qui a acquis les codes de la culture blanche dominante mais qui reconnaît aussi la culture noire propre — musique, littérature, art. Quant aux personnages féminins, ils sont vus entièrement de l'extérieur, ont peu la parole et ne possèdent aucun humour ; ils ne jouent pas du stéréotype, ils en sont plutôt le jouet.

the stereotype of the black man is reworked from the inside by a spiritual, refined, ironic narrator who has acquired the codes of the dominant white culture but who also recognizes his own black culture – music, literature, art. As for the female characters, they are seen entirely from the exterior, rarely speak and lack all humor; they do not play with the stereotype, but are rather played with.¹²⁵

As we have seen, historically speaking, the *Blanche* is comparatively weak as stereotype compared to the *Nègre*. However, Laferrière's text inverts this hierarchy, rendering the *Blanche* as a rigid stereotype in the fiction, while the central character deemed *Nègre* ultimately subverts the stereotype and is revealed as a fully developed, complex, non-stereotypical individual: an identity, in real world terms, and a novelistic character, in fictional ones. This move constitutes a kind of discursive revenge – de-stereotyping the *Nègre* while stereotyping the *Blanche* – that operates on the level of a stereotype's *form*, as Rosello discusses, rather than its content. Having begun to explore how Laferrière deals with the *Nègre* and *Blanche* stereotypes formally by

¹²⁵ Saint-Martin, "Une oppression," 61-2.

different techniques of characterization, let us turn to his treatment of their relationship in the narrative.

8.2 The *Nègre* and the *Blanche* Together

Laferrière mines the intertwined histories of slavery and colonialism to explore contemporary heterosexual relationships between those labeled *Nègres* and *Blanches*. These relationships are animated by fantasies of the other; indeed, fantasies play a central role in the novel, which the narrator once describes as “des phantasmes [...] les miens” / “fantasies [...] mine” (128-9/120)”. He claims: “la sexualité est avant tout affaire de phantasmes et le phantasme accouplant le Nègre et la Blanche est l’un des plus explosifs qui soit.”/ “sexuality is based on fantasy and the *Nègre/Blanche* fantasy is one of the most explosive ones around” (130/122). Sex and fiction are both the stuff of fantasy; the allegory I draw between the *Nègre-Blanche* relationship and the writer-reader relationship likewise connects these two spheres. The two examples from *Comment faire l’amour* I will explore here involve very different historical contexts: slavery in the American south, and colonialism in Africa. (Further on, I will offer another example that invokes specifically British colonialism in India and Africa.) Laferrière is deliberately drawing on a range of geopolitical spaces to historicize white domination as the backdrop for *Nègre-Blanche* relationships.

Laferrière depicts the reciprocal desire animating the *Nègre-Blanche* couple as predicated on centuries-old fantasies that remain active in both parties’ imaginaries today. He offers the following description of plantation culture in the American South:

Corps noirs ruisselants de sueur, courbés devant la grâce floconneuse du coton. Corps noirs luisants de sensualité et ballottés par le cruel vent du Sud profond. Deux cents ans de désirs entassés, encaissés, empilés et descendant les flots du Mississippi dans la cale des riverboats. Désirs noirs obsédés par le corps blanc pubère. Désirs tenus en laisse comme un chien enragé. Désirs crépitants. Désirs de la Blanche. (105)

Black bodies running with sweat, bent over the snowy grace of the cotton. Black bodies shining sensual, beaten by the cruel wind of the Deep South. Two hundred years of desire thrown together, boxed in, piled up and sent down the Mississippi in the hold of a riverboat. Black desire obsessed with pubescent white flesh. Desire reined in like a mad dog. Desire flaming up. Desire for the *Blanche*. (97)

In this lyrical passage, both black and white bodies are sexualized in the gaze of the other, as the word ‘desire’ is repeated over and over. Disturbingly, the sensual aspects of this scene are in fact

created by the material and political conditions of slavery: the sensual black bodies are desired *because* they belong to enslaved workers in cotton fields; these men in turn obsess over the pubescent white female body *because* it is forbidden, white like the cotton implicated in their oppression. Desires are piled upon one another like bodies in the hold of a slave ship on the Mississippi River. Robert J.C. Young's notion of colonial desire is useful here to elucidate how these alleged racial and sexual opposites desire each other precisely because of their dialectical opposition in a culture riven by racial ideologies. Laferrière's novel, published a decade before Young's critical study, instantiates some of the dynamics Young examines.

Young identifies colonial desire as "a covert but insistent obsession with transgressive, inter-racial sex, hybridity and miscegenation."¹²⁶ Indeed, Laferrière writes of "Black desire *obsessed* with pubescent white flesh" (my emphasis). Young explains:

the races and their intermixture circulate around an ambivalent axis of desire and aversion: a structure of attraction, where people and cultures intermix and merge, transforming themselves as a result, and a structure of repulsion, where the different elements remain distinct and are set against each other dialogically. The idea of race here shows itself to be profoundly dialectical: it only works when defined against potential intermixture, which also threatens to undo its calculations altogether. This antagonistic structure acts out the tensions of a conflictual culture which defines itself through racial ideologies.¹²⁷

The above passage illustrates that the "obsession with transgressive, inter-racial sex" operates for both the *Nègre* and the *Blanche*. Indeed, Laferrière's final phrase "Désirs de la Blanche" in fact entails more ambiguity than the translation suggests. It may mean either "desires *for* the *Blanche*" or "desires *of* the *Blanche*," which would signal the reciprocal desire animating the *Blanche-Nègre* combination. In fitting Laferrière form, this passage shifts among various perspectives: the beginning of the passage highlights the sensuality of black bodies, revealing this moment as focalized through the *Blanche*; further down, the focalization shifts to that of the blacks who desire the pubescent white (female) body: "Black desire obsessed with pubescent white flesh." Troublingly, slavery here serves as an aphrodisiac; this is certainly another Laferrierian provocation, designed to provoke both those readers perturbed by images of slavery

¹²⁶ Young, *Colonial Desire*, xii.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

(i.e., “Black bodies shining sensual, beaten by the cruel wind of the Deep South”) and those readers perturbed by images of interracial – and paedophilic – desire (i.e., “Black desire obsessed with pubescent white flesh”). This last image is pointed in particular at white male readers who, the author anticipates, will react to the threat black male heterosexuality poses for the pubescent – therefore implicitly innocent and underage – white female.¹²⁸ The fantasy of the other – the *Nègre*’s fantasy of the *Blanche*, the *Blanche*’s fantasy of the *Nègre*, and the *Blanc*’s fantasy and fear of the *Nègre*’s predatory sexuality – animates all parties’ imaginaries in this love triangle. The black female is palpably absent from this charged sexual scene. She serves only as a peripheral musical reference, in this scene¹²⁹ and others¹³⁰, but never participates as a sexual/social actor in relation to the other three positions. She is not, in fact, a type under examination in the novel; the novel’s sole reference to the *Nègresse* serves to negate her completely, deeming her insignificant socially and sexually (since sex here serves a social function). I will return to this issue below.

My second example articulates the *Blanche*’s fantasy of the *Nègre* in terms of his stereotypical African savagery and hypersexuality. This likewise demonstrates the connection

¹²⁸ Note that the only phrase indicating gender in this passage is the final one: “Désirs de la Blanche.” The “Black bodies” and “pubescent white flesh” needn’t necessarily belong to black males and white females, respectively; enslaved black women could desire pubescent white males. However, the relentless pairing of *Nègre* and *Blanche* throughout the novel, and the literal effacement of black women from the text leads the reader to accept Laferrière’s narrow formula for racialized desire: white females and black males can desire one another; no other interracial pairing is conceivable within the logic of the novel. This logic mirrors the logic of anti-black racism, in which black men are sexualized and white women must be protected from black male sexuality by white men. However, anti-black racism extends to other interactions, namely white men’s desire for and rape of black women -- a historical phenomenon far more widespread than black men’s rape of white women. This blind spot with respect to other vectors of desire in the race-gender matrix serves Laferrière’s focus on black men’s racialized subjectivity at the expense of black women’s.

¹²⁹ This passage opens with reference to blues singer Bessie Smith, her biography and her sadness; the latter is invoked in connection to slavery: “Pauvre Bessie. Pauvre Mississippi. [...] Pauvre Bessie au coeur lynché.” / “Poor Bessie. Poor Mississippi. [...] Poor Bessie with a lynched heart” (105/97). The scene then transitions into the description of *Nègre-Blanche* desire cited above.

¹³⁰ Suzette Mayr examines the role of African American singers (Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald and Tina Turner), and the otherwise absent figure of the black woman in the novel. Mayr, “Absent Black Women,” 33-39.

between sexual fantasies and fictional fantasies – or more precisely, fantasies of literary success. Writing and sex are joined here, supporting my argument that the *Nègre-Blanche* relationship allegorizes the writer-reader relationship. Here, the narrator imagines an interview he will give when his novel is published and he is a successful writer. In his fantasy, he tells his interviewer of a cultivated, well-traveled Ivorian who strategically plays the primitive African so as to seduce a *Blanche* with an attraction for the exotic.

Je connaissais le type. C'était tout juste s'il ne disait pas à la fille qu'il était un amateur de chair humaine, qu'il venait de la brousse, que son père était le grand sorcier de son village. Bon, on connaît la musique. Et moi, je voyais la fille hocher la tête, en extase devant un vrai de vrai, l'homme primitive, le Nègre selon *National Geographic*, Rousseau et Cie. Je connais très bien ce type [...]. C'est un urbain et un Occidental. Mais cela, il ne l'admettra devant aucune Blanche pour tout l'ivoire du monde. Devant le Blanc, il veut passer pour un occidental, mais devant la Blanche, l'Afrique doit lui servir, en quelque sorte, de SEXE SURNUMÉRAIRE. (155)

I knew the guy. He was all but telling her he was a cannibal, fresh out of the bush, that his father was the big medicine-man in his village. The whole mythology. I watched the girl: she was nodding, in total ecstasy at finding a real bushman, homo primitivus, the *Nègre* according to *National Geographic*, Rousseau and Company. I know the guy and I know he's not from the bush. [...] He's an urban man, a virtual European. But he'll never admit that to a *Blanche* for all the ivory of the world. In the *Blanc*'s eyes, he wants to be a Westerner; but with a *Blanche*, Africa serves as his supernumerary sex. (147)

Here the performance of *Nègre*-ness serves, again, a sexual purpose, but draws its power explicitly from colonial history and values: the *Blanche* is seduced by the primitive African tribesman on display for white visual consumption in *National Geographic* magazine; she is smitten by the almost-cannibal son-of-a-witch-doctor, straight from Africa, whose Africanness is as appealing as a second penis. Drawn to the primitive exotic with fervor worthy of an Orientalist, the *Blanche*'s erotic fascination distills centuries of colonial desire into an evening's encounter with the other. Here Laferrière provocatively places contemporary interracial attraction on the shoulders of colonialism and slavery, historicizing the *Blanche* and *Nègre*'s desire for one another. The epistemological history of these tropes carries forward and crystallizes in this instance of contemporary courtship, revealing their durability and continued limiting force on human relationships.

This passage captures the simultaneous attraction and aversion that characterize colonial desire. Here, Africanness and the stereotypes it entails for the credulous *Blanche* – cannibalism, witchcraft, primitive life in the bush – elicit fascination and attraction that, we can surmise, are predicated in part on repulsion; received notions of race and racial difference form the foundation of these simultaneous, contradictory feelings, likely for both parties involved. Laferrière’s *Nègre* and *Blanche* types constitute racial and sexual opposites caught in a dialectic. The *Blanche* desires a primitive exotic, not a cultivated contemporary citizen of the world who is her social and intellectual equal. It is the mythic, virile, animalistic *Nègre* forbidden to her who excites her own repressed animalistic desire, not the refined Ivorian émigré. Captured in the glare of her desirous Orientalist gaze – captured quite literally, as she will not see him otherwise – the Ivorian performs a character he feels he is not so as to conform to white expectations, and thereby profit from the situation according to his own agenda. Both of these moves – the *Blanche*’s Orientalist gaze and the *Nègre*’s performance for a white audience – replicate long-established patterns of racialized behavior. Both parties perform as their roles dictate: the *Nègre* wittingly and the *Blanche* unwittingly. She is clearly mocked here, for her gullibility, for her racist anticipation of the savage *Nègre* stereotype, for her own stereotypical predictability. This is a crucial difference in how Laferrière treats each stereotype. All roles are performed imperfectly, for norms are ideals that cannot be attained; and Butler, Bhabha and Rosello assert that there is space for resistance in the imperfect repetition of norms. Laferrière’s narrator performs *Nègre*-ness with self-reflexivity and with difference, disturbing the stereotype. By contrast, the *Blanche* stereotype is merely confirmed.

Laferrière illustrates how (fictionalized) human beings, in their complexities and individualities, wrestle with the generic types they are assigned. The Ivorian in the previous example cleverly deploys the African *Nègre* type to his advantage, deliberately performing the part that he has been assigned, though one at odds with his ‘real’ character and background. Laferrière’s text, clearly not the ‘How To’ guide its title ironically claims to be, can be read instead as a guide for how to play the *Nègre* type. The pedagogy it advances, both by modeling and by explicit instruction, is one lucidly aware of social expectations and biases and shows an imagined black male reader how to manipulate these. Implicit in this manipulation is an element of mockery: the savvy narrator teaches his *Nègre*-in-training reader how to become a savvy manipulator himself, and this, at the expense of those being manipulated, i.e. *Blanches* first, and

Blancs, their alleged protectors, second. Clearly, mockery is a form of critique. In mocking the *Nègre* trope and the *Blanches* who believe it exists, Laferrière's critique – of these *Blanches* and of similarly credulous, racist white readers – is evident. Therein may lie different lessons for different readers: the black male reader can learn how to turn the racist stereotype applied to him to his advantage, and white readers, male or female, have an unflattering mirror held up to their own racist expectations and stupidity.

8.3 The *Nègre* and the *Blanche* Apart

As we have seen, Laferrière simultaneously deploys the *Nègre* and *Blanche* stereotypes and explicitly denies that they exist. This apparent contradiction is more easily resolved with respect to the *Nègre* than the *Blanche*. First, I will problematize his negation of the two stereotypes; then, I will continue to unpack the uneven way each stereotype is treated in the novel. Up to now, we have seen Laferrière's excessive and therefore subversive deployment of the *Nègre* type. However, on several occasions, Laferrière (via his narrator-double) explicitly denies the validity of this category; this is, in effect, another way to deconstruct the category. Both subversive deployment and denial serve to undermine the *Nègre* stereotype. The narrator states explicitly, "il n'y a pas pratiquement pas de femmes dans ce roman. Mais des types. Il y a des Nègres et des Blanches. Du point de vue humain, le Nègre et la Blanche n'existent pas. [...] ces deux-là sont une invention de l'Amérique." / "There are practically no women in this novel. There are just types. *Nègres* and *Blanches*. On the human level, the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* do not exist. [...] They are American inventions" (153/145). Laferrière's point here is clear: the *Nègre* is a category produced by the racist white gaze and that indexes anti-black racist treatment, rather than common origins, shared cultural practices, or any of the other resources for identity that racial, ethnic, or cultural groups may draw upon. He highlights *Nègre*-ness for its quality as a *type* produced historically in the context of colonialism and slavery, rather than a way to designate individuals whose humanity is fully dignified. By writing here of both the *Nègre* and the *Blanche*, Laferrière implies that these are equal in their stereotypical nature and equivalently deconstructed in his narrative. However, this is not the case. The *Blanche* type is historicized in her racial and class connections to slavery and colonialism, but she is not historicized as a female type (regardless of race) produced in the historical context of patriarchy and sexism. I have argued that Laferrière's treatment of the *Blanche* deliberately fails to subvert that stereotype, instead reinforcing it in a kind of discursive revenge; this discursive revenge

reinforces the racial-sexual revenge we see the *Nègre* exact against the *Blanche*. Another asymmetry in Laferrière's treatment of the two types involves his failure to historicize male domination in the way he historicizes white domination. His metacritical intervention stops short: slavery and colonialism are critiqued in his problematization of the *Nègre* type, but patriarchy and sexism are not critiqued in his deliberate stereotyping of the *Blanche* type. Indeed, the *Blanche* stereotype Laferrière puts forth smacks of sexual objectification and misogyny. The *Blanche* is not merely a flat, predictable, dupable and dumb figure; she is also sexually objectified and dominated. The text reinforces a sexist depiction of white women, but subverts a racist depiction of black men.

When the narrator claims that the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* are “just types” and “American inventions” who “do not exist” (145), I must complicate his claim in three ways. First, he makes a symmetrical claim about asymmetrical designations: *Nègre*, with its centuries-old racist valences, carries a weight that *Blanche*, given its relative neutrality, does not. Though Laferrière portrays *Blanches* in his novel with an array of negative characteristics (naiveté, credulousness, racist expectations, to name a few), the designation *Blanche* does not bear the racist lineage and historical weight that *Nègre* does. While a racist slur like *Nègre* is unacceptable, *Blanche* remains an acceptable contemporary designation for a racial-sexual category. So, too, does *Noir*. *Noir* and *Blanche* would be more appropriate, symmetrical designations to use here. Second, as I have shown, in terms of character development and in terms of historicizing and problematizing the stereotype in question, Laferrière also treats the two types asymmetrically: the *Nègre* is ultimately rendered as a fully-developed character while the *Blanche* remains a fictional stereotype, and the *Nègre* is revealed as a construct and product of racist ideology, while the *Blanche* is not shown to be a construct and product of sexist ideology.

Third, the narrator's denial of the *Nègre* and *Blanche* types as humans obscures the interplay between socially-constructed identity categories, including stereotypes, and the felt realities of individuals who inhabit the constructed categories. The so-called *Nègres* whose interiorities we readers have access to do not *feel* themselves to be *Nègres*; we can only wonder how the *Blanches* identify themselves and what associations their elected identities call up. A performative understanding of identity would lead us away from the opposition the narrator implies here between racial-sexual types produced by pure invention, on the one hand, and some transcendent human(ist) content, beyond these socially-coded and constrained roles, on the other.

Theories of performativity would encourage instead an intermediary position that avows the social constructedness of racial-sexual types, as it insists upon the lack of separation between that which is constructed and that which is felt, lived, and therefore ‘real.’ Where I seek to qualify the narrator’s above claim is 1) in highlighting the asymmetry between *Nègre* and *Blanche* as historical terms and as fictionalized stereotypes here; 2) in foregrounding *Nègre* as a damaging racial stereotype, as opposed to a more neutral identity designation like *Noir*; and 3) in situating identities like *Noir* and *Blanche* between biological reality, on one extreme, and invented falsity, on the other. Identity is the constant interplay between one’s ever-evolving sense of true self and society’s pressures on that self. However, identity roles and stereotypes can be deliberately performed *as a role to play*. In these cases of intentional performance, an individual lucidly adopts a role she *does not identify with* – a role that is a certain distance from her subjective sense of self. This kind of deliberate performance is distinct from the invisible, unconscious processes of performativity that social education and cultural inculcation instigate. Laferrière’s text illustrates these different modes of identity performativity and performance. In his novel, as in life, identity roles may be more or less self-aware, more or less deliberate, more obedient or more resistant to the prevailing norm. The *Nègres* in the text are often lucid about performing a stereotype to suit the *Blanche*’s expectations. The *Blanches*, however, are unaware that they are performing a role in someone else’s fantasy script, or anticipating a role from the men they encounter. *Nègres* are here savvy manipulators, adjusting their performance to attain certain ends, while *Blanches* are unaware and dupable, blindly replicating the roles they have passively absorbed. Laferrière’s asymmetrical treatment of the two types means that the *Nègre* stereotype is problematized and subverted, while the *Blanche* stereotype is not.

The narrator’s resistance to alleged identity ‘inventions’ parallels Laferrière’s rejection of identity labels, both in and out of his fiction.¹³¹ Throughout his oeuvre and interviews, the author

¹³¹ In *J’écris comme je vis*, Laferrière states: “écrivain immigrant, écrivain ethnique, écrivain caribéen, écrivain du métissage, écrivain postcolonial ou écrivain noir... Je suis condamné, quelle que soit la posture que je prends, à me faire coller une étiquette sur le dos. La dernière en date, j’y reviens, c’est écrivain francophone. [...] je veux être pris pour un écrivain, et les seuls adjectifs acceptables dans ce cas-là sont : un bon écrivain [...] ou un mauvais écrivain.” / “immigrant writer, ethnic writer, Caribbean writer, writer of *métissage* [mixture], postcolonial writer or black writer... I’m condemned, whatever posture I take, to have a label stuck to my

refuses categorizations like ‘Haitian,’ or ‘Caribbean,’ or ‘black writer,’ and, with characteristic playfulness, both rejects and adopts these and others. His novel *Je suis un écrivain japonais / I am a Japanese Writer* likewise toys with reader expectations, as the narrator – again, a writer-double for Laferrière – plays at Japaneseness in a challenge to identity categories, be they national, cultural, ethnic or racial. It is worth noting that Laferrière’s critique of the *Nègre* stereotype, with its particular racist history and power, must be held apart from his broader critique of other, non-racist identity labels. While *Nègre*-ness in *Comment faire l’amour* signals the persistence of anti-black racism in Québec, Japaneseness in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is a tool to mock identity attachments and assumptions broadly speaking. It does so, however, at the expense of Japaneseness, which is deployed solely via stereotype. In this sense, Laferrière’s treatment of a clichéd Japaneseness in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* can be aligned with his treatment of a clichéd *Blanche*-ness in *Comment faire l’amour*: in each case, a category invoked in opposition to blackness is deployed in hyperstereotypical terms so as to invert the established trajectory of stereotyping processes. It appears, then, that Laferrière cannot critique stereotype without having recourse to other stereotypes. Blackness can be de-stereotyped only so long as another category is re-stereotyped. The righting of one wrong entails the commission of another.

Though Laferrière’s resistance to identity labels is clear, his own narrative betrays a more complicated picture of identity categories and their potential truth-value. Despite the narrator’s insistence on the invented quality of *Nègre* and *Blanche*, his own and other speakers’ engagements with these tropes demonstrate their abiding presence in human interactions, and therefore a certain ‘realness.’ When a speaker says, “I can’t stand this talk about *Blanches* anymore. [...] We *Nègres* need to be left alone” (82), constructed categories have sedimented into lived human realities. When the narrator claims, “As a *Noir*, I don’t have enough distance from the *Nègre*” (42), he *both* demonstrates lucidity with respect to identity entrapments, *and* cannot speak of race without recourse to these designations. This parallels Laferrière’s own move, for he denies the labels as valid human designations at the same time as he deploys them left and right. His own discursive difficulty managing such stereotypes via techniques of parody,

back. The latest one is francophone writer. [...] I want to be taken for a writer, and the only acceptable adjectives are the following: a good writer [...] or a bad writer” (*J’écris* 107).

irony, inversion and excess may in fact indicate the extent to which the human mind cannot think beyond the structures it has been socialized to think with. We cannot get outside the discourses of oppression that shape us, even if we wish to critique them. Like the self-reinforcing modes of parody and irony Laferrière also uses, which necessarily repeat the first-degree utterance, his subversion of stereotype has recourse to stereotypes and riskily repeats stereotypes even in moments when it appears to resist these. There is no innocent reference to a stereotype, as Rosello argues. We can discern a **third lesson** here: Stereotypes infiltrate identities, constructions infiltrate ‘reality,’ expectations infiltrate interactions, and clichés contaminate human relationships, despite one’s (potentially) critical intentions.

The narrator himself struggles to separate the individual from the type she represents. This passage relates his interior monologue as he and Miz Sophisticated Lady have sex, and his recursive invocation of stereotype to describe both himself and his lover:

Je veux baiser son inconscient. [...] Vous pensez : baiser l’inconscient d’une fille de Westmount ! Je regarde du coin de l’œil mes cuisses huilées (à la noix de coco) le long de ce corps blanc. Je prends fermement ses seins blancs. Le léger duvet sur le ventre blanc (marbre). JE VEUX BAISER SON IDENTITÉ. Pousser le débat racial jusque dans ses entrailles. Es-tu un Nègre ? Es-tu une Blanche ? Je te baise. Tu me baises. Je ne sais pas à quoi tu penses quand tu baises avec un Nègre. Je voudrais te rendre, là, à ma merci. [...] Et toi ? Tu es là en pleine concentration métaphysique et je ne sais pas à quoi tu penses. Je sais pourtant qu’il n’y a pas de sexualité sans fantasmes. Tu sembles morte. À peine bouges-tu. Es-tu indifférente? (81)

I want to fuck her [un]conscious¹³². [...] Think about it: fucking the [un]conscious of a Westmount girl! I catch a glimpse of my oiled thighs (coconut oil) against this white body. I take her white breasts firmly in my hands. The light down on her white marble body. I want to fuck her identity. Pursue the racial question to the heart of her being. Are you a *Nègre*? Are you a *Blanche*? I fuck you. You fuck me. I don’t know what you’re thinking when you fuck with a *Nègre*. I’d like to put you at my mercy, right here. [...] What about you? You’re there in total metaphysical concentration and I don’t know what you’re thinking. But I do know that there’s no sexuality without fantasy. You seem unfeeling. You hardly move. Are you indifferent? (71)

¹³² Homel translates *inconscient* as ‘subconscious,’ though its translation is rather ‘unconscious.’

The narrator seeks his lover's 'real' truth, the authentic self that (he imagines) resides in her unconscious. He wonders what she – this individual, this *Blanche* – is thinking, in this moment when stereotypes interact, when she is *also* a *Blanche* who “fuck[s] with a *Nègre*.” Her interiority is inaccessible to him, yet he projects himself unsuccessfully into her position in hopes of accessing it. He imagines both sides of their existential dialogue, as perspective volleys back and forth across an incommensurable gap, across “des années-lumière de distance métaphysique” / “light-years of metaphysical distance” (134/126). Who is white, who is black, who fucks whom, who is in control, who is invested, who is indifferent? The passage's perspective speeds through different positions as a ball ricochets in a pinball machine.

Here again, the narrator finds himself in a hall of broken mirrors, unable to grasp the dynamics of this situation with any certainty. He seeks to understand her: “Et toi ? Tu es là en pleine concentration métaphysique et je ne sais pas à quoi tu penses.” / “What about you? You're there in total metaphysical concentration and I don't know what you're thinking.” It proves difficult to parse *this* individual from the type she represents; the stereotype contaminates. Though the narrator appears interested in her thoughts as an individual, as a unique expression of the *Blanche* type, he cannot fathom her outside of the category and of the fantasy of the *Nègre* he imagines her having. He is unable to render this situation without having recourse to the types performing the scene: the *Blanche* with skin of marble like a Greco-Roman sculpture, the Westmount girl, the virile black stud from the land of coconuts. The stereotypes are *points de repère*, fixed landmarks in an otherwise uncontrolled, social-sexual-racial dynamic. Dyer reminds us: “Stereotypes [...] insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none.”¹³³ Our narrator – the learned, self-aware social critic – plays with the stereotype applied to him, deconstructing it from the inside by virtue of his lucidity; he does so by reiterating the stereotype applied to another, the *Blanche*. In this instance, he tries but fails to move beyond the stereotype of his lover, stuck inside his stereotyped reading of others even as he rails against others' stereotypes of him.¹³⁴ Even in his lucidity and self-reflexivity, he cannot get outside the reductive, repressive discourses that stereotypes mobilize.

¹³³ Dyer, “The Role of Stereotypes”, 16.

¹³⁴ We will see this dynamic echoed in Díaz's work, and in his narrator Yuniór's vision of women.

The narrator admits himself: “there’s no sexuality without fantasy.” The stereotypes are in fact what feed his fantasy: Miz Sophisticated Lady is likened to a classic icon of Western white femininity, as he imagines himself an icon of tropical black masculinity. Importantly, this fantasy entails an element of misogynistic domination (e.g., “I’d like to put you at my mercy”). The verb *baiser* is repeated multiple times, carrying within it the sense of unequal power, of something men do to women.¹³⁵ He wants “to fuck her unconscious” – precisely the place where her ignorant, un-self-aware racist expectations of the *Nègre* reside – and “to fuck her identity”; yet an identity is what she is denied, for she is instead an iconic stereotype. He wishes to “pursue the racial question to the heart of her being,” but her being is nothing more than “this white body”; she is mindless, “unfeeling,” “indifferent,” sexual objectification incarnate. His fantasy of the *Blanche* is predicated on this misogynistic caricature of woman as sex object, and his fantasy of domination in turn engenders his pleasure, following the dictates of pornography. As pornography tends to, this scene explores male perspectives only, focuses on male pleasure only, and predicates that pleasure on the sexual domination of the female. Here, Laferrière is clearly being provocative once again; yet provocation – its thrills and ironies, its mockery and playfulness – does not excuse misogyny, which this scene (and many others in the novel) exhibits in spades.

What to make of the anti-racist black male writer who jovially replicates misogyny in his critique of anti-black racism? He surely seeks to pique and provoke – to punish, in a sense, the *Blanches* and *Blancs* for the racism they have been shown to harbor. While punishment and retribution may certainly be in order, we can wonder if two wrongs here make a right. For *Blanches*, despite their racial and class power, remain disempowered in terms of gender. Rather than exacting revenge more directly against *Blancs*, who are treated

¹³⁵ In the sequence, “Are you a *Nègre*? Are you a *Blanche*? I fuck you. You fuck me,” the narrative voice moves back and forth between the *Nègre*’s point of view and his imagination of the *Blanche*’s. I read the imagined dialogue as follows:

Blanche: “Are you a *Nègre*?”

Nègre: “Are you a *Blanche*? I fuck you.”

Blanche: “You fuck me.”

Although there is some ambiguity about the identities of ‘I’ and ‘you’ in these last two sentences, the misogynistic logic of the novel only allows for the dynamic I outline here: man fucks woman, not the opposite.

in the novel as the real holders of power, Laferrière's tale of the *Blanche*'s sexual conquest perpetuates the sexual domination of woman, an institution as old as time itself and, like slavery, a system of oppression. He treats the *Blanche*'s domination as a means to indirectly harm the *Blanc*, offering the sexual objectification of the white female body as a remedy for slavery's objectification of the black male body; once again, the black female body is absent from the transaction. Saint-Martin convincingly shows how Laferrière provides the historical context of anti-black racism in order to 'justify' the novel's anti-*Blanche* sexism. She argues:

l'assujettissement de la femme blanche est à la base même de l'affirmation de soi de l'homme noir ; c'est grâce au sexisme que se manifeste le discours anti-raciste et sur le dos des femmes (au sens propre comme figuré) qu'est repensée la masculinité noire.

the subjection of the white woman is at the core of the black man's affirmation of self; it is because of sexism that the anti-racist discourse is made manifest and on the backs of women (literally as well as figuratively) that black masculinity is rethought.¹³⁶

This rethinking of black masculinity, or liberation of the *Nègre* via his sexual domination of the *Blanche*, works by reinscribing norms of heteronormativity and patriarchy rather than by challenging them. Laferrière offers misogyny on the altar of racial retribution, sexually oppressing the *Blanche* as punishment or reparation for the racial and class oppression of the *Nègre*. Saint-Martin's title claims that "une oppression peut en cacher une autre" / "one oppression can hide another." More precisely, according to the logic Laferrière puts forth here, the liberation of one group entails the oppression of another. We can wonder here where to draw the line between prescription and description: is Laferrière claiming, as his writer-double certainly does, that such a punishment is justified? Or is he rather offering a grim picture of human relationships, always unequal (as his narrative claims¹³⁷), always resulting in a winner and a loser and claiming that, despite minority and feminist movements, the white man will always win? The latter, optimistic take on Laferrière's

¹³⁶ Saint-Martin, "Une oppression," 54.

¹³⁷ "Il n'y a de véritable relation sexuelle qu'inégale." / "The only true sexual relation is between unequals." (48/41)

intervention (which simultaneously entails a pessimistic view of human relations) is one way to let our seemingly pro-social justice author off the hook, certainly something his relentless evasiveness, ironic inversions and grain-of-salt doublespeak seek. Another alternative is to excuse Laferrière's misogyny as pure provocation that advances *not* some grand truth about uneven power relationships, racism or sexism, but instead seeks only to elicit a response from the reader. This leads me to another angle, afforded by considering further the allegory I draw between the *Nègre-Blanche* relationship and the writer-reader relationship.

If we revisit the previous example, reading the *Blanche* as a surrogate for the reader (which Miz Littérature, for one, certainly is) and the *Nègre* narrator as a surrogate for the writer (which he is also, for he ostensibly writes the book we read), we see a different lesson offered here to the novel's readership. Following this interpretive line, the writer writes of his third-person, female reader: "I want to fuck her [un]conscious," signaling the unconscious stereotypical (i.e., racist) expectations a white reader has of a writer of color. The narrator continues: "I want to fuck her identity. Pursue the racial question to the heart of her being." The question our black writer is asking is about the deep-seated racist assumptions found in "the heart of [the reader's] being." Yet he muses, "I don't know what you're thinking," addressing the reader directly in the second person. Her (your) inner thoughts and prejudices are at once inaccessible and discernable, and the racist expectations detectable there incite the narrator's wrath and thirst for vengeance: "I'd like to put you at my mercy," turning the tables of power once and for all. Fucking the reader entails overpowering, dominating, calling out, and schooling her/him. Such vengeance against the racist reader is deemed justified by the lineage of racist 'readings' (literal and figurative, i.e., racist actions and racist assumptions) whites have exercised against blacks throughout history. This reader needn't necessarily be female, despite the female pronouns I use here; the reader deserving of schooling and vengeful punishment is the white reader, male or female. Writers are not necessarily male (even if Laferrière and his writer-double are), and readers are not necessarily female; but in this novel, the writer is a (black) male and the implied reader is a (white) female, *even when the real reader is not*. Following the ideology of patriarchy put forth uncritically in the novel's pages, it is the female that can be fucked, so if the reader is being fucked, the reader must be allegorically, if not biologically, female.

Whether the actual reader is female or male, the reader gets fucked like a woman, hence my use of female pronouns to refer to the reader.¹³⁸ The element of heterosexual male domination in the sex scene above is transposed to the reader-writer relationship, regardless of actual gender. This allegorical reading of this scene of sexual domination does not excuse or endorse its first-degree misogynistic content; rather, it offers a second-degree alternative reading based on a different tense relationship of uneven power – that between writer and reader – but one that lacks the historical weight of relationships between blacks and whites or men and women. But of course, writers and readers are also gendered and raced, not neutral. Laferrière’s provocative play with the writer-reader relationship in his first-person novel about the writing of the novel depends on collapsing the positions of black/male/writer and of white/female/reader.

Any minimally aware actual reader knows Laferrière is a black man; his photo figures on the novel’s cover in certain editions, or on its final pages. Our readings are, of course, shaped by our knowledge of the author’s identity. We would likely read this treatment of the *Blanche* differently – as ironic subversion, perhaps – were it written by a white female author; and we would certainly be appalled at that author’s treatment of the *Nègre* stereotype, for it could only be racism, not irony about racism. Indeed, any attempt at such an ironic deployment of stereotypes about black men by a writer who is not black would fail and be irredeemably racist. The speaker’s identity matters in the receiver’s interpretation: of irony, parody, jokes, overt and subtle subversions, and allegedly ‘neutral’ representations of forms of oppression. Rosello reminds us that the “death of irony” occurs when the space between first- and second-degree readings disappears; in light of the sum history of whites’ anti-black racism, there is no space for whites’ second-degree invocations of negative stereotypes about blackness. Jokes, irony, parody, and subversive deployments of racist and sexist stereotypes can (more) safely move up the ladder of power, but never down. The question is, in our social hierarchy with its axes for both race and gender, where do we situate white women in relation to black men? In the hierarchy Laferrière puts forth, white men are at the top, followed by white women, black men, and black women. If we

¹³⁸ My reading departs from that of Saint-Martin, who sees Laferrière’s implied reader as the white male.

accept Laferrière's order, then we might be inclined to grant him these edgy sexist jabs. Or we might argue that Laferrière's jabs are directed at the wrong target, that white men are the real oppressors and the *Blanches* merely the oppressors' daughters, for this is what his novel claims, in its simplistic, historically inaccurate fashion. We know that white women clearly have their share of responsibility in the oppression of blacks, and that men of any ethnicity have their share of responsibility in the oppression of women. I will return to this problem and to Laferrière's hierarchy shortly.

As I have shown, the symmetry implied between the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* types disguises an asymmetry between the racist slur *Nègre*, with its weighty historical underpinnings, and the historically neutral designation *Blanche* (equivalent to *Noir*). Laferrière's characterization is also asymmetric: in casting the *Blanche* as rigid fictional stereotype as I have shown here, Laferrière performs a power inversion. The *Nègre* is a stereotype self-consciously historicized and problematized by the narrator and thereby subverted, while the *Blanche* is a stereotype – a sexist one – unproblematized and reinforced. Laferrière is certainly self-conscious about both of these writerly decisions. Here he enacts a form of discursive revenge, freeing the historically oppressed *Nègre* from stereotype while confining the comparatively free, but nonetheless sexually dominated, *Blanche* within stereotype. Racial revenge occurs across gendered lines in the novel's form, as the author's characterization asymmetrically handles the two principal stereotypes invoked. This revenge is echoed in the novel's content, in the sexual vengeance the *Nègre* exacts against the *Blanche*.

9 Provoking the Reader

9.1 Sex as Racial Revenge

In a number of instances in the novel, the performance of *Nègre*-ness serves two simultaneous functions: the immediate pursuit of sexual satisfaction, and the broader goal of enacting racial and class revenge by way of sex. However, the latter proves ultimately more important; explicit sex scenes do not focus on or describe the narrator's pleasure, but rather relate his intellectual musings on the situation and the power relationships activated therein. The following scene explicitly engages with colonial history, and sex is a medium with which to avenge historical and contemporary inequalities. One of the narrator's lovers, Miz Littérature, has a home that ostentatiously demonstrates her wealthy, colonial, English inheritance. As he

listens to her washing up – “Eau intime. Corps mouillé. Etre là, ainsi, dans cette douce intimité anglo-saxonne” / “Private sounds. Wet body. The luxury of soft Anglo-Saxon intimacy” (103/95) – he catalogues her colonial décor:

Briques rouges couvertes de lierre. Gazon anglais. Calme victorien. [...] Piano noir laqué. Gravures d’époque. Portrait de groupe avec cooker. Banquiers (double menton et monocle) jouant au cricket. [...] Diplomate en casque colonial en poste à New Delhi. Parfum de Calcutta. Cette maison respire le calme, la tranquillité, l’ordre. L’Ordre de ceux qui ont pillé l’Afrique. L’Angleterre, maîtresse des mers... (103)

Big red-brick house with walls scaled by ivy. English lawn. Victorian calm. [...] Shiny black piano. Engravings from another age. Group portrait with corgis. Bankers (double chin and monocle) playing cricket. [...] Diplomat in pith helmet posted to New Delhi. Odor of Calcutta. The house breathes calm, tranquility, order. The order of the pillagers of Africa. Britannia rules the waves. (95)

The watery preludes to sex and images of a fluid, penetrable femininity are juxtaposed with iconic symbols of wealth, Englishness, and colonial domination: important origins of the *Blanche* type, who hails from Montréal’s English-inspired Westmount neighborhood. However, these symbols are strikingly out of place in Québec, where cricket and Calcutta are foreign indeed. The passage reveals the narrator’s fantasy of the *Blanche*’s colonial Englishness, which is itself a stereotype several steps beyond that of the Anglophone Québécoise woman. The narrator reads her décor as proof of stereotype, invoking other stereotypes along the way: the *Blanc* type expands to include New Delhi diplomats, alongside Deep South and French Caribbean slaveholders. Anti-black racism and oppression cross temporal and spatial boundaries, and stereotypes are voracious, expanding infinitely to accommodate an ever-growing range of subject positions in reductive terms. Despite the novel’s setting, white Canadian men are no more visible in its pages than these geographically and temporally distant figures. In this passage, the narrator anachronistically casts colonial-era bankers and diplomats as the *Blanche*’s possessors-protectors. Soon they will be unseated, for the scene is set for the provocative assertion of black male sexual power to follow.

In *Comment faire l’amour*, sex is a prism through which various forms of uneven power can be rendered. The black men in this novel, perceived as hypermasculine and virile, deploy their sexual power to redress other areas of disempowerment, namely in terms of race and class. Racial difference is entwined with class difference, and the sphere where racialized,

economically disadvantaged, immigrant black men can assert their power is that of sex. In this space, men, whatever their color, maintain the upper hand over women, and therefore the racial and class tables can be turned. The narrator continues:

Tout est, ici, à sa place. SAUF MOI. Faut dire que je suis là, uniquement, pour baiser la fille. DONC, JE SUIS, EN QUELQUE SORTE, À MA PLACE, MOI AUSSI. Je suis ici pour baiser la fille de ces diplomates pleins de morgue qui nous giflaient à coups de stick. Au fond, je n'étais pas là quand ça se passait, mais que voulez-vous, à défaut de nous être bienveillante, L'HISTOIRE NOUS SERT D'APHRODISIAQUE. (103)

Everything here has its place – except me. I'm here for the sole purpose of fucking the daughter. Therefore, I too have my place. I'm here to fuck the daughter of these haughty diplomats who once whacked us with their sticks. I wasn't there at the time of course, but what do you want, history hasn't been good to us, but we can always use it as an aphrodisiac. (95)

Admitting he was not present at the time of colonialism and slavery, Laferrière's narrator posits history as an aphrodisiac: his thirst for avenging historical injustices drives his desire to possess the *Blanche* sexually.¹³⁹ She is rendered synonymous with, and therefore held responsible for, colonial exploitation; this is the premise upon which her own exploitation is based, for she serves as a tool with which the *Nègre* exacts his revenge. This revenge should in fact be directed against white men, for the narrator specifies that it was the *fathers* of the *Blanches* who are really to blame. This misdirected retribution compounds the misogynistic tenor of these instances of revenge: white women are punished, white men are not.

¹³⁹ Revenge is itself a form of inversion. Furthermore, Laferrière, with this racial revenge enacted via sex, inverts Fanon's take on racist lynching as a form of *sexual* revenge. Fanon argues: "Le lynchage du nègre, ne serait-ce pas une vengeance sexuelle? Nous savons tout ce que les sévices, les tortures, les coups comportent de sexuel." / "Isn't the lynching of the black man a sexual revenge? We know how sexualized torture, abuse and ill-treatment can be." Fanon, *Peau noire/ Black Skin*, 129/137. An ostensibly *racial* form of killing, lynching is, according to Fanon, essentially *sexual* since it emasculates, as it kills, the black man. Taking up Fanon in this and other instances, Laferrière signals how "residual forms of racialized thinking [...] persist within the deep structures of racialized psychic-cultural formations in the contemporary era, become commodified in myriad cultural forms of production, and circulate and recirculate [...]." Braziel, "Trans-American Constructions," 889.

Our narrator connects his plight to that of black men everywhere; moving from his own experience in Montréal's Westmount to another so-called *Nègre's* experience in Harlem, we see the latter similarly exact sexual vengeance for racial and class wrongs, past and present.

L'Amérique aime foutre AUTREMENT. LA VENGEANCE NÈGRE ET LA MAUVAISE CONSCIENCE BLANCHE AU LIT, ÇA FAIT UNE DE CES NUITS! [...] Le Grand Nègre de Harlem a le vertige d'enculer la fille du propriétaire de toutes les baraques insalubres de la 125e (son quartier), la baisant pour toutes les réparations que son salaud de père n'a jamais effectuées, la forniquant pour l'horrible hiver de l'année dernière qui a emporté son jeune frère tuberculeux. La Jeune Blanche prend aussi pleinement son pied. C'est la première fois qu'on manifeste à son égard une telle qualité de haine. LA HAINE DANS L'ACTE SEXUEL EST PLUS EFFICACE QUE L'AMOUR. (19)

And America loves to fuck exotic. Put black vengeance and white guilt together in the same bed and you had a night to remember! [...] The Big *Nègre* from Harlem's head spun at the prospect of sodomizing the daughter of the slumlord of 125th Street, fucking her for all the repairs her bastard father never made, fornicating for the horrible winter last year when his younger brother died of TB. The Young *Blanche* gets off too. It's the first time anyone's manifested such high-quality hatred toward her. In the sexual act, hatred is more effective than love. (15)

In this case, we see black poverty opposed to wealthy, white proprietorship in Harlem. Once again, the *Blanche* is not the landlord but the landlord's daughter who will be 'punished' for her father's negligence. In this and other cases, the *Nègre's* sexual conquest is less about sexual desire for the *Blanche* herself than it is a means of class and racial vengeance against white men to whom the *Blanches* are seen to belong. This stark example crystallizes two intertwined lessons. **Lesson Number Four:** Even as the various axes of differential power (i.e., race, class, gender) are inseparable from one another, individuals can strategically mobilize one axis in the service of another; power in one sphere can compensate for or redress power denied in another.¹⁴⁰ Sex becomes not an act of love but an act of hate and revenge; Laferrière again plays the provocateur.

¹⁴⁰ Judith Butler provocatively claims that sex, gender and race do not have to be identities, that they are vectors of power first and foremost. See Kotz and Butler, "The Body You Want," 82-89. Given the importance of these categories in many people's definitions of themselves, I prefer to frame sex, gender and race as identity categories through which differential power is deployed.

The misogynistic tenor of the passage is striking. Three different verbs are used here to refer to the sexual act as vengeance: “enculer” (sodomize), “baiser” (fuck), and “forniquer” (fornicate), the first two connoting domination quite strongly. This vengeance is ‘justified’ by virtue of the white guilt the *Blanche* allegedly feels – but never explicitly articulates – because of her landlord-father’s negligence, and because, the narrator informs us, the *Blanches* like it this way! The *Nègre*’s exoticism, hatred for the *Blanche*, and aggressive sexuality are a turn-on for the *Blanche*, the narrator claims, here using a pedantic, ostensibly objective, third-person narrative voice. These details serve to justify and excuse the misogynistic dimensions here, encouraging the reader to identify with the *Nègre*’s position, to endorse his treatment of the *Blanche* and to be complicit in his misogyny. Whether the reader is male or female, white, black or of some other ethnicity, the prevailing perspective presented by the narrator and *presumed to be shared* by the reader, is that of the heterosexual black male.¹⁴¹

Richard Dyer convincingly shows how storytelling devices, such as the justificatory ‘logic’ outlined above, treat male heterosexual dominance and the male heterosexual perspective as the norm, thus encouraging the audience, regardless of its members’ identities, to endorse this mode of male behavior and to share in this perspective. Many narratives, he argues, “invit[e] [us] to enter the fictional world of the story [...] so as to see things through a particular sexual sensibility, that of the dominant notion of male sexuality.”¹⁴² He draws evidence from suspense stories, stories that recount the classic damsel-in-distress-saved-by-male-hero narrative, and stories of rape (even those ostensibly critical of it). He shows how camera techniques place the audience in a superior position to the female character by virtue of how she is represented visually (often with her body exposed and sexualized) and by narrative techniques that deny her information the audience is privy to (i.e., that the murderer is lurking around the corner), thus rendering her vulnerable, dupable, and dumb. In Laferrière’s novel, literary techniques rather than filmic ones reveal the *Blanche*’s vulnerability, dupability and dumbness; her body is also revealed and sexualized. The audience is, as Dyer shows, placed into a superior position with respect to the *Blanche*, and that position is that of the heterosexual male, aggressively

¹⁴¹ I have argued that the text targets an implied black male reader who is being taught how to perform the *Nègre* role. I emphasize here that any actual reader, of any identity, is coaxed into that position and into complicity with the *Nègre* narrator’s point of view.

¹⁴² Dyer, “Male Sexuality,” 95.

dominating the *Blanche* sexually as in the passage above. What's more, the logic outlined therein invokes white guilt and the *Blanche*'s unique sexual proclivities to justify her sexual domination in particularly aggressive, vengeful terms. By these manipulations in the form and content of the narrative, the reader is enticed into complicity with the misogyny represented therein. Not only is misogyny not problematized or critiqued in the novel¹⁴³, but it is presented as normal and justified.

I critique Laferrière's uncritical representation of misogyny and of women's sexual subjection at the same time that I recognize the author's purposefully provocative play with several inflammatory subjects at once: sex, racial inequality, and gender inequality. On two occasions, the protagonist jokingly calls his white female lovers slaves; this constitutes an inversion just as it corroborates women's subservience to men at the level of gender. Such provocative moments in the text reinforce male sexual power over women, but subvert whites' racial power over blacks. Sex therefore serves a double function in the text: it indexes itself, while it also signals other realms of differential power by proxy. Sex offers a particularly provocative instantiation of power difference, since the taboos against so-called 'miscegenation' remain strong; since white male protectiveness and fear of sexual inferiority flare when the myth of the sexually potent *Nègre* is activated; since seemingly uncritical depictions of female sexual subjection pique certain readers. Vengeance for racial injustice and social ascendancy are both made possible by virtue of sexual relations between the *Nègre* and the *Blanche*.

Here we must read Laferrière in light of Fanon's intervention in *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Fanon explores interracial relationships primarily in light of the social mobility they afford the person of color. For Fanon, the man of color wants to be recognized as *Blanc*, not as *Noir*. The love of a *Blanche* allows the man of color to become a *Blanc*, since he is loved like one. He thereby appropriates white civilization and white dignity alongside the *Blanche*'s body. Fanon writes, in the narrative voice of a black man: "J'épouse la culture blanche, la beauté

¹⁴³ My analysis below will explore several instances where we hear feminists offer critiques within the novel. I do not find there that misogyny or sexism is in fact critiqued in those or other instances; instead, Laferrière anticipates feminist critiques and tries to preempt them by including them in the novel.

blanche, la blancheur blanche. Dans ces seins blancs¹⁴⁴ que mes mains ubiquitaires caressent, c'est la civilisation et la dignité blanches que je fais miennes." / "I espouse white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. Between these white breasts that my wandering hands fondle, white civilization and worthiness become mine."¹⁴⁵ When a black man attains a white woman's love, he acquires the social value a white man possesses. The woman is therefore the carrier of social standing and value *for the black man* (white men already possess these), and when he possesses her emotionally, sexually and legally through marriage, he gains in power. Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" describes the processes by which women are exchanged as symbolic property in a heterosexual patriarchy. The exchange of women, as Rubin describes it (following Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Monique Wittig), creates social bonds between the men orchestrating the exchange;¹⁴⁶ the *Blanche* is thus a social-sexual commodity sought after and possessed by men. In Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, Wittig, Rubin, Fanon, and Laferrière, the woman is the locus of value, and possessing her confers this value on the possessor. Fanon's hierarchy corroborates this view of marriage as the means by which social relationships *between men* are played out *through women* as intermediary objects of exchange.¹⁴⁷

Another lesson about differently objectified bodies thereby comes into view. The landlord's daughter in effect *belongs* to him, and the *Nègre* can get back at the landlord by possessing his daughter sexually – and doing so in particularly vulgar terms (*enculer*). Here the

¹⁴⁴ As further evidence of Laferrière's purposeful engagement with Fanon's text, the protagonist of *CFL* fondles a different pair of "seins blancs" / "white breasts" here: "elle me garde dans ses bras. Je pique, là, un somme. Sur son sein blanc." / "she holds me in her arms. I doze off. On her white breast" (46/39).

¹⁴⁵ Fanon, *Peau noire/ Black Skin*, 51/45.

¹⁴⁶ Rubin, "Traffic in Women," 42-7.

¹⁴⁷ Fanon anticipates Rubin (or follows Lévi-Strauss?) in describing the exchange arranged between a black man and the brother of his white beloved: "'Je l'aime. Elle m'aime. Nous nous aimons. Il faut qu'elle devienne ma femme. Sinon je me tue à vos pieds.' Sollicité, le Blanc accepte donc de lui donner sa sœur – mais à une condition : tu n'as rien de commun avec les véritables nègres. Tu n'es pas noir, tu es 'excessivement brun.'" / "'I love her. She loves me. We love each other. I want her as my wife. Otherwise I will kill myself at your feet.' When he is approached, the white man accepts therefore to give him his sister on one condition: You are not black; you are 'very, very dark.'" Fanon, *Peau noire/ Black Skin*, 55-56/50. The acquisition of the *Blanche* enables the whitening of the *nègre/noir*. The exchange of women fuels social ascendancy.

Blanche's body is objectified, sexualized, possessed and exchanged by men, much like the *Nègre*'s body is objectified in the myths of sexual potency surrounding him, much like the (male or female) slave whose body was treated as a tool of labor in another kind of commerce. We understand that the Harlem resident's poverty derives directly from the history of slavery and racism in the United States and that he remains trapped economically and psychically by racist practices and ideologies. Similarly, we see that the *Blanche*, privileged with racial power in a racist system, but lacking in sexual power in a heteronormative, patriarchal system, is trapped in her own way: as a symbolic and sexual commodity in an exchange between men. Hence **Lesson Number Five**: In different ways, the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* are objectified, sexualized bodies in markets of exchange. Their historical contexts and their contemporary positions are clearly very distinct, but both possess forms of power and unpower, and both are bodies susceptible to exploitation (often by white men). Laferrière's asymmetric engagement with the two types elides the exploitation both bodies are victim to, rendering racism the greater ill worthy of critique and deploying sexism uncritically in order to do so. In destereotyping the *Nègre* and stereotyping the *Blanche*, Laferrière enacts in his characterization the sexual act of revenge the *Nègre* enacts with *Blanche*. Formal revenge aligns with sexual revenge. In both modes, revenge is not exacted against white *men*, those principally responsible for the historical oppression of blacks and women alike, but against white *women*, who carry their own historical burden of gendered oppression, as well as their own share of responsibility in black oppression. Laferrière's power inversion in effect 'frees' black men at the expense of white women, leaving white men unscathed and white male power unchecked. Black men's social status is elevated to that of white men when they possess and dominate white women, thereby participating in patriarchy in the same way white men do. Laferrière's anti-racist intervention around the stereotype of the *Nègre* problematically confirms sexism and patriarchy.

Laferrière builds on Fanon's hierarchy, illustrating how pleasure operates within a racial-sexual power matrix and how pleasure is predicated on being served sexually by someone of lower standing. Here Miz Littérature performs oral sex for the narrator:

Elle se baisse vers moi [...]. Elle se baisse de plus en plus. [...] J'en rêvais. J'en bavais. Je n'osais lui demander ça. Un acte aussi... Je savais que tant qu'elle ne l'avait pas fait, elle ne serait pas totalement à moi. C'est ça, le drame, dans les relations sexuelles du Nègre et de la Blanche: tant que la Blanche n'a pas encore fait un acte quelconque jugé dégradant, on ne peut jurer de rien. C'est que dans

l'échelle des valeurs occidentales, la Blanche est inférieure au Blanc et supérieure au Nègre. C'est pourquoi elle n'est capable de prendre véritablement son pied qu'avec le Nègre. [...] Il n'y a de véritable relation sexuelle qu'inégale. LA BLANCHE DOIT FAIRE JOUIR LE BLANC, ET LE NÈGRE, LA BLANCHE. D'où le mythe du Nègre grand baiseur. Bon baiseur, oui. Mais pas avec la Nègresse. C'est à la Nègresse à faire jouir le Nègre. (47-8)

She lowers herself towards me [...] I'd dreamed of it. I'd licked my chops over it. I didn't dare ask her. An act so... I knew that as long as she hadn't done it, she wouldn't be completely mine. That's the key in sexual relations between black and white: as long as the woman hasn't done something judged degrading, you can never be sure. Because in the scale of Western values, white woman is inferior to white man, but superior to black man. That why she can't get off except with a Negro. [...] The only true sexual relation is between unequals. White women must give white men pleasure, as black men must for white women. Hence, the myth of the Black stud. Great in bed, yes, but not with his own woman. For she has to dedicate herself to his pleasure. (40-1)

The *Blanche* physically lowers herself into the position of (voluntary) sexual service;¹⁴⁸ in this moment, by doing something deemed “degrading,” she gives herself to her lover, bequeathing her (white) status to him and adopting a role subordinate to his. According to the power hierarchy that Fanon describes and that Laferrière calls “the scale of Western values,” the person of higher status receives pleasure from the person of lower status, while the person of lower status gains status by virtue of this exchange. As it is presented here, the *Blanche* willingly renounces her entitlement to pleasure as she bequeaths it to her lover; she surrenders her racial privilege and gleefully perpetuates her gender disadvantage. His pleasure is contingent on her voluntary degradation; this clearly misogynistic interpretation again recalls pornography's modes of representation. Once again, the *Blanche*'s willingness is meant to excuse the misogynistic dimensions of this scene. Once again, the sexual subjection of women is presented as justified by the history of racial injustice. According to Laferrière's hierarchy, *Blanche* is above *Nègre*; however, this elides the *Blanche*'s inferior gender position with respect to any man, black or white. I am not arguing that the *Blanche* is historically more oppressed than the *Nègre* or that racism is less evil than sexism; but I resist Laferrière's neat claim to the contrary,

¹⁴⁸ The original French version emphasizes the *Blanche*'s physical gesture of lowering herself, repeating the phrase “elle se baisse” twice. It also refers to the black woman as *Nègresse*, which the English translation obscures.

for it negates women's oppression past and present. In a text rife with misogyny itself, this historical revision is all the less allowable. Rhetorically speaking, by asserting the *Blanche-Blanche-Nègre-Négresse* hierarchy here, Laferrière justifies misogyny as vengeance for racism, but his hierarchy oversimplifies the complexity of these unequal relationships and the intersections among race, gender, sex and class.¹⁴⁹

The scene continues:

ET VOILA MIZ LITTÉRATURE QUI ME FAIT UNE DES CES PIPES. Je pense à mon village au bout du monde. A tous les Nègres partis pour la richesse chez les Blancs et qui sont revenus bredouilles. Je ne sais pas pourquoi - ça n'a rien à voir avec ce qui se passe ici -, je pense à une musique que j'ai entendue, il y a très longtemps. C'était un type de mon village qui avait un de ces disques Motown. Ca parlait d'un lynchage. Du lynchage, à Saint-Louis, d'un jeune Noir. On l'avait pendu et ensuite châtré. POURQUOI CHÂTRÉ? Cette interrogation me poursuivra toute ma vie. (48)

And now Miz Literature is giving me some kind of blow job. I think of the faraway village where I was born. Of all those blacks who traveled to a white man's land in search of riches and came back empty-handed. I don't know why – it has nothing to do with what's going on – but I think of a song I heard years ago. A guy in my village had a Motown record. The song was about a lynching. The lynching in St. Louis of a young black man. He was hanged then castrated. Why castrated? I'll never stop wondering about that. (41-2)

The scene therefore smoothly connects the *Blanche's* voluntary abasement with (1) the continued economic disadvantage black men experience due to slavery, colonialism and neocolonial economic forces, and (2) the lynching and castration of a black man. The logic goes: what is a little blowjob compared to lynching and castration? Indeed, nothing much, when presented this way. In an analogous example, a liberal white man intervenes in a dispute when a white lesbian critiques the narrator for hitting on a *Blanche* in line at the post office. The white man says, “Moi aussi, je crois que la drague est dégradante pour la femme. Mais que vaut une innocente drague à côté de la Traite de Nègres?” / “Sure, coming onto a woman is degrading for her, but it's an innocent game compared to the slave trade” (57/49). Though the narrator then comments on the “perversity” of such an argument, this appears to be the argument Laferrière wishes to suggest.

¹⁴⁹ My argument here is certainly a predictable feminist critique Laferrière anticipates; shortly, I will discuss instances where Laferrière anticipates feminist reactions to his text.

The lesbian retorts with the anticipated feminist indignation: “les colonialistes ont réalisé leur phantasmes de domination phallique en écrasant les autres et au moment de régler l’addition, ce salaud propose, tout bonnement, que les Nègres baisent nos femmes!” / “The colonizers played out their phallic domination fantasies by crushing other people and now that the time’s come to pay the bill, this bastard is offering our women for the niggers to fuck” (57/59). As a (stereotype of a) racist white feminist, this character rejects the “perverse” logic Laferrière’s text provocatively proposes; as readers, we are encouraged to reject her logic on the grounds of its racism. The lesbian’s racism is of course more blameworthy than the narrator’s harmless advance towards the *Blanche*. Yet the sexual domination of women, generally speaking, is blameworthy, as is the racial domination of blacks. Our savvy author has anticipated the stereotypical feminist critique, made it stereotypically racist, and included it in his narrative, thus preempting it and, to an extent, defusing its power. This rhetorical sleight of hand obscures the sexist logic that underpins Laferrière’s anti-racist discourse. It also omits the possibility of a non-racist feminist critique, instead assuming that all white feminists must be racists.

Castration is invoked to highlight the perceived threat of black male sexuality¹⁵⁰ and the victimization black men have historically suffered; bell hooks notes that:

Historically the language used to describe the way black men are victimized within racist society has been sexualized. When words like castration, emasculation and impotency are the commonly used terms to describe the nature of black male suffering, a discursive practice is established that links black male liberation with gaining the right to participate fully within patriarchy.¹⁵¹

Indeed, Laferrière uses black male victimization in a racist society to authorize sexism, misogyny and patriarchy. Laferrière evokes black male victimization here in the form of whole body and genital annihilation; the black male body and sex organs are destroyed for the threat they allegedly pose, male sexuality being construed here are the locus of a man’s personhood. His sexual being is elided with his whole being; his dehumanization takes the form of

¹⁵⁰ Fanon discusses both castration and the white fear of black men’s sexuality that motivates it in *Peau noire/ Black Skin*. He articulates whites’ psychopathology as “la peur de la puissance sexuelle du nègre”/ “the fear of the black man’s sexual power.” Fanon, *Peau noire/ Black Skin*, 133/142. See Braziel’s discussion of Fanon’s and Laferrière’s treatment of these issues in “Trans-American Constructions,” 883-890.

¹⁵¹ hooks, *Yearning*, 76.

emasculatation; virile masculinity as the ultimate human value is thus confirmed, and patriarchy as the social order upheld. To recover the lost masculinity of black men lynched and castrated in the past, the *Nègre* narrator here has his masculinity and selfhood restored by the *Blanche* who, in an act that inverts castration, voluntarily lowers herself before him and celebrates his genitals in this act of fellatio.

Laferrière may also play at sexism so as to consciously provoke feminist and/or white critiques; indeed, scholarly reception of this novel indicates that he has been successful there. He also anticipates such critiques in the novel itself, working the reading of his novel into the novel itself. Indeed, the fellatio scene deals with our favorite Miz, Miz Littérature: the doctoral student of feminist literature and professional reader *par excellence*. She most effortlessly stands in for the reader in my allegory, which allows us to reread this scene of fellatio as a moment when writer has turned the tables on reader, gotten the reader to see her own stereotypical, racist assumptions, and made the reader feel so guilty that she will accept what she otherwise wouldn't: misogyny and sexism. By carefully crafting the pairing of anti-black racism and anti-*Blanche* sexism, by manipulating narrative perspective so as to make the reader sympathetic to the black male narrator's point of view, and by playing on white guilt, Laferrière assures the reader's complicity in her own shaming. The reader's own anti-sexist values are undone by virtue of the anti-racist values which are always prioritized; as the *Blanche* gets fucked and fucked with, the reader does, too, made complicit with institutions (sexism, misogyny, patriarchy) that deserve to be opposed. This may be Laferrière's provocative middle finger to a white readership.

Though the *Nègre*'s relations with the *Blanche* are framed in terms of vengeance and retribution, it is important to note that these relations are always consensual and do not entail acts of sexual domination (though they may contain *fantasies* of this or describe consensual sex in aggressive terms). While men's power over women is confirmed rather than challenged here, Laferrière shows the *Blanches*' complicity in their subservience. When they perform sexual services for the narrator, or volunteer to clean his house, it is at their own initiative and not from coercion. Laferrière uses these instances of white women's subservience to black men in three ways. First, the women's subservience is a manifestation of white guilt, where white women willingly lower themselves before their alleged racial inferior so as to make reparations for white privilege. Second, it is a provocative reversal. The narrator jokes that his lover is his slave when

she cleans his house; now, the white person is the slave and the black person is the master. But Laferrière's reversal only goes so far: the traditional gender hierarchy is reinforced, not inverted; woman cleans house, and man watches. Third, by showing the *Blanche*'s complicity in her sexual domination and in her voluntary domestic servitude, Laferrière encourages the reader's complicity with these misogynistic moments. The logic is this: it can't be oppression if the oppressed willingly accepts it, or even invites it upon herself. Due to their race and class privilege, wealthy white women from Westmount certainly cannot be called oppressed; however, Laferrière's *representation* of misogynistic attitudes and actions, including scenes of ostensibly consensual sexual violence against women,¹⁵² problematically reinforces sexist, patriarchal ideologies as it endorses and normalizes aggression against women. Laferrière and his writer-double attempt to evade the charge of misogyny by showing white characters who are aware of their privilege and who offer reparations in their own ways. While reparations for slavery, colonialism and contemporary racism are certainly merited, here they operate, in Saint-Martin's phrasing, "on the backs of women," a group with its own oppressive history to shoulder, as well as its own measure of responsibility to assume with respect to racial injustice. White men emerge unscathed.

9.2 The *Négresse* and the Myth of the Black Stud

Before continuing further with my discussion of the writer-reader relationship and the ways Laferrière anticipates certain readings in his text, I must address two intertwined issues raised in the scenes above: the myth of the Black stud and the figure of the *Négresse*. While Laferrière clearly caricatures the *Nègre* type to subvert it, one dimension of the stereotype stands out in ambivalence: the myth of the black stud. This myth is central in the novel and announced from the first in the title, whose ironic instruction manual form professes to teach women how to manage black men's sexual stamina. When Laferrière exaggerates the *Nègre* stereotype to the point of satirical caricature, he drives home that fact that the stereotype is already within us; his intervention calls up a recognizable social identity. His text does not teach us the myth of the

¹⁵² One explicit example, with Miz Sophisticated Lady: "Faut la baiser vicieusement. [...] Faut la pénétrer violemment, presque au sang, pour ensuite se retirer tout doucement" / "Fuck her viciously. [...] Penetrate her violently, till it hurts, then pull back nice and easy" (79-80/70); translation modified. Of course, the narrator makes it clear that she likes it this way, thereby 'excusing' the "vicious," "violent" treatment she receives.

black male sexual potency, as this is a narrative we are already familiar with. The question is: What is the result of this intervention?

Comment faire l'amour traffics in stereotypes about black male heterosexuality. Throughout the novel, we can discern a number of moves around the question of black male sexual potency. On one level, when the text explicitly awakens and confirms white fears of black male heterosexual power and prowess, the narrator strategically adopts the oppressor's viewpoint so as to turn it against him, to play on his fears and to exaggerate the form of power and superiority that he himself is seen to possess. This is the same critical ventriloquism with which Laferrière invokes the *Nègre* trope throughout, as an index of the racist white gaze. In this move, the narrator takes on the *Nègre* label so as to make a show of his presumed sexual power. Debating with a *Blanche* he has met in a nightclub, he claims: "Sexuellement, le Blanc est mort." / "Sexually, the white man is dead" (129/120). When she accuses him of regurgitating the myth of the Black Stud, he replies: "Les Blancs ne peuvent pas gagner sur les deux tableaux. Ils s'affirment supérieurs aux Nègres partout, et puis tout à coup, ils veulent être nos égaux quelque part. Dans la sexualité." / "But you can't have *Blancs* winning coming and going. They say they're better than *Nègres* in everything, then they turn around and want to be our equals in one area: sexuality" (130/122).¹⁵³ The narrator calls out a logical inconsistency in the discourse of white supremacy to support his claim of the *Nègre*'s sexual superiority.

At the same time, the scene in question and many others represent the *Nègre* as successful sexual predator: "Nègres en rut. Quelques dizaines de souris blanches dans l'antre du Chat Nègre." / "*Nègres* in rut. A few dozen white mice come to play in the lair of the Black Cat" (127/ 119). The narrative's description reads like a catalogue of stereotypes:

Corps huilés. Bois d'ébène, 18 carats. Dents d'ivoire. Musique reggae. Combustion. Nègre en fusion. Un couple Nègre/Blanche en train de copuler, presque, sur la piste. Un grand frisson atomique. [...] L'atmosphère est à la drague dure. Sauvage. Quelques Blancs sont occupés à gesticuler dans un coin. Le reste n'est plus qu'une marée noire, envahissante, débordante. Les femmes piégées là, fixées comme des mouettes dont les pattes restent prise dans le mazout. (128-9)

¹⁵³ We might accuse Laferrière of a similar crime: critiquing racism while endorsing sexism.

Streaming bodies. Eighteen-carat ebony. Ivory teeth. Reggae music. Combustion. *Nègre* fusion. A *Nègre/Blanche* couple practically copulating on the dance floor. Atomic shockwaves. [...] Hard-core cruise. Savage thrust. A few *Blancs* gesticulating in the corner. Everything else is a black tide, washing over the dance floor, filling the room. Here and there a woman is trapped like a seagull with its feet caught in heavy oil. (120-1)

Nègres are cats hunting mice, or overwhelming tides of oil in which seagulls are trapped. Black male sexual power and irresistibility are highlighted here, while *Blanches* are treated as helpless victims. Both sides of the equation are blatant exaggerations and provocations. Of course, the women in the nightclub are safe and participate of their own volition; the sensual interactions described are consensual and enjoyed by all. Laferrière is exaggerating and dramatizing, so as to provoke critical reactions from certain readers: reactions from white men whose lack of sexual prowess is highlighted here and who may see *Blanches* as their sexual and social property being usurped by *Nègres*; and reactions from white women who bridle at being depicted as powerless, dumb, animal prey for savvy male predators. Black female readers may also bridle at the glaring omission of black women from a scene where they would surely be present. Indeed, *Blancs* are invoked only to show their exclusion (relegated to a corner where they dance among themselves) and therefore sexual inferiority in this scene, and black women are excluded by the narrator's refusal to include them in the scene. We can safely presume that black women are part of the "black tide" described above, but they are never identified as such, deemed irrelevant in this theatre of *Nègre-Blanche* interactions. This negation of the black woman as a subject who is worthy of discussion and representation ignores the dual racial and gender oppression she is burdened with; this omission cannot be read as critical of said oppression in the slightest. It is, at best, an abdication of responsibility on the part of Laferrière, the engaged critic of racism, and at worst, a corroboration and endorsement of black women's marginality.

Read in the first degree, the myth of black male studliness is confirmed by scenes like this. However, we should never read Laferrière in the first degree. Given his excessive and therefore subversive deployment of stereotype throughout the novel, this scene of exaggerated blackness and highly stereotypical black male sexuality can also be read in a subversive manner. Laferrière's treatment is ambiguous indeed, for the narrator demonstrates his sexual prowess repeatedly, and seemingly unironically, throughout the novel. He has sex with many *Blanches* and, what's more, drives them to the heights of sexual ecstasy. Several scenes illustrate his

prowess in the bedroom in some detail. These moments bear no signs of irony and can be taken as proof of the narrator's own status as great lover. Here Laferrière invokes the *Nègre* trope to flaunt a celebratory aspect of racial difference – black male sexual superiority – at the expense of white males. This is certainly a provocative jab, but perhaps also truth, *as the narrative presents it*. Adding to Laferrière's ambiguity on this point, other moments in the text question the myth of the black stud directly and even undermine it. I turn first to the figure of the *Négresse*, for examining it will shed light on other moves Laferrière is making around the myth of the black stud.

The sole mention of the *Négresse* as a type in the novel occurs in the narrator's description of the social hierarchy wherein inferiors must give pleasure to superiors. The *Nègre*, for all his mythic studliness, is anything but a stud for the *Négresse*, because “she has to dedicate herself to his pleasure.” He will therefore be a bad lover to her, but she must be a good lover to him, as it is her responsibility as the inferior to do so. The novel's only reference to black women as a type thus serves to 1) render them sexual servants to black men; and 2) negate their significance in the logic of sex-as-social climbing. Having sex with the *Blanche* will make the *Nègre* advance socially, following Fanon's and Laferrière's hierarchy; having sex with the *Négresse* serves no social function, and therefore, it is implied, has no *use* for the *Nègre*. Here we see the *Négresse* not only rendered as a sex object, but even rendered useless in that most dehumanizing role. Black women are here treated as the lowest of the low; indeed, black feminists have convincingly shown the double marginalization black women experience in our culture of white and male privilege.¹⁵⁴ Laferrière's text does not problematize or critique this

¹⁵⁴ Among others, see Frances Beale, “Double Jeopardy,” in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Vintage, 1970); Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Massachusetts Review* 13, no. 1/2, *Woman: An Issue* (Winter/Spring 1972), 81-100; Michele Wallace, “Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood,” *Village Voice* 28 (1975), 6-7, and *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial, 1979); Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1991) and *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004); bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) and *Killing Rage: Ending*

injustice; rather, it reaffirms it, problematically confirming the *Négresse*'s valuelessness on racial and gender grounds. Her valuelessness is further confirmed by her absence throughout the rest of the text; she is simply not worth discussing, the narrative implies. This is in contrast to the *Blanc*, who is repeatedly mentioned as a type of importance, worthy of discussion; indeed, he is the holder of power and the figure the *Nègre* wishes to unseat by possessing his daughter, the *Blanche*. White and male supremacy are confirmed, as the *Nègre* tries to beat the *Blanc* at his patriarchal game; black female inferiority is confirmed by denying the *Négresse* agency or humanity, rendering her as a useless sex object, and effacing her presence from the text.¹⁵⁵

Suzette Mayr argues that the *Négresse*'s absence "haunts" the novel as "the elephant in the room that no one will speak of":

Although she is never included as a potential character or acknowledged as a potential reader of the text, the black woman's notable absence makes the novel possible. Her inclusion would collapse the ultimately flawed, ideological house of cards that designates Vieux's¹⁵⁶ fucking of white women as a revolutionary, political act against racism and colonialism. [...] Her mere existence in this text would defy the "Black Stud" type; it would

Racism (1995); Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁵⁵ In Laferrière's *Cette grenade*, the writer-double narrator responds (evasively) to a black woman who wishes to be included in his work. She reproaches him for being another black man who advertises for white women (161), while he finds all manner of excuses – including protecting black women – to justify excluding black women. After the conversation, however, the narrator goes on to propose such a project to his editor, claiming that the *Négresse* is "la reine des victimes" / "the queen of victims" (166), the foundation of the social edifice, and that he is now mature enough to write about the situation of black women in America. We see, as does his editor, that he has just invented this project on the spot and that he is not, in fact, writing such a work. See chapter "Comment un écrivain nègre peut-il trouver son chemin dans cette jungle?" in Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, 159-167. See also Mayr, "Absent Black Women," 35. Laferrière's post-hoc (and unconvincing) defense justifying *CFL*'s exclusion of black women does not serve my analyses of that text on its own terms.

¹⁵⁶ Many critics opt to refer to the novel's narrator as Vieux, the nickname (meaning "old man") his roommate occasionally calls him. In others of Laferrière's works, the 'Vieux' nickname returns to refer to the works' narrator, who is often also Laferrière's writer-double. Given that this is not the narrator's first name, and that I wish to emphasize the narrator's function as anonymous *Nègre* stereotype, I choose to refer to him anonymously as 'the narrator.'

ground him in a larger community rather than allow him to remain as a single black man against a white (racist) world. [...] Suddenly for example [the narrator] would have girlfriends, mothers, or sisters.¹⁵⁷

Mayr argues that the black woman's presence would disrupt the love triangle between *Nègres*, *Blancs* and *Blanches* by forcing the *Nègre* to confront his male privilege. Instead, Laferrière (via his narrator) "perpetuates black women's exploitation by refusing even to acknowledge it."¹⁵⁸ Given the threat the *Négresse* would pose to the novel's discursive logic of racial-sexual relations, the only form granted her is that of the absent cultural reference to a famous African American female singer. Four such singers of jazz, blues and pop do appear throughout the novel, eliciting respect for their music and providing a kind of soundtrack to certain scenes.¹⁵⁹ Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald and Tina Turner appear as references to African American musical culture, as Laferrière references other famous cultural figures.¹⁶⁰ These famous black female singers are not connected to the *Négresse* type, but rather constitute cultural references to famous artists the narrator respects. The 'threat' the *Négresse* would pose to the novel's patriarchal anti-racist logic is thus concealed behind anodyne references to African American singers that merely offer some cultural context and content, not an agential black female subjectivity.

Pointedly, Laferrière's sole mention of the *Négresse* is found in a passage that explicitly undermines the myth of the Black stud. Here, I expand on Mayr's argument about the *Négresse* as haunting, threatening absence in the novel: the *Négresse*'s sole appearance serves to undo the primary locus of the *Nègre*'s power – his sexual potency. I cite this passage at length, separated

¹⁵⁷ Mayr, "Absent Black Women," 32, 36.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵⁹ See George Elliott Clarke, "Reading Black and White in Contemporary Québécois Texts," in *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 173.

¹⁶⁰ The narrator's other references to celebrities include primarily black and white *male* writers, intellectuals and musicians: Chester Himes, Bukowski, Freud, Fanon, Charlie Parker, etc. Two female intellectuals (Gloria Steinem and Simone de Beauvoir) are included in the text in a mocking way, one famous white female Québécoise television personality (Denise Bombardier) will be outwitted in an example I discuss below, and one sexy white Québécoise actress (Carole Laure) is the narrator's sexual fantasy.

by line breaks that are my own, so as to trace the moves Laferrière makes within. The first section we have seen above:

- (I) Il n'y a pas de véritable relation sexuelle qu'inégale. LA BLANCHE DOIT FAIRE JOUIR LE BLANC, ET LE NÈGRE, LA BLANCHE. D'où le mythe du Nègre grand baiseur. Bon baiseur, oui. Mais pas avec la Nègresse. C'est à la Nègresse à faire jouir le Nègre. [...]
- (II) J'aimerais bien savoir, être tout à fait sûr que le mythe du Nègre animal, primitive, barbare, qui ne pense qu'à baiser, être sûr que tout ça EST vrai ou faux. Là. Direct. DÉFINITIVEMENT. Une fois pour toutes. Personne ne vous le dira, mon ami. Le monde est pourri d'idéologies. [...] En tant que Noir, je n'ai pas assez de recul par rapport au Nègre. Le Nègre est-il ce cochon sexuel? Le Blanc, ce cochon transparent? Le Jaune, ce cochon raffiné? Le Rouge, ce cochon saignant? Seul le Porc est Porc. [...]
- (III) Quand je me pose ces questions [...] sur LE RÔLE DES COULEURS DANS LA SEXUALITÉ, [...] je mourrais probablement avec les dents de ce problème enfoncées dans la gorge. (48-50)
- (I) The only true sexual relation is between unequals. The *Blanche* must give the *Blanc* pleasure, as *Nègres* must for *Blanches*. Hence, the myth of the Black stud [*Nègre grand baiseur*]. Great in bed, yes, but not with the *Nègresse*. For she has to dedicate herself to his pleasure. [...]
- (II) I'd like to be one hundred percent sure whether the myth of the animalistic, primitive, barbarous *Nègre* who thinks only of fucking is true or not. Evidence. Show me evidence. Definitively, once and for all. No one can. The world has grown rotten with ideologies. [...] As a *Noir*, I don't have enough distance from the *Nègre*. Are *Nègres* sexual pigs? Are *Blancs* pale pigs? *Jaunes* [Yellows] refined pigs? *Rouges* [Reds] bleeding pigs? Only Pig is Pig. [...]
- (III) When I ask myself hard questions about the role of color in sexuality [...] I would probably die with the teeth of that problem sunk into my neck. (41-43; translation modified)

In the first section of the above passage, the narrator frames the black stud as myth rather than fact – and a myth, we see in the second section, refers here to an idealization that may or may

not be true, rather than a falsity necessarily.¹⁶¹ The narrator concedes that the *Nègre* is a “bon baiseur” (good fuck) with the *Blanche*, but not a “grand baiseur” (great fuck). He is good only because his sexual prowess depends on their relationship of unequal racial power and the fantasies this power differential instigates. It is the context of uneven power, not individual capacity, that determines the *Nègre*’s quality as a lover. Indeed, with the *Négresse*, the *Nègre* is a total sexual failure. Mayr is right to identify the *Négresse* as threatening absence, for her one appearance negates the *Nègre*’s studliness. I will return to the *Négresse* below. That the *Nègre* (again, a generic type, not an individual) can be a *good* lover is thus the result of history, oppression, fantasies of otherness – in short, things that are not unique to the person in question.

Between sections I and II above, the narrative voice moves from the objective, authoritative, pedantic third person to the subjective, questioning first person. Now the narrator speaks of himself, “[a]s a *Noir*”, referring to the *Nègre* in the third person so as to problematize the stereotype: “I’d like to be one hundred percent sure whether the myth of the animalistic, primitive, barbarous *Nègre* who thinks only of fucking is true or not.” The myth of the black stud is here explicitly questioned, rather than confirmed, and this question cannot be answered because its terms are filtered through ideology. Here we see what looks like sincere questioning move into the ironic: building on the (sexist) cliché “men are pigs,” the narrator moves through a series of obvious racial clichés (whites are invisible, Asians are refined, indigenous people are bloodthirsty) only to throw out that line of thinking. He concludes, “Only Pig is Pig,” implying that these clichés of racialized masculinities do not obtain. The speaker appears ultimately defeated by the question of black male sexual prowess; he cannot confirm or disconfirm the myth here. Yet we see at the end of the passage the myth’s significance and weight in the

¹⁶¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘myth’ as a) “a widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; [...] a fictitious or imaginary person or thing;” b) “a person or thing held in awe or generally referred to with near reverential admiration on the basis of popularly repeated stories (whether real or fictitious);” and c) “a popular conception of a person or thing which exaggerates or idealizes the truth.” Laferrière plays at the intersection of these different meanings in this passage, suggesting the *Nègre* is at once an exaggeration or idealization, a misconception, and an imaginary person. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “myth, n.”, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.oed.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/124670?rskey=D94W6z&result=1>

narrator's life: the *Nègre* stereotype, and other race-derived stereotypes, are clichés that might kill him.

Throughout the novel, Laferrière moves back and forth between confirming and undermining the myth of the black stud. Immediately following the Harlem sex-as-revenge scene cited above, with its celebration of racial hatred as an aphrodisiac and of the *Nègre*'s power to please the *Blanche*, the narrator declares the heyday of *Nègre-Blanche* relations passed. I cite the continuation of that passage:

Si vous voulez un aperçu de la guerre nucléaire, mettez un Nègre et une Blanche dans un lit. Mais aujourd'hui c'est fini. Nous avons frôlé la DESTRUCTION TOTALE sans le savoir. LE NÈGRE ÉTAIT LA DERNIÈRE BOMBE SEXUELLE CAPABLE DE FAIRE SAUTER LA PLANÈTE. Et il est mort. Entre les cuisses d'une BLANCHE. Au fond, le Nègre n'est qu'un pétard mouillé, mais ce n'est pas à moi de le dire. (19-20)

If you want to know what nuclear war is all about, put a *Nègre* and a *Blanche* in the same bed. But it's all over now. We came close to total annihilation without knowing it. The *Nègre* was the last sexual bomb that could have blown up this planet. And now he's dead. Sputtered out between the thighs of a *Blanche*. When you come down to it, the *Nègre* was just a wet firecracker, but that's not for me to say. (15-16)

At the same time that the *Nègre*'s sexual power is emphasized, it is deemed passé: the *Nègre* is dead, killed in the act of sleeping with the *Blanche* – a studly way to die, one might say. The *Nègre* was a stud, it seems, but “It's over now.” This phrase is repeated twice, regretfully, as if offering (in the words of the novel's English translator) “a funeral elegy for the myth of the Great Black Lover” (2). And it was, it is implied, a myth, a falsity, rather than a reality: “the *Nègre* was just a wet firecracker” – an image of impotency, of failed explosive sexual potential – “but that's not for me to say.” In truth, only the *Nègre*'s lovers would be qualified to evaluate his sexual performance; Laferrière implies here that he feels uncomfortable disclosing the emptiness or outdatedness of the myth, as if he were betraying black men who use the stereotype to their advantage. These men are one ostensible target audience I identify for the text's ironic pedagogy, distinct from the real audience I claim Laferrière targets: white male and female readers.

This question of the black man's prowess is addressed most directly toward the end of the novel. The narrator's position becomes clear – if, of course, we can believe him – during the

nightclub conversation cited above. After he has informed his *Blanche* interlocutor that “Sexually, the white man is dead” and she challenges him for simply deploying the myth to his advantage, he retorts:

Puisque tu m’as provoqué, je vais te dire le fond de ma pensée. Nègres et Blancs sont égaux devant la mort et la sexualité. Eros et Thanatos. Je pense que le couple Nègre/Blanche est pire qu’une bombe. Le Nègre ne vaut peut-être pas la corde qui doit le pendre, mais avec la Blanche, il y a de fortes chances qu’il se passe quelque chose. Pourquoi? Parce que la sexualité est avant tout affaire de phantasmes et le phantasme accouplant le Nègre avec la Blanche est l’un des plus explosifs qui soit. (130)

Since you’ve provoked me, I’m going to tell you exactly what I think. *Nègres* and *Blancs* are equal when it comes to death and sexuality. Eros and Thanatos. And I think that when you mix *Nègre* and *Blanche* you get blood red. The *Nègre* might not be worth the rope that hangs him¹⁶², but with a *Blanche*, the chances of something happening are good. Why? Because sexuality is based on fantasy and the *Nègre/Blanche* fantasy is one of the most explosive ones around. (122; translation modified)

The narrator allegedly states “exactly what I think”: *Nègres* and *Blancs* are sexual equals. Because sexuality is the stuff of fantasies, then the *Nègre* is a stud only with the *Blanche*, only by virtue of the fantasies they both bring to the encounter. Otherwise, he’s not worth “the rope that hangs him.” Beyond all that, black men and white men are equals with one another. The masculine gender used indicates the gendered basis for this equality; notably, women are not treated as equals throughout the text. We see the myths of the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* shaping sexual and social relationships, independent of some ‘objective,’ substantive content. Rosello advocates conceiving of stereotype “not as the opposite of truth but as one of the narratives that a given power wants to impose as truth at any given moment.”¹⁶³ Consistently throughout the novel, Laferrière utilizes violent imagery to describe the *Nègre-Blanche* couple itself. Multiple times the narrator likens the *Nègre-Blanche* couple to an atom bomb; the previous passage ends with an image of teeth sunk into the narrator’s throat; and the above allusion to lynching poignantly calls up the history of slavery in the United States and the male slave’s putative desire

¹⁶² Homel’s translation -- “the *Nègre* might not be worth the paper he’s printed on” -- fails to capture the violent reference to slavery Laferrière’s line makes.

¹⁶³ Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype*, 17.

for the white woman. The upshot is that the *Nègre* and *Blanche* types, irrevocably bound up in one another, remain caught today in the complex web of consequences that result from slavery and colonialism – projects in which white European and American hegemonies imposed their versions of ‘truth’ to dominate others discursively, materially and psychically. Laferrière’s graphic imagery illustrates that this contemporary space remains one of great violence and trauma.

I have cited here the few moments where the myth of the black stud is interrogated or undermined; more often, as in the novel’s many sex scenes, the myth is confirmed. This back and forth around the myth is an aspect of Laferrière’s ironic, self-reflexive style; as he has warned us, everything he says should be taken with a grain of salt. Like the stereotype of the *Nègre* that is simultaneously deployed in excess so as to subvert it, and explicitly denied, the myth of black male sexual prowess is also asserted and undermined. With respect to the *Nègre* stereotype generally speaking, I see both moves around the type as ways to deconstruct and invalidate the racist stereotype; with respect to the myth of the black male sexuality specifically, I find Laferrière’s intervention ambivalent. I follow Daniel Coleman who argues that the novel is ultimately ambivalent in its intervention around black masculinity for it “settles neither into clearly post-colonial counter-discursive subversion nor into neo-colonial submission [...]; at one and the same time, it exposes and ridicules the discursive system that produces the racist stereotypes which degrade men of African ancestry, and it recycles and recommodifies those very stereotypes in the process.”¹⁶⁴ Braziel notes Laferrière’s deployment of “*le nègre* and *la blonde*”¹⁶⁵ [as] racial-cultural capital, circulating as commodified images;” when his text “hyperbolizes [the stereotypes’] cultural market value,”¹⁶⁶ we can wonder if that value is ultimately problematized *by readers* (for it clearly is in the text), or if they will come away from reading with these stereotypes confirmed and reinforced. Given these tropes’ cultural currency before Laferrière’s literary intervention around them, the question is whether or not his work can *control* the way the *Nègre* stereotype (his central concern) is commodified by readers of his work

¹⁶⁴ Coleman, “How to Make Love to a Discursive Genealogy,” 53.

¹⁶⁵ The *blonde* is a subcategory of the *Blanche*; for my purposes here, the distinction is not pertinent.

¹⁶⁶ Braziel, “From Port-au-Prince,” 240, 241.

after his intervention. In other words, can his excessive deployment of the *Nègre* stereotype result in its effective subversion, or will his salacious depiction of black male sexuality be further commodified to confirm the stereotype? One thing is certain: scenes of the *Nègre* engaged in aggressive, violent (if always consensual) sex and references to a predatory, threatening black male sexuality seek to provoke reactions, primarily from white male and female readers. Deploying a stereotype is never neutral; it always carries the burden of its earlier enunciations into its present. Similarly, as I will illustrate with respect to Díaz's work, dominant forms of oppression like racism and sexism cannot be represented neutrally, because 'neutral' representations ultimately reinforce what they do not critique.

9.3 Provoking and Anticipating Stereotypical Readings

The citation above hints at Laferrière's self-aware provocation throughout the novel. The narrator exclaims, "since you've provoked me," claiming the *Blanche* is the one to provoke him, when in fact, in that scene, he was the one to provoke her with bold, unqualified claims about white male impotence and black male potency. However, following the allegory I advance between the *Nègre-Blanche* relationship and the writer-reader relationship, the *Nègre* narrator here is speaking not only to his *Blanche* interlocutor in the nightclub, but also as a black male writer to the white reader: "you've provoked me." Indeed, Laferrière is provoked not only as a man of color, incensed by centuries of racial injustice, the history of which his text seeks to lay bare; he is also provoked as a *writer* of color who sees racist white and feminist critiques circulating in the world of literary criticism and in the world at large. Anticipating these within his novel, he uses the occasion to preempt and respond. With characteristic irony, his response to provocation is often similarly provocative. In other words, Laferrière anticipates white and feminist critiques to his novel, not only because he is a black male writer writing about sex, and interracial sex at that (this would likely be enough to elicit reactions), but also because he has deliberately written the novel in a provocative manner, treating the *Blanc* as sexual inferior, treating the *Blanche* as sexual object, and erasing the *Négresse* from existence. All of these reading constituencies will easily be up in arms about the negative or non-representation of their group. Laferrière anticipates stereotypical readings from certain readers, and criticism of his novel after its publication proves that, to a certain extent, he was right: his novel has indeed

received, alongside much praise, critiques of his treatment of white and black women, of black masculinity and heteronormativity; my analysis has cited a number of these.¹⁶⁷ Certain reading constituencies have indeed reacted predictably – stereotypically – to his text. A predictable critique is not, however, necessarily an invalid one. Laferrière has merely shown us that he has thought ahead, anticipated certain reactions, and written his novel as he has written it in full awareness of these likely reactions, in full awareness of its stereotypical reading or misreading, as the case may be. Furthermore, Laferrière’s anticipation of stereotypical readings shows the author’s own practice of stereotyping in action: he applies his own stereotypical expectations to the readers he anticipates of his novel, a novel that focuses so dearly on stereotypes itself.

A final passage, near the novel’s close, crystallizes Laferrière’s anticipation of stereotypical readings. In it, the narrator imagines he has finished writing his novel (in effect, the novel we read) and has been invited for a televised interview by the Québécoise journalist and celebrity Denise Bombardier on her Radio-Canada public affairs program appropriately titled *Noir sur Blanc* (Black on White). Indeed, the exchange to follow is a competition between *Nègre* and *Blanche*, which, unsurprisingly, *Nègre* will win. Bombardier, a white woman, is immediately aligned with the *Blanches* the narrator seduces, outwits and mocks throughout the novel by her introduction as “Miz Bombardier,” no different from the novel’s other Miz. Like them, she too will be outwitted and (figuratively) fucked with. She begins her questioning in a stereotypically feminist way:

Vous n’aimez pas les femmes, m’a-t-il semblé?

¹⁶⁷ I cite a few critics and reviewers here to illustrate the range of reactions Laferrière’s text occasions: Réjean Beaudoin writes: “Je n’ai rien contre les nègres, rien non plus contre l’érotisme, mais je tiens beaucoup à déclarer que le roman de Dany Laferrière, *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, est une parfaite ineptie.” / “I have nothing against *nègres*, nothing either against eroticism, but I feel compelled to declare Dany Laferrière’s novel *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* a perfect ineptitude.” See Beaudoin, “Les Mouches du plafond,” 127-131. Francine Bordeleau, on the other hand, celebrates him as “un écrivain redoutable. Libre. Dangereux” / “a mighty, free, dangerous writer” using “la littérature comme arme, comme instrument de liberté” / “literature as a weapon, as an instrument of freedom.” See Bordeleau, “Dany Laferrière sans arme,” 9-10. Rita Kempley calls the novel and the film based on it “little more than an offensively titled low-budget look at scoring with white women in Montreal,” “as piddling as it is pretentious, as racist as it is sexist, as self-hating as it is self-congratulatory.” See Kempley, review of *How to Make Love*.

R.: Les Nègres aussi.

Miz B. sourit. J'ai gagné la première manche. (153)

“it seems to me you don't like women.”

“Negroes too.”

Miz B. smiles. I won the first round. (145)

The narrator explicitly frames this interaction as a battle – of wits, of sexes, of races – of which he wins the first round. Next the narrator relates his theory of *Nègres* and *Blanches* as invented types, rather than humans.¹⁶⁸ Bombardier calls the novel “le premier véritable portrait de Montréal venant d'un écrivain noir” / “the first portrait of Montréal from the pen of a black writer” (154/146) and claims it's a delight to see blacks not merely complaining, but striking back, with humor. The narrator replies, “C'est comme ça dans la vie. On pare les coups et on en donne” / “That's the way life is. You parry the blows and you strike back” (154/146). This is, again, a statement to Laferrière's reader-critics, spoken by his writer-double, the now-famous writer. His blows at *Blanches* and readers are justified by the history of racist institutions and racist critiques; humor and irony are his weapons. When Bombardier asks why the narrator does not invoke Africa the way many black writers do, he replies that his characters are Westerners and their culture is completely Western. This can be read as Laferrière's response to the criticism he anticipates from black critics who advocate a more Afrocentric definition of blackness.

Next the narrator claims that “dans un rencontre entre un Noir et une Blanche, ce qui prédomine c'est le mensonge” / “when a black man and a white woman meet, the lie is the predominant feature” (155/146). Read in a self-reflexive manner, this passage comments on this very interaction with Bombardier. The narrator basically tells her he is lying to her – and that she is also lying to him. Laferrière the writer is also telling the reader that he is lying, thereby deconstructing whatever he says before he says it and making it impossible to know what he

¹⁶⁸ “Il n'y a pas pratiquement pas de femmes dans ce roman. Mais des types. Il y a des Nègres et des Blanches. Du point de vue humain, le Nègre et la Blanche n'existent pas. [...] ces deux-là sont une invention de l'Amérique.” / “There are practically no women in this novel. These are just types. *Nègres* and *Blanches*. On the human level, the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* do not exist. [...] They are American inventions.” (153/145)

really thinks or really means to do in this novel.¹⁶⁹ This is a reminder to the reader to take him with a grain of salt, and it functions as a clever way to preempt and defuse critiques to come, for he can always plead irony and inversion in his defense. Hutcheon has shown that irony is a “weapon” with an “edge” that leaves the ironist difficult to attack.¹⁷⁰ Coleman describes Laferrière’s play in terms of metaparody:

Laferrière’s text is not a simple one-to-one parody in which Vieux inhabits and subverts slavery-era stereotypes of black men; it is a metaparody because it re-sites and ridicules not just the original discourse of racialized sexuality, but also its many responses and variations throughout its etiology, including its opponents and resisters. The moment readers settle on a certain interpretation of Vieux’s narration, they find themselves anticipated by the text’s own metafictional commentary.¹⁷¹

Coleman uses the terms of parody and metaparody; I offer in addition the terms of stereotype and stereotype subversion to articulate Laferrière’s ambivalent play with the myth of the black stud. The author’s anticipation of certain readings and the narrative’s repeated undermining of its own claims leaves the text radically open to different interpretations, at the same time that it shows that any single interpretation must be wrong in light of counterevidence. I have been focusing on jabs I see directed at stereotypical white readers: that reading constituency is anticipated and mocked – indeed, parodied – by Laferrière’s metaparody of the black stud.

¹⁶⁹ Even as I align the reader and the *Blanche* and see Laferrière and his writer-double addressing both, I recognize that these positions cannot be *fully, seamlessly* merged. When I see the reader being subtly addressed in the instances I have highlighted, I assume (as I take Laferrière to) that the reader’s identity and critical faculties may differ from those of the *Blanche*. Miz Littérature, as the professional *Blanche* reader, would be the exception to this distinction, and indeed, she is as dupable, racist and ridiculous as the rest – all the more so because of her feminist higher education. In my alignment of the *Blanche* and the reader, I see the two conflated with one another, at the same time that there are obvious differences between them.

¹⁷⁰ Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 2, 11. Laferrière concurs: describing his deliberate provocation of interracial sex in *CFL*, he says, “The topic of interracial fucking hit them right in the solar plexus. That Black might be in a bed with their own daughter. That’s dangerous. It’s dangerous because of the irony that runs through my first book. Not only is that Black screwing my daughter, they told themselves, he’s smiling about it too! That smile is at the heart of the subversive intention.” Laferrière, “An Interview,” 912.

¹⁷¹ Coleman, “How to Make Love to a Discursive Genealogy,” 65.

Bombardier, concerned with how other reading constituencies received the novel, asks how black readers received the book. The narrator responds:

Ils veulent me lyncher. [...] Parce que j'ai vendu la mèche. Ils n'aiment pas avoir le nombril à l'air. Ils disent que je suis un vendu, que je fais le jeu des Blancs, que mon livre ne vaut rien et que si on l'a publié, c'est tout simplement parce qu'il faut toujours un Nègre pour faire des grimaces et donner bonne conscience aux Blancs. (156)

They want to lynch me. [...] Because I let the cat out of the bag. They don't like being caught with their pants down. They say I've sold out, that I'm playing the *Blanc's* game, that my book is no good and the only reason it was published was because *Blancs* need a *Nègre* to carry on and give whites a clear conscience. (148)

Laferrière's writer-double anticipates criticism from black readers who will claim he has sold out to whites by representing black men negatively for whites' amusement, like in the minstrel shows of yore. These black readers are implicitly male, as black males are the ones with a clever game to play (playing the *Nègre* to seduce the *Blanche*) and the ones who might be "caught with their pants down" in the middle of the act. Black female perspectives remain conspicuously absent. Cameron Bailey notes: "black writers and critics tend to feel uncomfortable with the novel's glibness, its complete exclusion of black women, and, above all, with the sense that its satire is played mainly to white male readers."¹⁷² Laferrière accurately anticipated (stereotypical) readings of his (stereotypical) black male narrator. Coleman also raises the concern that the deployment of the black stud stereotype can be seen as a form of self-exploitation and self-commodification, which, though profitable to the author via sales of his book, nonetheless recirculates a damaging stereotype and is therefore hurtful to the author's community. Coleman writes, "The novel's astounding success, then, points toward the discomfiting possibility that, regardless of its potential for parodic subversion, the economy in which it is consumed will contain its transgressive potential."¹⁷³ The literary market is hungry for narratives of black male

¹⁷² Bailey, "How to Make Love to a Nation," 87. Kempley's review of the novel supports Bailey's view: "A feminist nightmare, this sophomoric interracial dating manual does the greatest injury to black women, its invisible victims." See Kempley, review of *How to Make Love*.

¹⁷³ Coleman, "How to Make Love to a Discursive Genealogy," 78.

sexual power, and this hunger is not necessarily an indicator that the trope as Laferrière has deployed it has been received in a subversive, critical manner. Reception is wildly uncontrollable, and some of this novel's success may derive from a first-degree consumer appetite for salacious tales of stereotypical black male sexuality, rather than a second-degree critical reading market for clever, metafictional metaparodies of it. I add that the misogynistic content may likewise satisfy an appetite for salacious tales of women's stereotypical sexual objectification. Both of these possible first-degree/non-critical readings are troubling, as they work to reinforce ideologies of oppression rather than overturn them. While I doubt Laferrière seeks to challenge the repressive ideology of sexism in this text, I am certain he seeks to challenge the repressive ideology of racism. We cannot be certain how his book is received by its various actual readers, and by playing with the heated issue of black male sexuality, Laferrière is indeed playing with fire (or with the atom bomb, if I borrow his metaphor for the *Nègre-Blanche* couple). But that may be just his point.

Continuing to anticipate and articulate criticism in the imagined Bombardier interview, the narrator describes the reception of the white Moral Majority: they call it “une ordure qui salit son lecteur, [qui ...] a pour unique but d'avilir la Race Blanche dans ce qu'elle a de plus sacré: LA FEMME. Vous voyez, je fais banco.” / “the kind of trash that pollutes the reader, whose only goal is to debase the white race by attacking its most sacred object: Woman. You see, I've hit the jackpot” (156-7/148-9). Hitting the jackpot for a provocateur means provoking as many different kinds of readers as possible; the more people the writer can piss off, the more successful the literary endeavor. After the publication of this novel, Laferrière became a celebrity in Québec, known for his public provocations (he once, for example, presented the weather report on television in the nude). He certainly found ways to get people talking about him, and the provocative content and interpretative openness of this novel have proven fertile fodder for inquiring minds. His political endgame in this novel may be deliberately obscured so as to serve a higher purpose: to get his novel read, to get himself talked about, and to catapult himself into celebrity. We, like Bombardier, remain uncertain whose team Laferrière is on. Finally, when asked if the opinion of black readers bothers him, the narrator replies: “C'est le destin de tout écrivain que d'être traître. J'espère que c'est mon premier cliché depuis le début de l'entretien.” / “To be a traitor is every writer's destiny. I hope that's my first cliché in this interview” (157/149). He admits to being a traitor – presumably to his race, perhaps to other constituencies

as well, and maybe even to some of his own values, implying that such an artistic and political endeavor necessitates certain compromises. He then announces his first cliché, at the end of a novel most riddled with clichés and stereotypes. Always speaking in ironic inversions, Laferrière and his writer-double are most deliberately difficult to pin down, both for the fictional Bombardier interviewing him and for the literary critic reading him.

10 Conclusion: the *Nègre*/writer's Triumph

In the novel's remaining four pages, two things happen: Bouba, the narrator's roommate, brings home two girls, and the narrator finishes his novel. The two girls are "à moitié mortes"/ "half-dead" and "affreuses"/ "horrible" (159/150; translation modified), homeless alcoholics Bouba picked up on the street. They are not referred to as *Blanches*, though they are implicitly white; we have seen that black women have no place in this novel. Bouba offers the tall one to the narrator: "la grande était à moi, [...] je pouvais en faire ce que je voulais: la baiser, la vendre ou la jeter par la fenêtre" / "the big one was mine and I could do what I wanted with her: fuck her, sell her, throw her out the window" (159/150). The narrator has no interest in her; for him, she has no value – too ugly to fuck, too poor to be worth his time, too valueless to be sold, too half-dead to bother killing. The *Blanche*'s value is in her class power *and* her racial power; poor white women do not qualify (much like black women), as they cannot improve the narrator's class position. What can do so, he hopes, is writing a successful novel. I read "La Grande" as a surrogate for the black women the narrator has no sexual interest in (and refuses to include in this tale), because they serve no function in his goal of social ascendancy.

The narrator throws a yelling fit that causes the police to show up and the women to leave; he turns down the opportunity for sex in favor of the opportunity to write "ce dernier chapitre" / "this last chapter" (160/152; translation modified) – the one we read – and this signals a shift in his approach. Writing is now his ultimate priority and the source of his fulfillment, and it is recounted in exuberant, orgasmic terms:

Je tape avec frénésie. La Remington jubile. Ça gicle de partout. Je tape. Je n'en peux plus. Je tape. J'en ai ma claque. J'achève. Je m'affale sur la table, à côté de la machine à écrire, la tête entre les bras. (161)

I'm typing like crazy. The Remington is having a ball. Words are squirting out everywhere. I type. I can't take it anymore. I type. I'm at the end of my ribbon. I

finish. I crash out on the table next to the typewriter with my head on my arms.
(152)

It would appear that it is now writer and typewriter having ecstatic sex, rather than *Nègre* and *Blanche*. The narrator, thanks to his “vieille complice” / “partner in crime” (161/152) or “old accomplice” (literally translated), has just reached his writerly climax: the completion of his novel. The act of “finishing” suggests both the act of writing and the sexual act. Writing has become sexual, perhaps even replaced sex, as the writer’s climax – here at the novel’s *narrative* climax – is more important than the sexual climax the writer has just declined in rejecting “la Grande.”¹⁷⁴ The narrator’s goal, up to this point, has been to seduce *Blanches* and talk about it. Now, it seems, writing has become an orgasmic activity in lieu of sex, and his overarching goal has become to complete the novel, publish and sell it, so that readers read it and are, as I have argued in my allegory, fucked and fucked with, thrown out the window (or under the bus, if you prefer), and forced to sell out: manipulated into complicity with patriarchy and misogyny, on the faulty grounds that racism justifies as much. The *Nègre*/writer has attained his goal twofold: in seducing *Blanches* and publishing this tale of sexual vengeance, his own narrative draws to a close. His typewriter is now his “accomplice” *instead of the Blanche*, who previously held this position¹⁷⁵; we might then ask, as she does, “Where is the murder?” (123/93). Perhaps the *Nègre*/writer, with his typewriter accomplice, can be said to figuratively ‘kill’ (in fittingly hyperbolic, provocative, Laferrierian terms) or otherwise vanquish the reader, who has been rendered complicit¹⁷⁶, and the critic, whose critique has been rendered impotent by his unassailable ironic inversions.

The novel’s final chapter “On ne naît pas Nègre, on le devient” / “You’re Not Born *Nègre*, You Get That Way” (163/153) makes an edgy nod to French feminist Simone de Beauvoir’s famous phrase “On ne naît pas femme, on le devient” / “One is not born, but rather

¹⁷⁴ For an alternative reading of the relationship between sex and writing, see Pascale de Souza, “Comment écrire un roman sans se fatiguer: stratégies perlocutoires d’un best-seller chez Dany Laferrière,” *Quebec Studies* 27 (Spring/Summer 1999): 62-69.

¹⁷⁵ Earlier in the narrative, the narrator argues that “Le Nègre et la Blanche sont complices” / “The *Nègre* and the *Blanche* are accomplices”; his *Blanche* interlocutor, surprised, replies, “Où est le meurtre?” / “Where is the murder?” The narrator replies: “Le meurtre du Blanc” / “The murder of the white man” (123/93). This ‘murder’ is figurative and sexual.

¹⁷⁶ I highlight the etymological connection between ‘accomplice’ and ‘complicity’ below.

becomes a woman.”¹⁷⁷ This rephrasing of de Beauvoir is provocative in a book so rife with sexism, and especially so when it comes on the heels of the misogynistic suggestion that fucking, selling or killing a woman are three acceptable courses of action.¹⁷⁸ Its title echoes the performative dimensions of identity and stereotype as we have explored them earlier in this chapter. The narrator suggests ironically that he has become the *Nègre* he has self-consciously performed throughout; what he has in fact become is a writer. The merging of these two positions is reaffirmed, despite and through Laferrière’s relentless irony. He has actualized his writer identity, reaching the climax of his writing here at the closest thing to a narrative climax this fairly plotless novel can offer. This final chapter, the sunset of *this* book, is the dawn of the narrator’s just-finished novel (which, confusingly, is also the novel we are about to finish): “L’aube est arrivée [...]. Le roman me regarde, là, sur la table, à côté de la vieille Remington [...]. Ma seule chance. VA.” / “Dawn came up [...]. My novel stares at me from the table, next to the old Remington [...]. My only chance. *Take it*” (163/153). His only chance to leave poverty and make a name for himself is to publish this book, which could (and in reality, did) bring the writer material comfort and celebrity. Sex and writing overlap in my argument that the *Nègre-Blanche* relationship allegorizes the writer-reader relationship. Many a *Blanche* has been fucked and fucked with throughout this story; the white readers have also been fucked with, manipulated into sympathizing with the victim of racism who victimizes women. The white and/or feminist critic’s racist expectations exposed, her stereotypical readings anticipated and preempted, and her guilt called forth, her critique is rendered impotent and she too becomes complicit in the text’s misogyny. Even if the *Blanche* and reader positions are not identical, they are closely aligned here. The *Nègre*/writer has won the competition the novel has staged. He has conquered “l’Amérique” sexually via its *Blanches* and intellectually via its readers, both groups being outwitted and fucked throughout the novel, and then finally put to rest at the end, when writing replaces sex as climax and closure.

¹⁷⁷ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 283.

¹⁷⁸ De Beauvoir is, indeed, one of two female *intellectuals* Laferrière references in this novel; he mocks Gloria Steinem with the ‘Ms./Miz’ designation (see footnote 60). All the other intellectuals or authors he mentions – often in praise, rather than mockery – are male, black or white.

In this chapter, I have elaborated a number of ‘lessons’ I see Laferrière issuing to different readers throughout his fictional parody of the ‘How To’ instruction manual. These are sometimes history lessons, or mockery and chastisement directed at white readers; alternately, they are faux-instructive behavior lessons directed at black male students of the stud type. Black female readers receive no schooling and no consideration in the novel. Broadly speaking, Laferrière offers lessons in reading: in reading racialized, gendered and sexualized bodies through the lens of stereotypes the author exaggerates; in reading texts via stereotypical reading practices and critical approaches (be they feminist, white, anti-racist, or anti-colonial) the author anticipates. His lessons reveal how readers read bodies and texts, and expose the ideological problems contained within those fraught readings. His novel throws into relief different white gazes on the black male body, and different white readerly gazes on the black male writer. I have framed identity, stereotype and gaze in terms of performativity and performance so as to highlight both the unconscious and deliberate ways identity embodiments operate. In anticipating how Laferrière, as a heterosexual black male Haitian Québécois writer, will be received when he writes about interracial (and deliberately provocative, misogynistic) sex, he highlights the durability of the racist and sexist stereotypes that drive both his self-reflexive novel and the predictably stereotypical reactions the novel incites. Stuck as we all are in this racial-sexual economy, we are all in a sense complicit¹⁷⁹: folded together, entangled, contained within the oppressive hierarchies that characterize our society. I have argued that Laferrière manipulates the reader into complicity with sexism and resisted what I see as his deliberate undermining of feminist critiques by his ‘racism justifies anything’ rationale. Nonetheless, I feel his text offers a much larger, universally applicable lesson about everyone’s witting or unwitting complicity in ideologies and institutions of oppression. His anti-racist text cannot liberate the *Nègre* without oppressing the *Blanche*; this white female reader cannot read his anti-racist text without reading sexism against white and black women therein. We are all caught within the limits of the identity

¹⁷⁹ “Complicity” and “accomplice” derive from the same root. “Complicity” means “the state of being complex or involved” or of “being an accomplice [...] in an evil action.” It derives from the Latin *complicare*, meaning “to fold together.” It derives from the same root as the verb “complicate,” with the sense of “combine, entangle, intertwine” and connects to the Old French term *complice* (“an associate”) and the English “accomplice.” See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “complicity, n.,” accessed April 27, 2015, <http://www.oed.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/37715?redirectedFrom=complicity>

categories that structure our experience. Recirculating stereotypes in a subversive way is thus risky indeed, for it risks inadvertent complicity with the stereotype being problematized. The stereotype can be reinforced with each utterance (as Rosello warns), and the stereotype can be consumed un-subversively by readers hungry for stereotypical narratives (as Coleman warns).

In this discussion, I have unpacked the origin and performance of the *Nègre* type and shown the asymmetric way Laferrière handles the *Nègre* and *Blanche* types. I have shown how the *Nègre* is destereotyped by excess and exaggeration, and by explicit denial of the type's existence; the ostensibly *Nègre* narrator is in fact a fully developed novelistic character, not a stereotype, while the *Blanche* is rendered as a static stereotype. Laferrière thereby enacts discursive revenge in parallel to the racial revenge the *Nègre* exacts against the *Blanche* via aggressive sex. Sexism and misogyny are 'excused' by the narrative logic Laferrière's novel advances, wherein whites' racial oppression of black men justifies black men's sexual domination of white women; white men are never directly punished, as the *Blanches* receive punishment in their stead. Furthermore, the reader (whatever her or his actual identity) is coaxed into complicity with the narrator's heterosexual black male perspective and encouraged to authorize any behavior on the grounds that slavery, lynching, castration and other historical forms of racial oppression are much greater evils than any form of women's sexual domination. The *Nègre* type is historicized and problematized through the optics of slavery and colonialism; the *Blanche* type, in contrast, is never historicized through the optics of patriarchy and sexism, and these institutions of oppression are never problematized or critiqued within the text. I have teased out a number of instances where Laferrière anticipates and preempts critiques from certain reading constituencies: primarily white male and female readers, and once, black male readers. In doing so, I have argued that Laferrière, ever self-aware, has deliberately deployed sexism and misogyny to provoke stereotypical feminist and white critiques. I have also noted that black women are absent from the text, for they represent a threat to the fraught social hierarchy Laferrière puts forth between *Nègre*, *Blanche* and *Blanc*. Indeed, the *Nègresse* would negate the black male's sexual prowess, and so she is negated in the text. Laferrière treats the myth of the black stud with ambivalence, both confirming and disconfirming it. Finally, I have argued that the *Nègre-Blanche* relationship is an allegory for the writer-reader relationship, and that the white reader gets fucked by the writer much like the *Blanche* gets fucked by the *Nègre*. Both the *Blanche* and the white (male or female) reader are outwitted and duped, their racist assumptions

and expectations exposed, their white guilt called upon so as to encourage a permissive stance on the sexism and misogyny evident in the text. I have argued that the *Nègre*/writer's ultimate goal is to write the novel we read, and when this task is accomplished at the end of this novel, he 'kills' or at least triumphs over the reader. The white reader has been fucked with, made complicit with sexism, and rendered impotent as a critic; the black female reader, like the black woman, has been ignored completely in the text and rendered irrelevant. The black woman/black female reader, then, is the real fatality here, for she is never even acknowledged as a reader whose opinion matters or as a subjectivity worth considering. By her omission, the racial and gender oppression she is subject to are silently and very problematically reinforced.

Part Two: The Stud Unmasked: Junot Díaz's 'How To' Fictions

11 Introduction

A number of Junot Díaz's short stories play with the form and the idea of a 'How To' instruction manual. "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie," from Díaz's 1996 collection *Drown*, is the most direct parody of the 'How To' manual. In it, the narrator addresses his interlocutor Yuniór – a Dominican American adolescent boy – in the second person, explaining in imperative and declarative statements what to do and say in various situations in order to 'date' (a euphemism for trying to seduce) "a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie." The title of Díaz's 2012 collection, *This Is How You Lose Her*¹⁸⁰, rephrases the 'How To,'¹⁸¹ and, as promised, each story illustrates ways boys and men lose women they care for, most often by cheating on them. Three of the stories in the later collection use a present tense, second-person address like that of "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie."¹⁸² "Miss Lora" relates the sexual relationship between a slightly older Yuniór, who now has a high school girlfriend, and a high school teacher much older than him. He loses his girlfriend and his older lover for different reasons, none of which derives directly from his infidelity. In contrast, "Alma" tells the story of how college-aged Yuniór loses Alma, the girlfriend who leaves him when she finds written proof that he has cheated on her. This pattern (cheating that is discovered by written evidence, followed by breaking up) is recurrent throughout the collection and in its final story, "The Cheater's Guide to Love,"¹⁸³ whose title explicitly parodies the instruction manual genre. This story is framed not as a series of instructions for certain situations, as in "How to Date," but rather as a narrative of forty-

¹⁸⁰ Henceforth I will abbreviate this collection's title as *This Is How*, or *TIH* in parenthetical references.

¹⁸¹ "This is how you lose her" rephrases what would be the instruction manual's title: "How To Lose Her."

¹⁸² Henceforth I will abbreviate this story's title as "How to Date."

¹⁸³ Henceforth I will abbreviate this story's title as "The Cheater's Guide."

something Yuniór's painful recovery from a broken engagement. The story begins with his fiancée's discovery of his many infidelities (discovered through email and photographic evidence), and traces his trials and heartbreak over the six years that follow.

Yuniór is a recurrent narrator, identifiable by his unique narrative voice and character, throughout Díaz's three published works of fiction: the short story collections *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*, and the 2007 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.¹⁸⁴ In the four stories I am focusing on, Yuniór is the second-person addressee and protagonist. The narrative voice speaking about and to Yuniór is coherent across these stories; in *This Is How*, the narrator is obviously Yuniór, and Yuniór also likely narrates "How to Date." Therefore all four stories tell in the second person what amounts to a first-person narrative – a classic psychological deflection in which the narrator distances himself from the events he narrates, filtering them through a 'you' whose feelings and failures he may then lay bare. This 'you' can be read as a younger version of the narrator; the implicit 'I' thus recounts his experiences, memories and mistakes in the present tense as if they are happening to, and as if he is *teaching* a younger 'you.' While it ostensibly addresses a younger, separate self in need of instruction, this technique of deflection through the second person constitutes a very intimate (if disguised) gesture of self-talk, where the narrator recounts both his successes and his anxieties, insecurities, and shame, at times in moralizing, critical tones. Though circuited through second-person, present-tense address, these four stories can be read like diaries that pose, to varying degrees, as instructional, self-help texts. In most cases, Yuniór is both narrator and narratee, both the implicit 'I' speaking and the 'you' explicitly addressed. He is a doubled, split figure whose identity complexities I will examine through trope of the Dominican stud stereotype.

'You,' of course, also implicates the reader in the lived experience of the speaker and adds another dimension to the already complicated matrix of perspectives. By playing with the second person formally, Díaz insists upon the identity questions and complications at the heart of his narratives. Who is this 'you' being spoken to, and who is the 'I' speaking? Answering these questions proves challenging when we consider the multiple layers of identity put into play here: race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, sexuality, age, and language. While Yuniór is our most

¹⁸⁴ Henceforth I will abbreviate this novel's title as *Brief Wondrous Life*, or *BWL* in parenthetical references.

obvious ‘you,’ his identity is anything but simple, not only for its unique intersectionality but also because his social influences – brothers, fathers, mothers and lovers – inhabit him; his voice and identity are not only his but integrate aspects of others into himself. When ‘you’ interpellates the reader of Díaz’s text, this reader identity is no less multiple than Yuniór’s, for Yuniór-the-narrator’s implied reader is distinct from Díaz-the-writer’s implied reader, who is again distinct from Díaz’s real readers. As I focus on Díaz’s treatment of the Dominican stud stereotype and on his play with readers and reading practices, the second person proves a particularly capacious form of address, lending itself to multiple significations and perspectives. Díaz’s formal play with the second person reflects the identity ambiguities, multiplicities and complexities that his stories provocatively instantiate in their content.

In these four stories, the figure of the Dominican stud is depicted at different ages and stages of his development. In “How to Date,” Yuniór is coming of age and anxious to learn the role of the stud; in “Miss Lora,” high school-aged Yuniór has a girlfriend, but one who refuses him sexually, so he has his first sexual relationship with an older woman. In “Alma,” college-aged Yuniór has polished his skills of seduction, become the Dominican stud, and has both a lover and a girlfriend (whom he, of course, loses). In “The Cheater’s Guide,” we see an adult man ruined by his myriad infidelities and lies and, finally, painfully contrite. I will trace the development of the Dominican stud stereotype in these four stories in the order that follows the boy’s evolution from the aspiring young adolescent stud to the confirmed adult stud. Continuing to draw from theories of performativity and performance, I will explore how identity, generally, and racial-gender stereotypes, specifically, are roles to be taught, learned and played. I will show how Díaz plays with and parodies the pedagogical form of the ‘How To’ manual to show how men teach other men to perform stereotypical, racialized roles of heterosexual masculinity. A homosocial identity imperative comes into view, wherein young Dominican American men, marginalized racially, ethnically, culturally and socio-economically in the U.S., reach for the cultural and gender role most clearly available to them, and strive to embody it with a tenacity deriving from their degree of exclusion from white American hegemony. This embodiment entails patriarchal and sexist modes of being.

In Díaz’s oeuvre, male characters succeed or fail to various degrees to perform the Dominican stud role. This stereotype involves sexual promiscuity, infidelity, dishonesty to female partners, disobedience to female figures of authority, and bodybuilding or other forms of

athleticism; it entails recognizable machismo and misogyny, framed by a certain brand of Dominican masculinity. Díaz describes the expectations of masculinity to which his characters respond:

we're told that the sort of proof and excellence of a man is measured by how many girls he can get, by his lack of vulnerability, by his indifference and often his hostility towards what would be considered traditional women's arenas: domesticity, love, familial bonds, nurturing, family.¹⁸⁵

Indeed, prevailing definitions of masculinity and virility entail: 1) the rejection of femininity, which is itself characterized by the absence of the phallus; 2) the traits of power, success, wealth, and social status; 3) emotional control; and 4) attitudes of daring and aggression.¹⁸⁶ Though Díaz's male characters exhibit variations on the type, this constellation of features is fairly consistent across Díaz's oeuvre, where this logic of the stud predominates. In my analysis, I will consider masculinity as "homosocial enactment and approval" (following Kimmel)¹⁸⁷ that connects to homophobia and "homosexual panic" (following Sedgwick).¹⁸⁸ I will also consider masculinity as a process of gendered competition in which men try to dominate one another and perform "a multiplicity of situational masculine identities" (following De Moya).¹⁸⁹

The dominant stud type has a subordinate countertype and foil: the Dominican nerd, who has internalized the stud's criteria for masculinity but feels he fails to embody them and exhibits anxiety about this failure. Oscar from *Brief Wondrous Life* is the most striking case of the Dominican nerd in Díaz's oeuvre, though this type appears in more attenuated form elsewhere, sometimes mixed with that of the stud. Indeed, the mature Yuniór we see in "The Cheater's Guide" is a university professor and writer – rather nerdy activities for which Yuniór compensates by also playing the sporty, sexually successful stud who speaks in a hip, slang-heavy voice. This unique, attractive narrative and dialogic voice is Díaz's trademark, transmitted via his favorite narrator Yuniór who recurs with variations throughout his oeuvre. Díaz's Yuniórs are often intriguing combinations of seemingly dissonant characteristics: machismo and

¹⁸⁵ Díaz, "Fifteen Questions."

¹⁸⁶ Brannon, "Male Sex Role," quoted in Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia," 125.

¹⁸⁷ Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia," 129.

¹⁸⁸ Sedgwick, "Toward the Gothic," 89.

¹⁸⁹ De Moya, "Masculinity in the Dominican Republic," 98.

sensitivity, beefy bodybuilding and cerebral intellectualism, coolness and nerdiness, sexual success and sexual anxiety. An anxiety about successfully performing the role of the Dominican stud and thereby deflecting charges of nerdiness/effeminacy/homosexuality is visible in multiple characters: in the ‘student’ addressee who receives instruction in “How to Date”; in the ‘teacher’ narrator of that text who, in order to issue advice, has necessarily experienced the same situations, anxieties and frustrations; in the Yuniors we see in “Miss Lora,” whose frustration and powerlessness in the face of his girlfriend’s sexual refusals are apparent. Once the young man has passed a certain stage in assimilating the role, we no longer see visible anxiety, though we do see the negative consequences his infidelities have on his relationships and well-being: the sexually confident and unfaithful Yuniors in “Alma” and “The Cheater’s Guide” lose women they love and suffer from the consequences of their actions – actions dictated by their adherence to the Dominican stud stereotype.

For Díaz’s male protagonists, the norms of heterosexual male behavior they emulate are inseparable from their racial, ethnic and cultural identities. Once again, we cannot speak about gender and sex without speaking about race, ethnicity and culture (and vice versa). The instantiations of Dominicaness and Dominican Americanness we see in Díaz’s work engage with race and ethnicity, and with notions of brownness, blackness, whiteness and mixity. In urban and suburban sites of the northeast United States where his narratives take place, Díaz’s characters negotiate their own hybrid racial and ethnic identities as well as others’ variable interpretations of these identities. His male protagonists also categorize female love interests on racial and ethnic bases, using these features to classify girls’ and women’s sexual appeal and availability. Racial designations, framed in terms of skin color, and ethnic designations, framed in terms of national and cultural background, intertwine in Díaz’s characterization; in parallel to this, multiple cultural and linguistic influences animate Díaz’s narrative voices. I read both Díaz’s characterizations and narrative voices as performances of racial, ethnic and cultural identities that interact in complex ways. Blackness, brownness, whiteness, Dominicaness, Latino-ness and African Americanness are at once features of Díaz’s characters’ identities and audible sonorities in his narrative voices. These narrative voices use Spanish language terms, Dominican and African American vernaculars, rhythms that manifest a hip hop aesthetic, spoken (rather than written) tones of voice, and second-person, informal registers, alongside academic

registers and more traditional literary tones. These features of Díaz's idiosyncratic narrative voice mirror aurally the layered cultural, linguistic, racial and ethnic identities of his characters.

These four second-person stories participate to varying degrees in Díaz's parody of the 'How To' genre. "How to Date" does so explicitly in both form and title, while "The Cheater's Guide to Love" does so by title alone. "Alma" ends with the line "This is how you lose her," from which the collection's instructive title is taken. "Miss Lora" engages more subtly with the 'How To' genre but nonetheless explores ironic and non-ironic relationships of instruction. Miss Lora, a high school teacher, is the "profesora,"¹⁹⁰ but Yuniór's brother Rafa is his real teacher in this tale of sexual initiation. Finally, all of the stories in *This Is How You Lose Her* are framed by the 'How To' implied in the collection's title. This is of course instruction no one would want, except as an example of what not to do, and therefore mobilizes the 'How To' genre through irony. Díaz's earlier "How to Date" story, though not without moments of irony, nonetheless offers instruction that may be useful. Like Laferrière's *Comment faire l'amour*, these stories explore identities and stereotypes as things taught and learned, and depict instances of both deliberate and unintentional identity pedagogy and performance. As in certain examples we considered in Laferrière's text, "How to Date" involves the explicit *teaching* of a stereotype – the Dominican stud, though it is never named as such. This 'lesson' is passed from one man to another for the purpose of dating and seducing a woman. Unlike the 'Do It Yourself,' 'How To,' *Idiot's Guide* and other self-help texts that are ostensibly raceless but typically presume a white position and audience by default, Díaz's texts draw out the entwined racial, ethnic, cultural and socio-economic dimensions of his characters' positions and the ways these direct the skills they seek to acquire – skills of studliness demanded by the Dominican stud role, the only role these boys see as available to and required of them.

The three stories I focus on in *This Is How You Lose Her* are less explicitly didactic than "How to Date" (though that story is of course a parody of a didactic text). However, individually and together, they model a consistent Dominican stud stereotype and ideal. In most cases, older, more experienced men teach or show younger men how to behave – how to *perform a role* – in order to attain their romantic or, more often, sexual objectives. In "Alma," Yuniór quips about

¹⁹⁰ Díaz, *This is How*, 155. Subsequent citations from this text will be cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *TIH*.

sexual lessons he missed “during boy training” (*TIH* 46). In “Miss Lora,” Yuniór recalls his father’s and brother’s cheating as he (guiltily) follows their example. In “The Cheater’s Guide,” Yuniór blames his father and the patriarchy for his cheating ways. At various moments in his developmental trajectory, Yuniór pleads both a genetic and cultural predisposition for infidelity in order to justify doing something he knows he shouldn’t. We witness his discomfort about this role at different stages. The aspiring stud in “How to Date” is uncomfortable because the role he is expected and trying to learn does not come naturally or feel like an organic, authentic expression of the self. In “Miss Lora,” the newly minted stud struggles with the dissonance between his personal code of ethics and his unfaithful behavior. In “Alma” and “The Cheater’s Guide,” adult Yuniór has so mastered the stud role that it feels natural and proves difficult to control; losing his fiancée forces him to confront the consequences of his infidelities and to face himself in a deeper way. The younger stud tries to be someone he wants to be but feels he isn’t, while the older stud, having become that someone, feels guilty for doing the things he does. We witness the stud’s inner turmoil at all stages of development as he negotiates conflicting social pressures, mores, and values. In these stories, we see various manifestations of internal tension, anxiety, shame, guilt and loss that derive from striving for and/or attaining the Dominican stud ideal. Díaz shows how men are trapped in this restrictive type that hurts both men and women. Yuniór learns to fully embody the Dominican stud stereotype, and in turn, it causes his downfall: at the end of *This Is How*, Yuniór has hit bottom and only begins to imagine a new kind of self, without dishonesty and infidelity. In the first two stories I analyze, I will focus on the ways norms of masculinity hurt Yuniór; in the last two stories I analyze, I will focus on how Yuniór, once he embodies those norms, hurts women.

One can read Yuniór’s downfall as evidence of Díaz’s critique of the stud stereotype and its misogynistic values. His characters, though ostensibly heedless, macho womanizers, are in fact distraught with self-doubt and guilt – the opposite of the over-confident façade they project. With sensitivity and subtlety, Díaz unveils the insecurities hidden beneath the stud’s tough exterior, thus revealing the deeper psychological fallout that results from such relentless posturing. Furthermore, Díaz points to the complex of social circumstances that lead his protagonists to pursue such an ideal. We come to understand the magnitude of the conflicting pressures and multiple exclusions his young male protagonists face as they mature in the United States, and how the stud role serves a deeper existential function: it is a mechanism of social

belonging and a means to social acceptance in one's cultural community of men, a community multiply excluded from prevailing forms of belonging in the United States. Tracing the trajectory of the stud's development, we witness how his adolescent need for acceptance drives his adoption of the stud type, how he perfects the role with guidance from older male mentors, and how these primarily *social* (as opposed to sexual) motives give way to other concerns when the stud reaches maturity. Mature masculinity, as Díaz constructs it here, involves an emerging identification with women, increased capacities for empathy, and a growing self-awareness; the latter is transmitted through the second-person narration an older Yuniór offers to a younger version of himself he addresses as 'you.' Mature Yuniór, the quintessential stud, ultimately renounces the stud's ways in the collection's final two pages; therein one might find Díaz's critique of the Dominican stud type, and in particular of the stud's misogyny. I call this the first-degree reading. However, one can also read Yuniór the stud *not* as a subtle critique of the stereotype, but rather as a reinforcement of the stud's misogyny; I advance this second-degree reading.

Outside of his fiction, Díaz's political agenda is clear. He is a vocal critic of racism, sexism, white privilege, male privilege, patriarchy and heteronormativity. He calls himself "a feminist ally"¹⁹¹ and, in interviews and public appearances, repeatedly critiques these social problems.¹⁹² He says, "Most of us are socialized to never imagine women as fully human. Male privilege in all our societies is predicated and facilitated by this very blind spot."¹⁹³ He claims that *This Is How* is an effort to represent, but not endorse, the sexism that pervades our culture. He cites James Baldwin to justify his representation of the Dominican stud's sexist ideology: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."¹⁹⁴ Despite the clearly critical tenor of Díaz's public politics, his fictional representation of sexism is much more ambiguous, for it can often appear celebratory, or otherwise neutral, but rarely clearly critical. Like Rosello argues that there is no neutral invocation of a stereotype, I will

¹⁹¹ Díaz, "Fifteen Questions."

¹⁹² The interviews I cite in this chapter attest to Díaz's leftist politics. In particular, see Díaz, "Search for Decolonial Love;" Díaz, "Fiction is;" and Díaz, "Fifteen Questions."

¹⁹³ Díaz, "Sunday Rumpus Interview."

¹⁹⁴ Fassler, "How Junot Díaz."

argue that there is no such thing as a neutral representation of a dominant mode of oppression; any non-critical representation therefore serves to reinforce it.

The ambiguity in Díaz's work is amplified by the deliberate subtlety with which he seeks to treat politics in his fiction: "I have an agenda to write politics without letting the reader think it is political. That's my game plan for every story."¹⁹⁵ Díaz sometimes plays the trickster (as his narrator Yuniors often does, though their trickeries are distinct). Díaz here admits to tricking the reader about the masked politics of his fiction. I argue that Díaz's text not only obscures the progressive politics he professes to advance but ultimately reinforces sexism, male privilege and heteronormativity. While his critiques of racism and white privilege are more evident and more successful, the gender politics advanced in *This Is How* are deeply ambivalent. In its literary subtlety and its savvy targeting of multiple readerships, the text can be easily be read *with*, rather than against, the grain of hegemonic gendered power relationships. Furthermore, it encourages the reader's complicity in Yuniors's sexism. I have argued that Laferrière's subversive deployment of the *Nègre* can easily be co-opted by a market hungry for stereotypical tales of black male hypersexuality. While that is also the case for Díaz's deployment of the Dominican stud stereotype, we do not see clearly in Díaz's intervention the critique or subversion of stereotype we find in Laferrière. Furthermore, both studs' sexist values are given ample space in the texts.

The author's own words about his fiction are always useful tools to guide its reading; however, art by definition invites multiple interpretations, and real readers read Díaz's fiction in many different ways. A minority of readers bother to read or listen to interviews with the writer himself; therefore a majority of readers read his fiction 'straight,' without outside instruction, and the subtle critique Díaz claims to make might well be lost on readers who do not know to look for it. In an interview, Díaz describes *This Is How* as a book about "love and consequences," and "the rise and fall of a Dominican male slut."¹⁹⁶ 'Slut' certainly carries a more negative connotation than 'stud,' the term I have elected to use for its celebratory tone and its association with hypermasculinity, for I find both of these corroborated in Díaz's fictional

¹⁹⁵ Díaz, "Fiction is," 901.

¹⁹⁶ Díaz, "Fifteen Questions."

treatment of the figure. Neither term figures in English in the text, though the Spanish word *sucio*,¹⁹⁷ which has a decidedly negative connotation, does.

The collection's first story, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," opens by announcing the Dominican stud stereotype and the dissonance between adult Yuniór's forgiving view of himself and his girlfriend's unforgiving view of him – as a *sucio*:

I'm not a bad guy. I know how that sounds – defensive, unscrupulous – but it's true. I'm like everybody else: weak, full of mistakes, but basically good. Magdalena disagrees, though. She considers me a typical Dominican man: a *sucio*, an asshole. See, many months ago, when Magda was still my girl, [...] I cheated on her with this chick who had tons of eighties free-style hair. Didn't tell Magda about it, either. You know how it is. A smelly bone like that, better off buried in the backyard of your life. Magda only found out because homegirl wrote her a fucking *letter*. And the letter had *details*. Shit you wouldn't even tell your boys drunk. (*TIH* 3)

This starting point is important to frame Díaz's treatment of the "typical Dominican man" throughout the collection: his chronic cheating behavior and dishonesty about it, women's judgments of him, his appeal to the reader's understanding ("You know how it is") and his self-aware defenses of his own character ("I'm not a bad guy"). The stereotype is presented from the very first at the crossroads of women's critiques and Yuniór's own excuses. As readers addressed directly here as 'you' and addressed elsewhere in Yuniór's second-person narration, we are encouraged to identify and sympathize with Yuniór's position. The details "you wouldn't even tell your boys drunk" set up the 'boys club' atmosphere of the collection, where the heterosexual male perspective, its desires and pleasures, are assumed to be shared by the reader. Yuniór's unique, attractive, clever narrative voice makes him likable and makes his tale pleasurable to read. What's more, we see Yuniór's suffering at various stages of his development; his pain likewise encourages the reader's sympathy. Indeed, Díaz consistently depicts the Dominican stud in a sympathetic manner, even when he says and does horrible things. This sympathetic depiction calls into question the critique of the male privilege, sexism, patriarchy and heteronormativity that author Díaz *claims* to make. As Yuniór does here at the beginning of *This Is How*, Díaz seems to explain and excuse in his public discourse the

¹⁹⁷ 'dirty' slut; asshole; womanizer

politically problematic aspects of his fiction.¹⁹⁸ Among a number of doublings my analysis reveals, I will consider Yuniór and Díaz as doubles and foils: twins and opposites. We might consider Yuniór's sexism, misogyny and selective racism as revelatory of these prejudices within ourselves, for all of us socialized within a white- and male-dominant society have necessarily integrated these value systems into ourselves, even if they harm us, even if we disagree. Díaz alludes to this unavoidable internalization: "I think that men are not cured of the misogyny that patriarchy builds into us – we only manage it."¹⁹⁹ I argue that these oppressive politics are reproduced, possibly even condoned by his narrative. The author may 'manage' his own inherent misogyny (again, a misogyny inherent in all of us) by giving it artistic form in the fictional character Yuniór; the trouble is Yuniór's attractive narration and the 'lesson' he teaches readers: that it is acceptable and forgivable to treat women as he does. Díaz's personal artistic process should be distinguished from the political intervention his art makes – the political lessons it teaches readers.

We might read Díaz's narrative of Yuniór as condoning the Dominican stud stereotype, because Yuniór is a likeable, attractive fellow, both for the women he seduces and for the readers he narrates his story to. As I have shown with respect to Laferrière, readers and women can be aligned as receivers of the stud-narrator's seductive prose and clever machinations. Yuniór is seductive for many reasons: 1) his unique, hip narrative voice and clever, funny remarks make him likeable; 2) his first- and second-person narration draws the reader into identifying with his position, rather than critiquing it; 3) Díaz's attention to the large-scale social and cultural pressures Dominican men manage, and his sympathetic portrayal of Yuniór's suffering once he has lost his fiancée make the reader sympathize with Yuniór's position and forgive his bad behavior. All of these factors make Yuniór attractive and forgivable. Finally, Yuniór's sexual exploits are often described in celebratory tones. These 'boys club' moments seem to celebrate the stud stereotype rather than critique it. These four reasons point to a second reading of Díaz's

¹⁹⁸ In one such instance, Díaz echoes Yuniór's sentiment at the start of *TIH* quite closely: "Art has a way of confronting us, of reminding us, of engaging us, in what it means to be human, and what it means to be human is to be flawed, is to be contradictory, is to be often weak, and yet despite all of these what we would consider drawbacks, that we're also quite beautiful." See Díaz, "Author Explains."

¹⁹⁹ Hoby, "In Praise of Older Women."

stud that moves counter to the first: instead of critiquing the stud and critiquing the social conditions that compel men to adopt this role, Díaz may ultimately condone the stud stereotype by excusing Yunior's behavior and making the reader like him. And condoning the stud stereotype problematically entails condoning sexism and misogyny.

In both of these contradictory readings of Díaz's treatment of the stud stereotype, Díaz confirms that the social stereotype exists. Yunior is a Dominican stud in accordance with the stereotype; Díaz's representation thus illustrates that the stereotype exists in reality (via Díaz's fictional portrayal of reality). Whether Díaz critiques or endorses his stud-narrator's values in that fictional portrayal is up for debate, but the Dominican stud as valid human category is not questioned here. This is in sharp contrast to Laferrière's treatment of the *Nègre*, for Laferrière offers an obviously overblown, ironic exaggeration of the black stud stereotype that ultimately serves to undermine it. Here I distinguish the *social* stereotype – the category of people we are familiar with – from the *literary* stereotype – the fictional character who is flat, undeveloped and whose interiority we never access – following Richard Dyer's criteria (explored in Part One). Both writers, in their treatment of their respective stud characters, offer fully developed novelistic characters that evolve over the course of their texts. By dint of their complexity, interiority and development, these characters exit the realm of literary stereotype. I have argued that this complex characterization is one way Laferrière de-stereotypes the *Nègre*; he also undermines the *social* stereotype by showing its historical production and its status as construct rather than human category. While Díaz follows Laferrière in making Yunior a developed literary character rather than a literary stereotype, Díaz maintains the validity of the social stereotype as an existing social category and as an ideal that men strive for. He does not seek, as Laferrière clearly does, to show the stereotype's absurdity by exaggerating and therefore subverting it. Instead, Díaz represents the stud's experience from the inside, through first- and second-person narration, revealing the character's complexity while confirming his existence both inside and outside the fictional world. This validation of the Dominican stud as social stereotype is my starting point here, as I trace what Díaz does with this stereotype: critique it, reinforce it, or something else. My analysis will then move to the aspects of the stereotype's value system that I find most problematic, and trace what Díaz does with the Dominican stud's sexism and gendered racism.

In the following discussion, I will examine the complexities of Díaz's characterization and representation of Yuniór, the Dominican stud. I will trace how features of complex, fluid identities interact, and how static, simplistic stereotypes attempt to harness complexities and to reckon with contradictions. Though a focused exploration of the Dominican stud stereotype as a role taught, learned, performed and integrated into the self, I will unveil the social circumstances surrounding the type and the social functions it serves. Using José Esteban Muñoz's theory of brownness as downness and Freud's notion of melancholia, I will consider the negative affect Díaz's protagonists manifest in light of their marginal positions and their shaky relationships with male role models. Then, using Gérard Genette's notion of metalepsis, I will examine Díaz's blurring of narrative frames, of literary genres and of author-narrator identities. I will explore a number of doublings, substitutions and foils through the trope of the mask, a prominent trope in African and African diasporic literature. I connect the mask of machismo to the threat of emasculation Díaz's male characters endure; I will also consider Yuniór as a mask Díaz hides behind. In the first two stories I analyze here, I see Díaz offering a justified sympathetic depiction of the young Dominican stud-in-training; in the last two stories I analyze, I find his continued sympathetic depiction unjustified and indicative of a masked vindication of the stud, its misogyny and sexism. I will return throughout Part Two to Díaz's narrative voice – its bilingualism, its multiple literary and cultural registers, its use of the second person – considering these as formal techniques that mirror the multiple layers of self, experience and awareness we see in Díaz's characters. Within this narrative voice also lies Díaz's play with the reader, with multiple readerships and with reading practices. Using Linda Hutcheon's work on the postmodern, I find his intervention critical but complicit, internally contradictory and self-undermining. As Díaz plays with misogyny through his narrator Yuniór, he also uses ambiguity, contradiction, irony and inversion to play with the reader's prejudices, rendering the reader complicit in Yuniór's misogyny at the same time that he professes to critique it.

12 “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl or Halfie”: the Dominican Stud's Identity

12.1 Ethnicity, Race, Culture, Class, Gender and Sexuality

“How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl or Halfie” addresses a reader in the second person with a series of instructions of things to do and things to avoid in a variety of

dating scenarios. The reader or addressee is Yunior; as we will see shortly, the narrator may also be Yunior. The story is a mere seven pages and parodies the ‘How To’ instruction manual genre in its title and content more directly than the other stories we will consider. Although the story’s form respects the conventions of short prose – it is not structured visually or textually the way instruction manuals are –, its second-person form of address uses imperative, conditional and future tense statements to transmit instruction to its reader. The story details approaches, strategies, and techniques for various situations that might arise for the Dominican American teenage male dater whom it addresses, framing these as “If ..., then ...” conditional statements or instructions phrased in the imperative form or the future tense. Here is one example:

If the girl’s from around the way, take her to El Cibao for dinner. Order everything in your busted-up Spanish. Let her correct you if she’s a Latina and amaze her if she’s black. If she’s not from around the way, Wendy’s will do. (*Drown* 145)

The narrator instructs his interlocutor in strategies of studliness, which shift according to the kind of girl being pursued.

This story catalogues racial and ethnic stereotypes of adolescent females and purports to explain how these different types behave in a dating context. As with Laferrière’s *Nègre* and *Blanche*, Díaz’s girls are generalized types, not individuals, and their behaviors and attitudes are predictable based on their identity alone. Their unique personalities are never explored; when they speak, they speak only as representatives of their type. In this simplistic, “if *x*, then *y*” system, a single, salient trait – brownness, Latina-ness, residence in Yunior’s London Terrace neighborhood or outside it – is shown to compress much more information than the trait alone signifies, thus showing the process of stereotyping at work. A London Terrace girl does not just live nearby; she is also likely of similar racial, ethnic and socio-economic background, shares in the micro-culture of the neighborhood, understands certain references and has certain expectations. Díaz’s economical story captures the economy of stereotyping processes, where a Latina is understood as many things in excess of, but based solely on, her Latina-ness. The compound nouns “Brown girl,” “Black girl,” and “White girl” indicate stereotypes: finite, internally consistent, reproducible entities taken to behave in predictable ways, and thus functional units in the speaker’s dating system. In *This Is How*, we see Díaz play with other

female stereotypes, each an anonymous representative of her category (e.g., the “open-minded blanquita”²⁰⁰ (TIH 175), the “morena”²⁰¹ (TIH 189), and the “good Dominican girl” (TIH 182)). These stereotypes interact with the principal stereotype under examination here: the Dominican stud, ever present as narrator or narrator’s foil in Díaz’s oeuvre. While “How to Date” announces a number of female stereotypes in its title, my focus is on the unnamed male stereotype who applies these stereotypes to girls he pursues. As in *Comment faire l’amour*, the central male stereotype operates in relation to the female stereotypes he has relationships with.

Our silent, second-person protagonist Yuniór is a stud-in-training, and our first-person narrator his instructor in studliness. Yuniór must learn how a boy must act in order to get the girl he wants into bed; the stud identity he strives for demands this sexual success. It is an act indeed, as the behavioral formulas the narrator offers are scripted performances designed to cast the suitor in a positive light. Social roles are always contingent, operating in relation to one another. Yuniór’s identity is, like all identities, internally contradictory and fluid, shifting in relation to the girls he likes and to his male peers; and particularly at this stage of adolescence, his identity is still evolving. Other people’s expectations – which place pressure on the self – dictate how he behaves, what he desires, and who he seeks to be. Our dating apprentice therefore learns to play a number of roles for the different girls he pursues, and these performances hinge on expectations he *thinks* the girls have. He plays the empathetic listener to the “halfie” who says black people are mean to her; he plays the romantic who appreciates sunsets, because he thinks girls like that; he plays the aloof dude who refuses the girl’s phone calls once he has gotten what he wants from her. In addition to these different character roles, he also plays different ethnic roles to suit different situations. He defines himself as Dominican – a qualifier treated with both positive and negative associations in the text. The value or meaning of his Dominicanness varies with the identities of his interlocutors. For example, his broken Spanish (in fact, a consequence of his Dominican *Americanness*) is the source of embarrassment when he is with a Latina, but a source of pride with the non-Spanish-speaking blackgirl. With the halfie, he is ashamed of his “Afro” hair and performs whiteness gesturally in order to reassure her white mom: “Run a hand through you hair like the whiteboys do” (*Drown* 145). Teacher shows student how to draw out or

²⁰⁰ white girl

²⁰¹ brown or black girl. This term’s meaning will be discussed further below.

hide various aspects of his self in different situations. He moves among different, at times contradictory roles, some of which come naturally, some of which require effort and instruction. In this story, the Dominican stud role entails deliberate performances, taught and learned, modeled and imitated. It is not yet a role the protagonist feels to be natural, authentic, and readily emerging. Indeed, we can observe a process of role internalization progressively through the four stories examined here. During the learning phase, role-playing is explicit, effortful and uneasy, and Yuniór's insecurity and anxiety are apparent: Will he play his cards right to get the girl? Will he pull off the poses of whiteboy, competent Spanish speaker, and empathetic charmer as he should?

The narrative opens with Yuniór's brother and mother leaving him home alone as they go off to visit a relative. He has lied, claiming illness, in order to have the house to himself and receive a female visitor. His mother leaves in disgust, calling him a "malcriado" (*Drown* 143), meaning someone ill-mannered and ill-bred. Breeding and descent are present in Díaz's oeuvre, not only in the themes of race and ethnicity, but also in his treatment of masculinity. Dominican masculinity and the stud stereotype, with its misogyny, its lying and its cheating, are treated as products of patrilineal descent. We normally think of descent as an automatic inheritance, yet these roles are composed of learned behaviors and attitudes. While his characters treat behaviors associated with masculinity as genetic, Díaz, in contrast, highlights the learned and performed dimensions of all identity embodiments. Furthermore, by making breeding and good manners purely patrilineal, a mother (presumably responsible for half of her son's breeding and half of his poor manners) insults her son via his absent father, absent from this scene and this insult, and similarly absent from their lives. She calls her son ill-bred but is not insulting herself, her own genetic inheritance or her own skills at parenting. Instead, her son is now a man-in-training following in his father's footsteps: lying, womanizing, and disobeying female authority. Here, a mother absolves herself of any responsibility in the development or reinforcement of this role, and assigns blame along exclusive, gendered lines: men teach men to mistreat and mislead women; even mothers who are heads of households plead powerlessness in the face of such coercive social forces. The adolescent boy is in the process of separating from his mother and identifying with male role models, and his mother reinforces this gendered realignment here. Opening the narrative with Yuniór's dishonesty and a female voice of reproach sets the scene for

repetitions of both that will follow in later stories, and begins to sketch the social and behavioral contours of the Dominican stud stereotype.

Once mother and brother leave, the narrator instructs his protégé in how to make the house presentable for a female guest. The house's presentability is tied to the boy's desirability: if he can successfully display the house in such a way as to imply a higher class existence than his family actually enjoys, he is more likely to be sexually successful with girls he likes. Even boys in early adolescence have understood how a man's class position can determine his sexual desirability. Neighborhood signals socioeconomic class, and their poverty proves an obstacle for girls from other neighborhoods, whose parents protest: "Neither of them want her seeing any boys from the Terrace – people get stabbed in the Terrace" (*Drown* 144). Homes and neighborhoods are metonymic reflections of the boys themselves, who seek to compensate by disguising their poverty and other sources of embarrassment.

The speaker explains just how to present the house and thereby perform non-poverty for different female visitors:

Clear the government cheese from the refrigerator. If the girl's from the Terrace, stack the boxes behind the milk. If she's from the Park or Society Hill hide the cheese in the cabinet above the oven, way up where she'll never see. [...] Take down any embarrassing photos of your family in the campo, especially the one with the half-naked kids dragging a goat on a rope leash. The kids are your cousins and by now they're old enough to understand why you're doing what you're doing. Hide the pictures of yourself with an Afro. Make sure the bathroom is presentable. Put the basket with all the crapped-on toilet paper under the sink. (*Drown* 143-4)

Cheese bought with food stamps, poor relatives in the Dominican countryside, and bathroom habits carried over from places with poor plumbing are signs of poverty past and present that the protagonist must mask. So, too, is his "Afro" hair.²⁰² African descent, then, is concomitant with poverty in the boy's community; and both are sources of embarrassment to be hidden. Blackness and poverty should be disguised, while whiteness and middle-class status should be simulated, since both are resources for social mobility. This conflation of socio-economic status (poverty) with race (blackness) aligns our Dominican-born immigrant's position with that of working-class

²⁰² Ginetta Candelario notes: "For Dominicans, hair is the principal bodily signifier of race." Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears*, 223.

African Americans, although Díaz also signals the distance between these two positions (half-naked kids with a goat in the *campo*).²⁰³ These connections and distinctions are reinforced linguistically through the boys' use of African American vernacular and Spanish-language Dominican vernacular terms. I will return to this issue below.

The boy's efforts to disguise both his poverty and his African descent reveal the assumptions he expects girls to make based on these factors; he in turn makes assumptions about them based on similar criteria. The social world he inhabits is one where signs and symbols reflect powerfully on one's sense of self and influence one's relationships. He maneuvers to disguise his family's poverty in both the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, and to hide signs of his family's Dominican *campesino* habits; these obfuscations are a means of visible (if fabricated) social mobility and ways of "approximating the habitus of the white bourgeois body," as Sara Ahmed phrases it. In her definition, whiteness is "invisible and unmarked, [...] the absent centre against which others appear only as deviants, or points of deviation."²⁰⁴ To be brown or black (Díaz's protagonists' identities are ambiguous – one or the other, both of these or between) is to be raced, rendered deviant, and excluded from the hegemonic category. Whiteness is therefore

closely related to the vertical promise of class mobility: you can move up only by approximating the habitus of the white bourgeois body [...]. Moving up requires inhabiting such a body, or at least approximating its style, whilst your capacity to inhabit such a body depends upon what is behind you.²⁰⁵

Yunior has understood that whiteness is a form of cultural capital and he approximates not only the gestures and habits of the white body but also its habitation. The lengths to which he goes vary according to the distance between his and his visitor's socioeconomic statuses. Government cheese is more a source of shame, and should be hidden more carefully, with outsiders than with neighborhood girls of similar socioeconomic standing. Class, ethnicity and race intersect here as

²⁰³ Candelario writes: "hair is fundamental to Dominican identity displays and discourses: it marks the boundaries between Dominicans and Haitians and, in New York, Dominicans and African Americans." Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears*, 261

²⁰⁴ Ahmed, "Phenomenology," 157.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 159-160.

constitutive of immigrant Dominican Americanness; these factors are to be disguised in the service of the Dominican masculinity the stud strives to achieve.

The boy exploits the fluidity and performability of his identity, yet ironically, the Dominican stud role he strives for is a stereotype – a predetermined, simplistic and static category. To act the stud, he must perform various other stereotypes: the whiteboy, the empathetic charmer, the macho, etc. Now, and later when he has become the stud, he will never *feel* himself to be a stereotype; indeed, no one ever does, and no one ever truly is. Any stereotype is an externally-imposed category and a label assigned by others – a label I am assigning Yuniór in later stories. I read him in this story as the Dominican stud-in-training, and later as the Dominican stud stereotype achieved. I wish to stress here that I do so *at Díaz's invitation*. Díaz's depiction of Yuniór, which I am tracing here, clearly sketches the contours of the social stereotype we are all familiar with; at the same time, by fictional devices, Díaz characterizes Yuniór as a fully developed literary character, rather than a literary stereotype.²⁰⁶ To sum up, Yuniór as a human being (albeit fictional) is not a stereotype, because no human being is only a stereotype; and Yuniór as a fictional character is not a stereotype in this story, because he has not yet mastered the stud role, and even when he has done so later on, he is not a *literary* stereotype, because Díaz develops his character beyond the stereotype. The role he ultimately achieves is that of a *social* stereotype, whose validity as extant social category Díaz confirms in his depiction of Yuniór's development into the role. Yuniór will never see himself as a stereotype, but the role he strives for and achieves is a social stereotype that Díaz's depiction confirms.

Here we come upon the paradox inherent in stereotype (one that Bhabha identifies²⁰⁷): a stereotype is a false, static representation that must be ceaselessly repeated; and by virtue of its

²⁰⁶ We recall from Part One Richard Dyer's distinction between novelistic stereotypes and novelistic characters: stereotypes are "a mode of characterization in fiction [...] constructed through the use of a few immediately recognizable and defining traits, which do not change or 'develop' through the course of the narrative and which point to general, recurrent features of the human world [...]. The opposite of the type is the novelistic character, defined by a multiplicity of traits that are only gradually revealed to us through the course of the narrative, a narrative which is hinged on the growth and development of the character and is thus centred upon the latter in her or his unique individuality [...]." See Dyer, "The Role of Stereotypes," 13.

²⁰⁷ In "The Other Question," Bhabha identifies the paradoxical nature of fixity in colonial discourse, and in this discourse's stereotypes of otherness: "Fixity, as a sign of

repetition and stereotyped subjects' performance of it, it comes to hold an uncomfortable grain of truth. It becomes self-fulfilling, even as it must be endlessly reinforced. While Bhabha examines the way colonial powers impose stereotypes on others and the way the colonized mimic stereotypes ambivalently, I am examining Díaz's deployment of stereotype from a different angle: as an anti-colonial writer who plays ambivalently with stereotypes imposed on and recirculated within his community. Yuniór is here anxiously repeating and ceaselessly performing the identity stereotype a patriarchal society has taught him to value. As a young man, he fails to properly perform the Dominican stud role; in Bhabha's terms, he is resistant to the norm, but in Díaz's representation, this is despite Yuniór's best efforts to the contrary. As an older man, however, Yuniór comes to fulfill the stereotype quite completely, thus confirming it despite its inherent falsity; he is not resistant to the norm until his final epiphany. We watch Yuniór grow into the stereotype and then turn away from it.

A second level of irony operates here in the contrast between Yuniór's view of his own fluid identity, and his view of girls' stereotypicality. Yuniór fluidly and deliberately performs certain roles at the same time that he pigeon-holes girls into static stereotypical categories. The gendered and racialized other is fixed and predetermined, while the self is fluid and the product of performative choices:

The white girls are the ones you want the most, aren't they, but usually the out-of-towners are black, blackgirls who grew up with ballet and Girl Scouts, who have three cars in their driveways.²⁰⁸ If she's a halfie don't be surprised

cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy, and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated. [...] [I]t is the force of ambivalence that gives the stereotype its currency [...]" Bhabha, "The Other Question," 75.

²⁰⁸ This reference to wealthy out-of-town blackgirls does not invalidate the connection I draw between blackness and poverty, a connection reinforced elsewhere in Díaz's work. In this and others of Díaz's stories, camaraderie and community operate primarily along gendered lines. Wealthy out-of-town blackgirls have little in common with the protagonist. These Dominican boys sound and look *something* like African American boys – the halfie's gloss between "You and the black boys" in this story, and the police's racial profiling in "The Cheater's Guide"

that her mother is white. Say, Hi. Her moms will say hi and you'll see that you don't scare her, not really. (*Drown* 145)

Racial stereotypes are flagrant in this passage, revealing the stakes and risks of cross-racial romantic liaisons: whitegirls are desirable because they are easy, blackgirls are rich, and halfies have paranoid white moms who are afraid of Dominican boys. The teacher figure details potential obstacles the boy may encounter with different racialized girls – the blackgirls' wealth, the halfie's mom's whiteness – so that he can adapt his performance accordingly. The boy has the agency to choose different modes of behavior, to perform different selves, but the girls (as he sees them – as stereotypes) do not. This is but the first of many gendered double standards we will witness in these stories.

His performance of whiteness supports the cool, composed stud role he seeks to present. When the halfie's mom wishes to meet Yuniór, his teacher advises: "Don't panic. Say, Hey, no problem. Run a hand through your hair like the whiteboys do even though the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa" (*Drown* 145). "Run your hand through your hair" calls for a gesture of nonchalance, although the boy clearly feels the opposite: "Don't panic." He adopts a gesture of whiteness, knowing that this is disingenuous: "even though the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa." Here, the verb "run" feigns composure and confidence; it also signals inherited traits that run in a family and are the source of shame and insecurity. The implication here is that Yuniór can run his hand through his hair and try to run away from his inheritance, but it is always in him and ultimately impossible to escape. This line suggests a hierarchy in the layers of his identity: Africanness as it is treated here is real and inevitable, while whiteness must be feigned. Not all performances are created equal, even if one can learn to perform more effortlessly with time. While certain performances are challenging here, they become easier, even automatic, for the older stud we see in other stories. Then they feel natural, like a part of the self rather than an act. Díaz illustrates this process of role integration and this transition from deliberate performance to unconscious performative embodiment.

confirm this connection, without suggesting an equivalence between these two identity categories and experiences.

Alongside the different identity roles Yuniór performs *deliberately* to achieve certain goals, the Dominican stud is a role he strives to embody *sincerely and authentically*, even if it does not always feel natural. He has learned what Dominican masculinity is and, both wittingly and unwittingly, adopts its characteristics. When Yuniór strives for certain roles and avoids others, the underlying feeling is that whoever he *truly* is is not right: he is either too poor, or not smooth enough, too black, or not Spanish enough. He is trying to figure out *how to act* to be the kind of guy he *wants to be*. The question of *who he truly is*²⁰⁹ does not obtain (although there are certain inheritances difficult to leave behind); what matters is learning the ropes of the role he wants to inhabit. Aspirations to some authentic self are absent, as Yuniór seeks instead to mold himself into who he feels he should be – in other words, who others tell him it is good to be. This is in contrast to Laferrière’s protagonist, who is quite sure of who he is, but plays with the *Nègre* stereotype others assign him in order to meet his own objectives. Both protagonists deploy a racial-gender stereotype to seduce women, but Laferrière’s *Nègre* does it subversively, while Díaz’s protagonist wishes to *become* the type he emulates. Here again I discern Díaz’s affirmation of the social stereotype’s validity, even in his ironic and parodic text. By rendering instruction and apprenticeship so obvious in this parody of the ‘How To’ form, Díaz emphasizes the latent pedagogy inherent in all processes of socialization, and in the heteronormative socialization of the Dominican male in particular. Drawn into the protagonist’s experience through the second-person narration, the reader feels Yuniór’s desire to embody the Dominican stud role. I do not detect here any critique of the social stereotype as a false category, the way Laferrière does when he claims that the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* exist only as types, not as humans. Rather, Díaz treats the social stereotype as a real, operative ideal of masculinity people strive for and may attain, even if Yuniór’s anxieties reveal the emotional price that accompanies this striving.²¹⁰ Again, Díaz’s treatment of the central stud stereotype contrasts with that of

²⁰⁹ Danny Mendez writes of Yuniór in *Drown*: “As a Dominican male, as a faithful son, as the victim of his father’s rage, he recognizes himself as surviving only by being continually other than himself.” Mendez, “A How-To Guide,” 144.

²¹⁰ My reading conflicts with that of Marisel Moreno, who claims that Díaz’s portrayal undermines, rather than confirms, the prototypical Dominican macho. Moreno offers as evidence moments in the text when Yuniór fails to embody the stud role (i.e., by avoiding a fight with the neighborhood bully, or by being anxious and unsuccessful with girls). On the contrary, I read these moments of failure and anxiety not as Díaz’s challenge to the Dominican stud stereotype,

Laferrière, who claims that the *Nègre* is a constructed therefore false category rather than a real human type.

In fitting manual style, Díaz's story addresses variables the aspiring Dominican stud must account for in order to attain his sexual objectives. Socioeconomic class, race and ethnicity are variables he must measure, for they can indicate girls' sexual availability: "If she's a whitegirl you know you'll at least get a hand job" (*Drown* 144); and later in the story: "A white girl might just give it up right then. Don't stop her" (*Drown* 147). Whitegirls are easy, comparatively, and this is important for our stud-in-training: getting sex is his priority, and girls are sexual gatekeepers. A local girl "may have hips and a thick ass, but she won't be quick about letting you touch" (*Drown* 147). Race and ethnicity dictate not only a girl's sexual availability, but also her desirability. The narrator says knowingly, "the white ones are the ones you want the most, aren't they" (*Drown* 145). Though the most attainable girl is likely appealing for her attainability, the whitegirl is also appealing for her whiteness. White features are clearly prized: "Tell her that you love her hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because, in truth, you love them more than you love your own" (*Drown* 147).²¹¹ In an interview, Díaz notes "how much self-hatred and colorism determined [...] what we could call our desire"²¹² in his African diasporic community. Rather than hiding these problems, he represents them here in Yuniór, who valorizes white features as he seeks to disguise his black features. Having internalized blackness's perceived undesirability in the U.S. and Dominican contexts alike, Yuniór has likewise internalized the prevailing norms

but rather as a portrayal of the performative processes and emotional fallout that characterize the Dominican stud's coming-of-age. I argue that Díaz does not challenge the Dominican stud as extant social stereotype and therefore false category. Instead, he confirms the social stereotype's validity as operative ideal of masculinity for the boys socialized to value it. Yuniór's un-macho moments demonstrate the social pressures boys feel and the emotional stress that accompanies their development, not Díaz's challenge to the role. My interpretation is bolstered by Díaz's treatment of the stereotype in his later work, as my discussion will illustrate. See Marisel Moreno, "Debunking Myths, Destabilizing Identities: A Reading of Junot Díaz's 'How to Date a Brown girl, Black girl, White girl or Halfie,'" *Afro-Hispanic Review* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 103-117.

²¹¹ This line offers a tragic echo of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*; indeed, Morrison is "the most important English writer,"²¹¹ in Díaz's view.

²¹² Díaz, "Author Explains."

of beauty and favors white features – hair, skin, lips – over his own. His very desires are shaped unwittingly by centuries-old racisms and transmitted here by his teacher explicitly.

I must contextualize my discussion of blackness in Díaz's work in terms of the Dominican context, and particularly in terms of Dominican-Haitian relations. Blackness in the Dominican Republic is often negatively connected to Haitianness. The September 2013 decision by the Dominican government to expel undocumented Haitian migrants and rescind birthright citizenship to Dominican-born descendants of Haitians continued a political tradition of anti-Haitian policies, which Díaz and others critique as racial rather than national, though these prove difficult to separate. Dominican *anti-haitianismo* comes up regularly in Díaz's oeuvre; Silvio Torres-Saillant's work is indispensable in understanding this phenomenon. Torres-Saillant situates *anti-haitianismo*'s political roots in the Dominican Republic's independence from Haiti in 1844, and the accompanying nationalist ideology that sought to differentiate Dominicans from Haitians. The resulting political discourse – advanced by early historiographer José Gabriel García, bolstered by leaders Rafael Trujillo and Joaquín Balaguer whose campaigning attempted to 'justify' the 1937 massacre of 15,000 Haitians, and corroborated by more recent intellectuals – celebrates Dominicans' European and Iberian roots, and, conflating blackness with Haitianness, rejects both.²¹³ Since even before Trujillo, negrophobia was already prevalent among the intellectual elite and thus encouraged the mixed African diasporic majority's non-identification with blackness. Torres-Saillant attributes Dominicans' non-identification with blackness to "a deracialized social consciousness" that derived from the fall of the colonial plantation economy and the erosion of social barriers between white former slave masters and black former slaves: "Interracial marital relations [... gave] rise to an ethnically hybrid population" of "mulattos."²¹⁴

Peaceful or cooperative mulattos and blacks seem to have become decolorized in the eyes of the ruling class [...], fostering thereby a conceptual space that permitted free blacks and mulattos in Santo Domingo to step outside the racial encirclement of their blackness [and ...] facilitat[ing] a split between biological blackness and social blackness.²¹⁵

²¹³ Torres-Saillant, "Tribulations of Blackness," 1093.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1094.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1095.

Slavery and low-class status became synonymous with blackness, while high-class status became synonymous with whiteness, and these originally racial qualifiers become divorced from race and attached to class.²¹⁶ Since blackness continues to be associated with lower class, regardless of one's phenotype, blackness continues to carry negative connotations. Given these social connotations, the mixed African diasporic Dominican majority must "seek to dissociate themselves conceptually from the realm of blackness so as to secure their Dominicanness."²¹⁷ Yuniór's affirmation of his Dominicanness but silence about his blackness attest to his internalization of blackness's undesirability among Dominicans.

The example of Yuniór's internalized racism provides a useful baseline for my examination of Díaz's representation of racist and sexist attitudes. Here we see Yuniór, a boy of color, make a statement that devalues his own features and valorizes those of whiteboys and whitegirls, in keeping with the dictates of white hegemonic definitions of beauty. When Díaz, the writer of color, pens these lines for Yuniór, I do not doubt that the author is here making a subtle critique: not of Yuniór, whose racialization in white dominant society he has internalized and now turns against himself, but of the white dominant society that sets these racist standards of beauty. The fact that, in this instance, the racist remark is at the expense of the speaker himself, therefore not an act of racist aggression toward another, makes it all the more worthy of sympathy. Later on, we will consider a contrasting example from "The Cheater's Guide" where adult Yuniór makes racist judgments about others, namely women of color. This first example is useful as a counterpoint to that later example, and as a counterpoint to the broad gender critique I seek to make of Díaz's treatment of the stud stereotype. As I will show below, the writer of color may more safely feed his narrator racist lines than the male writer can feed his narrator sexist lines.

This parodic 'How To' guidebook shows a young man how to navigate a pigmentocratic matrix of desirability and attainability. And this matrix looks familiar: it recalls the desires of Laferrière's *Nègre* and Fanon's *homme de couleur* for the *Blanche*. Though Yuniór may approximate whiteness to some extent, full whiteness is unavailable to him, and so seducing the whitegirl brings him ever so slightly closer to the unattainable whiteness he covets. As Fanon

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1096.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1101.

and Laferrière have shown, sleeping with a white woman remains a mode of upward mobility for the man of color. Furthermore, when the halfie's white mom appears afraid of the Dominican boy her daughter is seeing, Díaz alludes to other incidents of white fear (i.e., Fanon's white child who cries "Maman, regarde le nègre, j'ai peur!" / "Maman, look, a Negro, I'm scared!"²¹⁸ and Laferrière's *Blanche* who fears the savage *Nègre* will eat her cat). Díaz's treatment of the whitegirl, her desire, her desirability and her fear builds on that of the *Blanche* in these earlier texts, updating the actors and stakes of these cross-race sexual encounters for the contemporary U.S. context.

Desire proves far more complex than mere physical attraction based on personal taste. Instead, aesthetic preferences are always already informed by hegemonic value systems and the social pressures they exert. Yuniór's desires – to seduce a girl with white skin, to hide his Afro, to prove his masculinity – are the products of these social forces. His desires are part and parcel of the Dominican stud stereotype he is learning to embody; and yet he experiences them as unique, personal tastes that reflect his individuality. By laying bare his protagonist's interiority alongside the social pressures he manages, Díaz shows how desires are *felt* to originate within, when they are in fact the product of external influences and of an individual's internal reactions to these. Even these internal reactions are guided and scripted to a certain extent. Díaz puts these scripts into relief in this faux-guidebook, insofar as the boy's thoughts, feelings, and desires are prescribed alongside his actions. When the narrator says, "The whitegirls are the ones you want the most, aren't they," we see a process of desire production and transmission in action; he tells his student what to want. And even if, at least at this early developmental stage, the *behaviors* associated with the type do not feel natural or innate, the desires tend to be felt this way. Values, desires, and preferences are quietly transmitted and reinforced, alongside behaviors and postures that are taught more explicitly. Male-to-male instruction imparts these lessons, sketching out the Dominican stud role for novices. We witness here the nexus of pedagogy and performativity: the explicit teaching of an identity role joins the implicit absorption of social values and desires in this parody of an instruction manual, wherein boys are trained in the stereotypical role they have been taught to strive for.

²¹⁸ Fanon, *Peau noire/ Black Skin*, 90/91.

Whiteness is only one of the qualities Yuniór seeks in a girl, and only one of several postures he assumes, depending on the circumstances. The Dominican stud role can also require performances of blackness, brownness, machismo, Latinness and others. These performances are not necessarily mutually exclusive; features of roles can be combined or alternated, as our budding social actor code-switches as circumstances require, and as he works through the intersections of his own identity attachments. Code-switching also happens linguistically. Díaz uses bilingualism and vernacular modes of speech as formal means to index race, ethnicity, culture and class. While the boy hides his blackness and his Dominican family's poverty and performs whiteness and middle-class status, the narrative voice guiding him frequently uses both African American and Dominican vernaculars, performing blackness, brownness and Dominicanness vocally alongside whiteness.

Díaz's narrative voice invokes multiple linguistic and cultural influences to manifest formally the mixity and multiplicity of his characters' identities. Their multiplicity confounds simplistic identity schemas and transgresses discrete categorizations, such as those of the story's title; this is an example of Díaz's irony and inversion. We see instances of African American vernacular, and a specifically hip hop aesthetic, in some of the passages previously cited (i.e., "all up in her business" (*Drown* 147) and "her moms" (*Drown* 145)). In "How to Date," Díaz's use of Spanish language terms is more limited than in his later texts, but one striking instance merits comment. In one hypothetical scenario where Yuniór is finally successful having sex with a girl, the narrator suggests: "While she's in the bathroom call one of your boys and say, 'Lo hice, loco'"²¹⁹ (*Drown* 148). This sentence evidences both linguistic and sexual insiderism. The protagonist shows off his sexual accomplishment and thereby proves his sexual worth as a Dominican male; this includes him in a clique of sexually successful Dominican studs. And he expresses his success in Spanish, to one of his Spanish-speaking "boys." Given the importance of sexual prowess in the forms of Dominican masculinity Díaz represents, this sentence becomes an index of certain values – of the sexual capital of the Dominican man, and of Dominican Spanish as a form of cultural capital among Díaz's Dominican American characters. (Spanish is also a form of cultural capital Díaz mobilizes when writing primarily for the English-language literary market and for a bilingual audience.) The line combines both Spanish-language Dominicanness

²¹⁹ "I did it, man."

and English-language blackness in a recognizable African American idiom (i.e., “boys”). This instance shows Díaz mobilizing blackness in the African American vernacular, in hip slang derived from hip hop culture, both as an indicator of African diasporic cultural community, and as a source of coolness. In one breath, he connects his characters to two pertinent communities and identities: the African American and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

Díaz’s narrative voices reveal Dominicanity and blackness as sources of cultural capital. These vernacular elements provide the unique linguistic and rhythmic texture that characterizes Díaz’s idiosyncratic narrative voice, while they signal identity features well beyond language itself. While the speaker professes a preference for white girls and mimics gestures suited to white hair, the voice in which he speaks (both aloud and in his narration) privileges other modes of speech and other values. African American and Dominican vernaculars are sources of social capital for these adolescent boys when they speak to one another; this register is certainly different than that used to speak to the white mom. Blackness and Dominicanity are thus valorized in the story’s form, even if these identities are at times sources of insecurity or shame for the characters. Writer Díaz is, of course, behind these ostensibly contradictory maneuvers: the explicit devaluing of blackness and Dominicanity in the statements Díaz’s protagonist makes, and the implicit valorization of these identities in the linguistic choices Díaz the writer makes. Díaz therefore proceeds here by inversion. His protagonist’s explicitly stated values can run counter to the values the writer himself transmits through formal devices. This inverse relationship between Yunió’s and Díaz’s viewpoints allows Díaz to subtly communicate his critique of the Dominican student’s internalized racism.

The presence of different registers and multiple vernacular influences instantiates *formally* the performativity Díaz’s characters manifest. The tension between identities explicitly repudiated by the characters and narrative voices that celebrate these signals two things: 1) the complexity of the environment Díaz’s characters navigate, which requires them to perform such a range of roles; and 2) Díaz’s subtle use of inversion and irony as formal techniques that evade critical capture.²²⁰ As I will show in my discussion of the multiple contradictory interpretations

²²⁰ The epigraph of *Drown*, a line by Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, begins with an inversion: “The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you. My subject: how to explain to you that I don’t belong in English though I belong nowhere else.” Firmat’s

of Díaz's treatment of the stud stereotype, inversion and irony are means to slip the grip of any singular reading, leaving the text open to contradictory interpretations and thereby evading the critic's critique. The interpretive openness and political slipperiness that characterize Díaz's play with loaded stereotypes serve to protect him from critique, because he is difficult to pin down. Díaz's use of parody, irony and inversion, which incites second-degree readings, deliberately renders his text ambivalent and ambiguous; these strategies are defenses against political critique Díaz anticipates at the same time that they are clever aesthetic modalities that please the reader. This evasion of critique constitutes Díaz's metacritical, one-step-ahead – dare I say, third-degree – intervention.

12.2 Afro-latinidad and Homosocial Belonging

The structure of this faux-guidebook implies a hierarchy of identity variables that concern Yunior in his efforts to seduce: race and ethnicity are the most important, as the story's title indicates, for these features in turn index socioeconomic class, sexual availability, and sexual desirability. As a predominantly English-speaking Dominican American with Afro hair, his own mixed racial background refuses simple categorization, ambivalently felt and received in the U.S. context where polarized notions of blackness and whiteness predominate. His sense of his own racial identity is informed both by this polarized U.S. racial paradigm and by the Dominican one.

Torres-Saillant examines the contradiction between “the Dominican population's self-awareness as a people of African descent and the negrophobia contained in prevalent definitions of Dominicanness.”²²¹ Yunior's move to hide the picture of himself with an Afro corroborates precisely this tension (as it signals to the reader Yunior's African descent). Torres-Saillant signals “the tendency of Dominicans to configure their racial identity in a conceptual space

paradoxical, inverted message both unveils the tensions between Spanish and English in Díaz's work, and shows the significance of inversions in his literary mode. For further discussion of this paradox, see Mendez, “A How-To Guide,” 124-125.

²²¹ Torres-Saillant, “Tribulations of Blackness,” 1089.

between the black and white polarities”;²²² indeed, there is a wealth of terms in Dominican Spanish to indicate mixed racial-ethnic-cultural backgrounds, in contrast to the dearth of terms to describe mixity in U.S. English. This expanded capacity of Dominican Spanish to communicate variations and combinations of racial, ethnic and cultural identities is certainly one reason Díaz so frequently has recourse to Spanish terms for these in his English-language text. I would venture to say that this is one of the foremost categories of Spanish-language terms Díaz includes, along with brief colloquialisms. Interestingly, these Spanish racial/ethnic/cultural identifiers are consistently used by Díaz’s eternal narrator Yuniór to describe women who interest him sexually, but not to describe men, whose backgrounds must be equivalently diverse.²²³ These identity labels, then, become gendered and (hetero)sexualized, as if all that matters about a woman is her sex appeal, which is inseparable from her racial, ethnic and cultural background. This is, of course, how Yuniór, the sexist Dominican stud, sees women. Here Díaz’s formal recourse to Dominican vernacular condones Yuniór’s sexism: the appealing Spanglish sonorities of Yuniór’s narrative reinforce, rather than subvert, his perception of women as (racialized) sex objects. This contrasts with my finding above that Díaz’s use of Dominican and African American vernaculars subverts Yuniór’s self-directed anti-black racism. Díaz’s use of vernacular to represent Yuniór’s *racism* signals the author’s critique: Yuniór’s black vernacular makes his voice cool, even if he may struggle with aspects of his blackness. But Díaz’s use of vernacular to represent Yuniór’s *sexism* does not signal critique: Yuniór’s Dominican vernacular makes both his voice and his sexism cool. The vernacular’s coolness performs different political moves.

Torres-Saillant notes: “Black Dominicans do not see blackness as the central component of their identity but tend to privilege their nationality instead, which implies participation in a culture, a language community, and the sharing of a lived experience.”²²⁴ Indeed, in both collections, Yuniór frequently mentions his Dominicanness; his blackness, however, is more

²²² *Ibid.*, 1090.

²²³ Some examples from *This Is How* include: “trigueña” (*TIH* 17) “morena” (*TIH* 187) “prieta” (*TIH* 104), “blanquita” (*TIH* 175), “salcadeña” (*TIH* 175), “the ecuatoriana with the biology degree and the chinita eyes” (*TIH* 4). Díaz also routinely links sex appeal with race/ethnicity/culture in English: the “hottie in tow [. . . is] straight-up Cambridge Cape Verdean” (*TIH* 190); sexy Magda is “an octoroon” who makes “brothers go apeshit” (*TIH* 16).

²²⁴ Torres-Saillant, “Tribulations of Blackness,” 1090.

often a label others apply to him. As much as Yuniór categorizes girls in stark, inflexible terms, his own identity proves difficult for him to pin down, and different people categorize him in different ways. The girls he so starkly stereotypes return the favor, identifying him in simplistic, one-dimensional ways. “I like Spanish guys,” says the whitegirl, while the halfie claims, “You’re the only kind of guy that asks me out. [...] You and the blackboys” (*Drown* 148). In this moment, she aligns him – presumably, the brownboy – with blackboys, casting him as a boy of color alongside, but still distinct from, blacks. In another moment, the halfie claims: “Black people [...] treat me real bad. That’s why I don’t like them.” The narrator comments: “You’ll wonder how she feels about Dominicans. Don’t ask” (*Drown* 147). Here, the halfie – half-white, half-black, as Yuniór calculates it – both aligns him with and distinguishes him from blackboys; and Yuniór wonders how she situates Dominicaness in her personal racial continuum. Though he identifies as Dominican, that label does not suffice to answer the question of racial identity in his diverse suburban New Jersey context. Absolute answers are unavailable and ultimately irrelevant: it is others’ perceptions that matter, and these are variable indeed. Stereotypes are applied outwards, to others, while we tend to grant ourselves the multiplicity and dynamic complexity of identities.

Juan Flores borrows from W.E.B. Du Bois²²⁵ to articulate the challenges of the U.S. Afro-Latino position in terms of a “triple consciousness” whereby “one ever feels his three-ness: a Latino, a Negro, an American; three souls, three thoughts, three unreconciled strivings; three warring ideals in one dark body.”²²⁶ Yuniór’s “three-ness” – his *Afro-latinidad* – is unarticulated and unresolved, and an additional source of adolescent stress. The ambiguities of his identity call forth various responses from others, and require from him a range of performances, adaptations and code-switches. Underneath this performative fluidity, a sinister feeling looms: he is visibly

²²⁵ Du Bois writes: “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45.

²²⁶ Flores, “Triple Consciousness,” 84.

anxious, uncertain, and unsafe, susceptible as he is to others' conflicting definitions of him, all of which situate him outside of whiteness and a position of security. (His failures at studliness also situate him outside of, but trying to break into, normative masculinity.)

José Esteban Muñoz would describe this constellation of feelings as indicative of “downness” specific to brown subjects' experience in a white-dominant culture. Muñoz articulates brownness as a descriptor for *latinidad* that is primarily affective; brownness is an “affective particularity”²²⁷ that is minoritarian and anti-normative, distinct from both whiteness and blackness. I apply Muñoz's interpretations to Díaz's Dominican American characters whose *latinidad* is actually *Afro-latinidad* and whose brownness includes blackness. Briefly, the notion of affect points to flows of emotion as social phenomena, beyond individual subjective feelings and sensibilities;²²⁸ a collectively experienced affect can then give force to collective identities. As I am applying it here, affect as a *social* phenomenon is at the heart of community: it is a *feeling* of togetherness and belonging around which a community crystallizes and through which a sense of ‘we’ can then be articulated.

Muñoz articulates felt, embodied experiences of *latinidad* (a synonym for brownness) as collective phenomena. He treats ethnic identity as performative and affective: rather than something fixed that people *are*, ethnicity is something that people *do*, and this *doing* reflects a collective *feeling*. This feeling is a point of connection and solidarity among Latina/o subjects, whose identities do not conform to a single common race, class, gender, religion, or nation.

²²⁷ Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down,” 679.

²²⁸ Tolia-Kelly and Crang distinguish between the ‘emotional’ and the ‘affective’ as follows: “the affective represents the ways in which flows of emotion coalesce to form a social phenomenon that is beyond the individual subjective responses, feelings, and sensibilities. Affect also moves us on to a terrain where race as felt identity is immanent to interactions -- and in that sense, it materialises the felt world. [...] This transpersonal dimension seems vital for our understanding of the social forces of race. Examining affect as the capacity to affect another -- to ask not what a body is but what it does -- offers a chance to found accounts of race in the relational construction of identities, in the forces created between people rather than in fixed social categories.” Affect can be defined in many different ways; for my purposes here, as a means to explicate Muñoz's position, I opt for this socially-oriented definition. Tolia-Kelly and Crang treat affect as a force driving identity (and specifically, racial) performativity: affect as a social phenomenon attends to the collectively felt experience of race, a particular form of embodiment that is performed in relation to other bodies. Tolia-Kelly and Crang, “Affect, Race,” 2309.

Muñoz aims to “describe how race and ethnicity can be understood as ‘affective difference,’ [...] or] the ways in which various historically coherent groups ‘feel’ differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register.”²²⁹ Borrowing from Raymond Williams’s notion of structures of feeling, Muñoz attends to the particularities of being brown – indeed, of *feeling* brown – in a white-dominant context. This felt awareness of one’s difference from the hegemonic class is what lends coherence to Latina/o identity and experience. Using Muñoz’s formulation, I find that Díaz’s fiction “theatricalizes a certain mode of ‘feeling brown’ [...] in a world painted white.”²³⁰ When Yunior approximates whiteness by running his hand through his hair “like the whiteboys do,” he responds to a cultural imperative to act white. This gesture is an effort to disguise the deeply felt difference of which he is acutely aware and frequently reminded: “even though the only thing that runs through your hair easily is Africa.” Feeling brown is feeling not white in a culture where one is told to be white, where brownness is antinormative and thus often uncomfortable. Hence feeling brown is often accompanied by feeling down. These interconnected feelings are at once personal and social: felt by individuals in their interiority as they are categorized collectively based on features of their exteriority.²³¹

The halfie’s demeanor is negative in many ways – from her opinions of others to her image of herself – and we understand that this is an effect of her own multiple marginality:

The halfie might lean back, breaking away from you. She will cross her arms, say, I hate my tits. Stroke her hair but she will pull away. I don’t like anybody touching my hair, she will say. She will act like somebody you don’t know. In school she is known for her attention-grabbing laugh [...] but here she will worry you. You will not know what to say. (*Drown* 148).

In a moment of emotional intimacy (if sexual refusal), the halfie manifests the self-hatred Díaz identifies in some members of African diaspora communities. Her public persona falls away, and she rebuffs Yunior’s advances. This may be due to her perception of her own undesirability; or she may find his advances demeaning. Her downness is certainly connected to her brownness –

²²⁹ Muñoz, “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity,” 70.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

²³¹ David Eng and Shinhee Han’s notion of racial melancholia builds on Muñoz’s connection between brownness and downness. See David L. Eng and Shinhee Han. “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, no. 4 (2000): 667-700.

her affective difference from the white norm and her exclusion not only from whiteness, but also from blackness. In different ways, the halfie and her Dominican American suitor are excluded from the prevailing U.S. racial categories; black/white separatist models are inadequate to describe their positions. As much as Yuniór is aware of (if troubled by) his own multiplicity and consciously performs identities, he is unable to understand girls' multiplicity and performativity; they also misunderstand his.

Flores identifies the potential for the U.S. Afro-Latino position to reconfigure racial, national and cultural identities both in the diaspora, and in the ancestral homeland:

Today many young Afro-Boricuas²³² and Afro-Dominicanos in the United States are affirming and embracing a black identity, including unity with African Americans, and are consciously or unconsciously setting off major repercussions in their home or ancestral homelands in the Caribbean and Latin America, where such subversive ideas, values, and "attitudes" are busy shaking up traditional notions of national culture and racial identity. This phenomenon, which I have been calling "the diaspora strikes back," may well do much to refigure "race" in the twenty-first century.²³³

Díaz certainly figures among these diasporic forces deliberately shaking up prevailing notions of Dominicaness, blackness and Latinoness. Díaz explains his strategy:

[I]nstead of insisting that Dominican "black denial" is a pathology unique to Dominicans, I try to foreground the Dominican example in order to explore how general and pernicious this is throughout the African Diaspora. Scarily enough, it's one of the things that "in the darkness binds us."²³⁴

While Yuniór and the halfie complicate identity categories with their multiplicities, they are shown here to be bound by, but inarticulate about, the racial self-hatred Díaz references here. In this exchange, Díaz draws out the failed potential for solidarity between these young people whose positions are distinct but excluded from the norm in parallel ways.

We begin to understand that homosocial relationships are the primary mechanisms of belonging available to Díaz's immigrant Dominican boys. Social acceptance by Dominican male

²³² Afro-Puerto Ricans

²³³ Flores, "Triple Consciousness," 83.

²³⁴ Díaz, "Junot Díaz."

peers is the motor driving his characters' anxious, urgent efforts to fit a role and therefore fit in, in a larger social context where they are multiply marginalized. Dominicanness and masculinity are the two core features of our protagonist's identity and the pillars that structure his sense of self. Though they are in fact no more solid than any other identity he may be assigned (i.e., black, brown, Latino, first-generation immigrant), he holds on with great tenacity to these two – Dominicanness explicitly stated, and masculinity implicitly understood, which together form the Dominican stud. His tenacity reveals the stakes of these identifications, which are modes of belonging and means to achieve social acceptance. Though sexual success with girls *appears* to be his goal, his strategies of seduction in fact address this more fundamental need. Female roles, though highlighted in this story's title and content, are ultimately secondary; though necessary, women are instruments with which men can achieve manhood in the eyes of other men. Just as Laferrière's *Nègre* exacts revenge against his white slumlord by possessing the slumlord's daughter sexually, the sexual conquest of girls by the Dominican stud in this story and throughout Díaz's oeuvre entails a transaction of social power *among* men, *via* women. Following Rubin's exchange-of-women thesis discussed in Part One,²³⁵ women are instrumental objects in an exchange, third terms in transactions between and for the benefit of men. Sex is the means of this exchange, which is ultimately about social power.

Díaz's text, like Laferrière's, plays provocatively with sex and with gendered and sexual stereotypes to comment on other spheres of human experience and other relationships of power. One way to read Díaz's representation of misogynistic attitudes is this: what looks like run-of-the-mill adolescent male misogyny in fact disguises an urgent quest to belong. What looks like a Dominican American male writer replicating a stereotype and reinforcing its patriarchal, misogynistic modes of being in his fiction is in a fact a more complex representation of identity belonging and unbelonging. Read in this way, the stud's sexism and misogyny are excused or, at least, explained by virtue of the racial, ethnic, cultural and socio-economic exclusion he must bear. The social contextualization Díaz offers to frame his Dominican American protagonists at this fraught crossroads of identity categories and social forces ultimately results in what I deem a sympathetic depiction of the stud. Given the stud's challenging racial, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic conditions, the reader is coaxed into sympathizing with these admittedly clueless

²³⁵ See Rubin, "Traffic in Women," 42-7.

(but therefore endearing), sex-obsessed (but sexually unsuccessful) boys and thus overlooking the misogynistic dimensions of their behavior. In this story, the protagonist is anxious, down, and failing. Despite his objectifying attitudes about girls, he is not successful in accomplishing his sexist sexual goals; he is therefore less reproachable. Below I will consider depictions of the stud where he is more successful in his misogyny, more worthy of reproach, but nonetheless depicted sympathetically. As I will show, Díaz's consistently sympathetic depiction of the stud undermines the critique the author claims to make of sexism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.

In their quest for stud status, Díaz's male characters manifest anxieties and insecurities that reflect the restrictions of this role, the lack of fit between the role and the self, and the conflict between this role and others that they also perform (i.e., the Sci-Fi nerd, the faithful boyfriend, the university professor, etc.). Yuniór's anxiety and insecurity are visible in several instances, and his mentor alternately soothes or reproaches him. The narrator implores, "Don't panic," "Don't ask" (*Drown* 147), "don't feel bad" (*Drown* 146), offering some comfort. He can also be rather brutal: "Don't go downstairs. Don't fall asleep. It won't help" (*Drown* 149). Rather than offer empathy and reassurance, he undermines Yuniór's confidence with put-downs: "You are not good at talking to people you don't know" (*Drown* 146); "You will not know what to say" (*Drown* 148); "you'll be stupid enough to believe her and ask her out again" (*Drown* 144). A charged male-male relationship comes into view here, where an older, more experienced mentor both encourages and reproaches, soothes and insults his younger protégé. Though we only see this relationship from one side, focalized through the student but spoken in the second person by his teacher, the power dynamic becomes visible: teacher dominates student in this gendered competition. Moments of understanding figure alongside biting criticism in the teacher's lesson, and both confirm the older speaker's power.

In "How To Date," the possibility of emasculation and the accompanying humiliation elicits panic, which the teacher tries to quell: "Don't panic." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of homophobia and the notion of homosexual panic are useful to elucidate how Díaz's boys leverage to position themselves in a competitive gender hierarchy. Sedgwick's work provides historical background and insight into the mechanisms and functions of homophobia. In "Toward the Gothic: Terrorism and Homosexual Panic," Sedgwick describes homophobia as a discourse that arose to set limits on male homosocial desire, giving certain men the power to set the standards of normative heterosexual masculinity and to 'out' those who do not abide; this was

done through what Sedgwick calls “blackmailability.”²³⁶ The threat of the accusation of homosexuality created an atmosphere of homosexual panic among all men, subjecting them to the “blackmail” and “terrorism”²³⁷ those in power could enact. Therefore homophobia is, well beyond a means of oppressing a minority group, a means of regulating the behavior and desire of all men. Western maleness was therefore constituted and policed “through the leverage of homophobia,”²³⁸ which was (and is) a means of broad social control, and there is competition among men to wield this powerful tool. In the story “Drown” in the eponymous collection, the narrator (not Yuniors this time) terminates his friendship with Beto after they have two homosexual encounters. After the first incident, the narrator feels homosexual panic, “terrified I would end up abnormal, a fucking pato”²³⁹ (*Drown* 104). He resolves this panic by deeming Beto the “pato” (*Drown* 91), accusing the other of homosexuality and denying his own homosexual desire and behavior, thereby policing maleness “through the leverage of homophobia,” as Sedgwick describes. In this gendered competition, the male who deems the other male unmanly via accusations of homosexuality gains authority and power.

In “How to Date,” we see the teacher form his protégé in his image, while he asserts simultaneously his authority and dominance at every turn. The terms of entry into Dominican masculinity are policed by the teacher, who is himself a marginalized Dominican teen and low in the power hierarchy. He exerts what power he has over his younger protégé, showing little empathy and putting him down, and teaching him how to manipulate women and in turn exert his own power over them. As Sedgwick has shown, the oppression and control of women is a transaction among men; in “How to Date,” the successful manipulation of girls gives boys status with other boys. Acts of domination trickle down in a succession of power maneuvers wherein males compete to participate in patriarchy, at the expense of females who are at the bottom of this (hetero)sexist hierarchy. Heterosexual masculinity entails the domination of other men and of women.

²³⁶ Sedgwick, “Toward the Gothic,” 89.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

²³⁹ gay

Casual homophobia structures the pedagogy of masculinity we see in “How to Date” and in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In that novel, Yunior and Oscar are foils also in a teacher-student relationship. Oscar gets his nickname “Wao” by being mockingly associated with “that fat homo Oscar Wilde” (*BWL* 180); he is called a “mariconcito”²⁴⁰, for crying (*BWL* 16), is effeminized (“Couldn’t play sports [...], threw a ball like a girl” (*BWL* 20)) and deemed “un-Dominican” (*BWL* 11). These are the ultimate insults to his (Dominican) masculinity. Furthermore, Yunior attempts to “fix Oscar’s life” (*BWL* 175) by teaching him to become a “real man”; this entails taking him jogging so he can lose weight and giving him advice about how to get girls. Although Oscar does finally lose his virginity, and his uncle celebrates – “The palomo”²⁴¹ is finally a man” (*BWL* 287) – Yunior’s efforts at instruction ultimately fail. Despite being accepted as heterosexual, Oscar nonetheless fails to meet the standards of Dominican masculinity; his failure is ultimately punished (allegorically) by death, revealing just how high the stakes of Dominican masculinity are.²⁴²

In his analyses of several stories in *Drown*, John Riofrio examines the role of empathy in the stories’ constitution of masculinity. Riofrio identifies empathy as aligned with femininity (and by extension, homosexuality), and shows how boys striving to become men must reject empathy in order to assert their masculinity. This means several things: 1) Díaz’s adolescent boys unlearn empathy as they learn to become ‘strong,’ unemotional men; 2) this role entails misogynistic attitudes and behaviors that stem from the need to distinguish themselves from the feminine and from feminine modes of emotionality in particular; 3) in order to accomplish this work of gender distinction, they at times victimize women and treat them harshly, rejecting not only *signs* of the gendered other within the self, but also the gendered other herself. Following

²⁴⁰ little faggot. De Moya defines the term *maricón* as referring to men who are seen as homosexual by choice. De Moya, “Masculinity in the Dominican Republic,” 90-91.

²⁴¹ According to De Moya, a *palomo* is at the bottom of the hierarchy of heterosexual men, just above bisexual and homosexual men, and lacking in social and economic power. De Moya, “Masculinity in the Dominican Republic,” 86-87.

²⁴² Elena Machado Sáez convincingly shows how Oscar is a subject of difference who cannot be assimilated into the Dominican nation, and how Yunior the diasporic narrator’s attempts to silence Oscar’s queer otherness ultimately reveal an unspoken homosocial romance that must be excluded from the dominant, patriarchal narrative of Dominican history. See Machado Sáez, “Dictating Desire,” 522-555.

Norma Fuller and others, Riofrio posits the feminine as a symbolic border around masculinity, and writes:

The adolescent, fatherless boys go about crafting their masculine identities via their interaction with, and reactions against, all that is feminine. For them, crafting a masculine identity is profoundly connected to the daily struggle to keep the feminine at arm's length thus enabling the boys to rightfully claim their masculinity.²⁴³

Empathy involves a degree of fusing with the other, of identifying with another and experiencing what she or he is feeling as if it were happening to oneself. The adolescent masculinity we see in *Drown* and in some stories of *This Is How* evidences the selfish, at times cruel antithesis of empathy, for empathy is the marker of the feminine and therefore of vulnerability and weakness – qualities unacceptable to the hypermasculine Dominican stud. We will see in our analysis of “The Cheater’s Guide” how, just as the constitution of adolescent masculinity involves a rejection of empathy and the feminine, the constitution of mature masculinity involves a recovery of empathy and an ability to identify with both women and feminine modes of emotionality.

The “true source of male anxiety,”²⁴⁴ following Riofrio, is the fragility of this masculinity, for it can be lost or taken away; in Sedgwick’s terms, the true source of homosexual panic is homophobia; in Freud’s, castration anxiety is the foundational male fear. Lacking something, being perceived as lacking something or being perceived as someone lacking are common to these theorizations. Masculinity must therefore be continuously defended and ceaselessly performed.²⁴⁵ This performance occurs under the watchful gaze of other men, who police the boundaries of manhood and social acceptance. In “How to Date” and throughout Díaz’s oeuvre, we see glimpses of Yunior’s friendships and the regulatory role male friends play. They call to check on his status: “Are you still waiting on that bitch? Hell, yeah” (*Drown* 144); and he announces his sexual conquest immediately to them (“Lo hice, loco”), for its value first

²⁴³ Riofrio, “Situating Latin American Masculinity,” 29.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁴⁵ These theorists’ treatment of masculinity’s endlessly repeated performances build on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity as the repetition of gender norms in *Gender Trouble*, and echo Homi Bhabha’s treatment of stereotypes as static representations that must also be ceaselessly repeated in “The Other Question.”

and foremost is as a means to their approval and therefore his social inclusion. These exchanges with peers signal the imperatives to which they are all bound and how relentlessly they must assert their studliness to one another, for fear of emasculation, humiliation and exclusion from their peer group. Driven by homosexual panic, which would in turn engender total social exclusion, they pursue heterosexual sex as a means to gain or keep a place in their community of Dominican machos. It will not facilitate entry into the white U.S. hegemony; rather, studliness is a form of compensation for the impossibility of making it in the white world, a way for disempowered men to feel powerful at the expense of the even less empowered – women.

Since the guidebook plays out different scenarios with different girls, the “Lo hice, loco” scenario is just one improbable outcome. The speaker warns: “But usually it won’t work this way. Be prepared.” Usually the girl won’t give it up. These fantasies of sexual success are no more than that, and the tale’s finale bears a grim tone of failure. The halfie will be difficult; the Latina won’t let you touch; you won’t know what to do; you won’t know what to say:

Say nothing. Let her button her shirt, let her comb her hair [...] let her go without much of a goodbye. She won’t want it. During the next hour, the phone will ring. You will be tempted to pick it up. Don’t. [...] Don’t go downstairs. Don’t fall asleep. It won’t help. Put the government cheese back in its place before your moms kills you. (*Drown* 149)

After highlighting his student’s failures, the teacher ends his lesson on a pessimistic note. Yuniór’s pain and shame are palpable here, and his teacher offers little sympathy. As much as the teacher of the Dominican stud is *training* his protégé to become like him, the exigencies of an anti-empathetic masculinity preclude the possibility of the teacher’s empathetic *feeling with* and therefore *identifying with* his student. Although teacher strives to form student in his image (and although teacher has made these mistakes himself in the past), teacher mustn’t show gentleness when student fails, for this would be feminine and contrary to the lesson at hand. Yuniór must learn the hard way, so as to harden himself against his own feelings and against others’ feelings as well. By being rebuffed by girls, he has failed to be a Dominican man and to master this particular brand of heteronormative masculinity *in the eyes of other men*. This failure teaches Yuniór a lesson and helps prepare him to succeed at being the stud later on.

Just as the boy’s racial and ethnic identity situates him outside of the hegemonic category of whiteness, his failures at studliness likewise situate him outside of, but anxiously trying to

break into, the hegemonic category of normative masculinity. In this powerfully formative homosocial relationship between older male mentor and younger male student, the stud-in-training manages tremendous social pressures, and manifests signs of emotional stress: anxiety, shame, guilt and pain. His downness connects race and ethnicity to gender: the racial/ethnic marginalization he experiences pushes him to adopt this stark standard of masculinity. Intra-gender and intra-cultural belonging through the assimilation of the Dominican stud type compensate for other exclusions. While its social function is visible here within a broader context of exclusion, so, too, is the violence the Dominican stud type does to those who strive to inhabit it, and, as we will see later, to the women they pursue. In this story, Díaz sympathetically depicts the stud coming into being as a reaction to unjust forces acting upon him. Regretfully, the stud's reaction to injustice entails unjust attitudes toward women.

12.3 Masking/Emasculating: I and You, Writing and Reading

This short story is a work of fiction masquerading as a self-help instruction manual. A first level of masking therefore operates in Díaz's parodic mode: the author disguises his fictional representation of Dominican masculinity in the form of a dating guidebook. Of the parameters of that masculinity as we have seen it thus far, authority, confidence, coolness and sexual success are essential. The very fact that an instruction manual is necessary at all highlights that this role is not natural or inherent, but rather must be learned and performed. Furthermore, the demands of this masculinity are impossible to satisfy, for a real stud would never need a book to teach him.²⁴⁶ Needing and using a manual emasculates its ostensible reader – the Dominican adolescent male 'you,' Yuniór – who (as the narrative reveals) is already multiple emasculated: by the girls who reject him, by the brothers, fathers, and other boys (including his teacher) who put him down, and by the white-dominant society that marginalizes him. Díaz's parody also simultaneously masks and reveals the instructor's own anxieties and failures underlying his authoritative instruction: the narrating teacher can only speak about Yuniór's experiences because he has experienced these situations himself in the past. In yet another inversion, the

²⁴⁶ Díaz says in an interview: "The formula for being a man is so impossible, it's like trying to get yourself into a suit that no human being can possibly wear." Díaz, "Author Explains."

narrator silently reveals his lack of authority and lack of studliness through the instruction that ostensibly confirms these.

In others of Díaz's stories, male-male mentorship relationships are commonplace: between Yuniór and Oscar in *Brief Wondrous Life*, between older brother Rafa and Yuniór and between father and son or uncle and nephew in *Drown* and *This Is How*. In this story, however, the second-person parodic instruction manual can also be read in another way: as a first-person narrative transposed into the second-person for the purposes of protecting the speaker's ego – a classic psychological deflection in which something shameful that happened to oneself is told as if it happened to someone else. In this case, the narrator speaks sternly or mockingly to his less-experienced self, reproaching himself for his errors while directing himself to better manage these situations next time. Yet he masks this self-talk as an other-directed lesson, splitting and doubling himself into authoritative narrator-self and disappointing student-self, hiding – yet surreptitiously revealing – the failures at machismo that hide behind a mask of successful Dominican masculinity. As my analysis of other stories will confirm, the writer can only reveal himself, even as he attempts to hide himself. This narrator's masked self-talk confirms his self-consciousness about his readership, as he pretends to address a reader outside of himself via 'you.' Writer Díaz is easy to align with his narrator Yuniór, and is likewise plainly self-conscious of and playing with multiple readerships. The narrator's masking of his own experience via the second person constitutes a sleight of hand directed at his reader; Díaz also performs such sleights of hand, using irony, inversion, contradiction and masking that obscure his position.

Revisiting the story's closing with this masking function of the second person in mind, we realize we are privy to a painful and deeply intimate moment of self-talk. The narrator's repeated "Don'ts" and declarations of inadequacy – "You will not know what to say;" "you'll be stupid enough to believe her and ask her out again" – signal his own sense of failure. He is utterly at a loss to navigate these situations without the male mentorship a father figure would provide. Instead, he splits and doubles himself to act the mentor for himself, speaking to himself as he imagines a father or older brother would, filling those empty shoes through his own capacities of invention. He is a split, doubled self, both mentor and mentee, stud teacher and failed stud student. Lyn Di Iorio Sandín identifies a tradition of doubled characters in U.S. Latina/o Caribbean literature, and situates *Drown* among "allegories of the street" where men

wear melancholic masks of machismo.²⁴⁷ My findings corroborate her claim that the mask veils psychic unrest, visible here in Yunior’s anxiety and downness. Sandín claims the mask “represent[s] pain, aggressiveness, uprootedness, hypersexuality, racial & class marginalization for Latinas & Latinos”;²⁴⁸ I would nuance this, for the mask hides some of these features (pain, uprootedness) while it showcases others (hypersexuality). While Sandín claims the mask is a form of resistance, I would call it rather a form of protection from gendered and cultural exclusion by one’s Dominican male peers; it certainly fails to resist prevailing gendered power structures. Sandín also identifies this mask as a stereotype. I call this stereotype the Dominican stud, whose mask performs studliness so as to mask forms of emasculation.²⁴⁹

In this story, ‘you’ is the mask behind which ‘I’ hides his own emasculated experience. Importantly, the mentoring persona the narrator adopts is both articulate and literate about his experiences and emotions. Though his tone is oral, his faux-guidebook is a work of writing that gives narrative coherence to his experiences. As a split, doubled self, Yunior is both the writer dispensing advice and the reader receiving it. He can express his pain in words, but must deflect it via a ‘you.’ Through his authoritative, unempathetic narration, he ‘wins’ this gendered competition with his imagined subordinate, who is actually himself, split and doubled. This narrativizing, mentoring voice imposes a logic and meaning onto the experience of the inarticulate, feeling self who lives out these experiences.²⁵⁰ This narrativizing process accords

²⁴⁷ Sandín, *Killing Spanish*, 14-15.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁴⁹ The tropes of the mask and the veil are important in African American and African diasporic cultures and inform my discussion of masking here. For a discussion of these tropes, see Michelle Wright, “The Trope of Masking in the Works of W.E.B. Du Bois, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Aimé Césaire,” and “Some Women Disappear: Frantz Fanon’s Legacy in Black Nationalist Thought and the Black (Male) Subject,” in *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 66-135.

²⁵⁰ In an interview, Díaz describes a poignant moment in his own youth when a story by Ray Bradbury rendered articulate the pain, dislocation and confusion he was experiencing as a child immigrant. The story gave him “a lens through which to understand all the things that were happening to [him] as an immigrant” and showed him he was not alone feeling these things. In his own fiction, the narrator Yunior renders articulate his own pain and anxiety through writing, even as he deflects it through an immature ‘you’ distinct from the mature ‘I’ writing. The literate narrator Yunior articulates feelings in writing that the Yunior caught up in the action is unable to. Díaz, “Junot Díaz Aims to Fulfill.”

with the therapeutic narrative of selfhood advanced in self-help culture;²⁵¹ in this respect, Díaz's parody of the self-help genre builds upon the authority the genre, suggesting "an accord or intimacy [between the genre and its parody] instead of a contrast"²⁵² or subversion. This distance between the wiser, mentoring self and the naïve, acting self is echoed in the structure of Díaz's later collection, *This Is How You Lose Her*, wherein an older Yunió writes to and about his younger self. This same doubled Yunió is also apparent in *Brief Wondrous Life*, as narrator Yunió writes the story of the de Leon family, the Trujillo regime, and his younger self.

Operating above these two levels of the self here in "How to Date," we also hear the all-knowing voice of 'How To' advice, giving instruction in the imperative form:

Hide the pictures of yourself with an Afro. Make sure the bathroom is presentable. Put the basket with all the crapped-on toilet paper under the sink. Spray the bucket with Lysol, then close the cabinet. (*Drown* 143-4)

This voice appropriates the conventions of self-help advice in *Men's Health* magazine and purports *ironically* to offer universally applicable advice, at that same time that it emphasizes the racial, ethnic, cultural and socio-economic particularities of these heterosexual interactions (e.g., "If she's a whitegirl you know you'll at least get a hand job"; "A local girl [...] won't be quick about letting you touch"). At the origin of these three voices and three layers of self is a fourth, implicit self: the implied author who uses irony and parody to signal how inaccurate and unsuited the typical, universalizing voice of self-help advice is for these young men of color. Díaz's faux-guidebook is very *unlike* the articles we see in *Men's Health* magazine, for these presuppose a default white, 'universal' audience and ignore race, ethnicity and class, while Díaz's narrative insists upon the significance of these at every turn. In this respect, Díaz's parody of the genre subverts its typical voice. However, his narrative is also very *like* the articles in *Men's Health*, in that both presume heterosexual masculinity as the male ideal, and the sexual conquest of women as the primary mechanism to achieve that ideal. Díaz's counter-hegemonic treatment of his protagonists' racial, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic positions contrasts

²⁵¹ Illouz writes: "The therapeutic narrative has become a basic self-schema, organizing stories about the self and, more specifically, autobiographical discourse. It is the form as much as the content of how we make sense of ourselves in the world." Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 178.

²⁵² Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 32.

sharply with his hegemonic treatment of their gendered and sexual positions. The four voices and four levels of self discernible here in Díaz's use of the second person serve as a formal analog to his treatment of identity: his 'you' is not a unitary 'you,' but rather multiple 'yous,' multiple voices that articulate different layers of self and of self-consciousness. Though his narrative voice is strikingly consistent and the narrator Yunior recurrent across his oeuvre, Díaz's second-person 'you' at the same time indexes multiple subjectivities, identity performances, and levels of awareness.

Ironically, the ideal stud – relentlessly confident, crass, and cool, unemotional, unintellectual, and un-literate (though not illiterate) – would not need a book to learn his role, nor would he *write* one for others; he would never keep a journal, even one disguised as a lesson for someone else. Díaz's writerly narrators, by virtue of being writers, render their studly physicality questionable with their cerebral, artistic, literate musings on methods of getting girls. As writers, they are thoughtful and self-aware, laying their reflections, strategies and insecurities bare. The act of writing transmits a distanced reflection on the self that the act of speaking, for its immediacy and impermanence, often does not. Díaz's writerly narrators, though writing in tones that sound spoken, are distanced from orality and its immediacy by writing, even in the present tense, about events experienced and feelings felt. They are translating²⁵³ orality and immediacy into literacy and durability, exposing their tricks and insecurities – things often kept hidden – into a lasting form that can be referenced, cited, and critiqued. The act of rendering written that which would otherwise be hidden counter-intuitively opens these studs up for critique and allows others to hold them accountable for their actions. This would seem to undermine the stud's success and irreproachability; and yet this is one consequence of writing: it unmask the writer, despite himself. A case in point: girlfriends in *This Is How* repeatedly discover instances of

²⁵³ Díaz claims: "I'm as much an immigrant to Spanish as I am to English—[...] I have no confidence of either language or in either language. [...] We exist in a constant state of translation. We just don't like it. We don't like to be reminded that we are translating this experience. Translators remind us of our relationship with language the way not everyone is comfortable with. [...] The only thing I do naturally [...] is to translate." By extension, his fiction translates experience into articulate, literary form. The function of the writer, then (be it Díaz himself, or his writer-narrator Yunior), is to translate – between languages, cultures and countries; between realms of experience and levels of consciousness; between contexts and audiences. Díaz, "Junot Díaz: 'We exist.'"

cheating through writing that their unfaithful boyfriends leave discoverable, as if the boys unconsciously wish to be found out – as if they wish to be *read*.

The narrator-writer in “How to Date” unveils the Dominican stud’s ways for both the story’s ostensible reader – the young adolescent student of studliness – and the actual reader reading Díaz’s work. He also unveils his interiority and dating strategies for the girls he might pursue, essentially outing himself to those he seeks to manipulate and dominate. The women who might be victims of the Dominican stud’s ways might be a hidden target audience whom the guilty, cheating narrator secretly addresses. Zooming out from narrator Yuniór to writer Díaz, these women may be one of Díaz’s target audiences. In both cases, the writerly Dominican nerd posturing as Dominican stud becomes the girls’ literate informant, arming female ‘conquests’ with knowledge of the enemy’s strategies and thus possibilities for resistance. We recall how, in Laferrière’s *Comment faire l’amour*, the narrator described how black male audiences received his novel: “They want to lynch me [...]. Because I let the cat out of the bag. [...] They say I’ve sold out [...]. To be a traitor is every writer’s destiny” (CFL 148-9). Laferrière plays unabashedly with the ‘outing’ of his stereotypical *Nègre*, rendering explicit and deliberate the *Nègre*’s strategies of seduction and manipulation by writing them down for all to read. As Díaz’s narrator likewise renders explicit the machinations of his Dominican studs, we can wonder if he is also deliberately revealing their secrets for the benefit of the women they might victimize: acting the traitor, but with more subtlety than Laferrière does.

In assessing Díaz’s treatment of the stud stereotype, and particularly the stud’s misogynistic values, it becomes imperative to understand who Díaz is writing for. Yet Díaz is writing for multiple audiences. He claims to write for his community and reproaches writers of color who write primarily for white audiences:

I’m not a voyeur nor am I a native informer [*sic*]. I don’t explain cultural things, with italics or with explanations or with side bars or asides. I was aggressive about that because I had so many negative models, so many Latinos and black writers who are writing to white audiences, who are not writing to their own people. If you are not writing to your own people, I’m disturbed because of what that says about your relationship to the community you are in one way or another indebted to. You

are only there to loot them of ideas, and words, and images so that you can coon them to the dominant group.²⁵⁴

Díaz is clearly very concerned with authenticity and loyalty to one's community, critiquing writers of color here as if their failure is a *moral* one. However, there are indications that Díaz is writing not only to his own community, but also to non-Dominican audiences. In various instances, Díaz (via narrator Yunió) speaks to a non-Dominican readership. Early in *Brief Wondrous Life*, Yunió addresses "those of you who missed your mandatory three seconds of Dominican history" (*BWL* 2) and asks, "You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either" (*BWL* 19), implying a non-Dominican U.S. audience. In *This Is How's* opening story, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," the narrator plays both sides of the court, describing his return to the Dominican Republic for a reader unfamiliar with it and therefore unlike him – "You'll have to take my word for it. Santo Domingo is Santo Domingo. Let's pretend we all know what goes on there" (*TIH* 10) – and underscoring the reader's similarity to him, with "You know what it's like when you're on the Island and your girl's an octroon" (*TIH* 16). Díaz's implied readers include those biographically similar and dissimilar to him. Díaz addresses these multiple audiences in the second person early on in each text, using 'you' like a multi-pronged marketing strategy targeted to different readerships. Certainly Díaz's commercial success is due in part to such savvy strategies that encourage multiple readerships' identification with the narrator. In light of appeals to multiple readers, it proves challenging to maintain, in fictional practice, the political stance and community loyalty Díaz announces outside of his fiction. Naturally, the writer is driven by various aesthetic and narrative concerns that may at times conflict with his political ones. However, this contradiction between the author's publicly stated political views and the politics apparent in his fiction supports my argument that his professed critique of sexism, patriarchy and heteronormativity is not so certain.

Díaz's multiple audiences call up conflicting loyalties. On the one hand, secretly outing the Dominican stud for women presumes loyalty to a female audience victimized by male privilege. On the other, overtly reciting the Dominican man's stud training in instruction manual form presumes loyalty to a male audience being taught to exercise male privilege at the expense

²⁵⁴ Díaz, "Fiction is," 900.

of women. The former interpretation is predicated on the author's subtlety and the reader's slow, critique-seeking reading – typical of academic rather than pleasure readers, and especially Ph.D. students anxiously seeking a self-proclaimed anti-sexist writer's anti-sexist critique. Interested as I am in the political intervention the artist makes before the gamut of real readers who read him, the more obvious, less subtle reading is likely the most commonplace. I would guess that most pleasure readers come away from this story with a sense of the myriad social pressures these boys face, rather than having received a public service announcement (i.e., a warning for women, or a guidebook for men) in disguised form. This tension between subtlety and explicitness, and between a slow, critical reading and a faster, pleasure reading will gain momentum in later stories, where Díaz's treatment of misogynistic values becomes more ambivalent.

“How to Date” ends on a note of defeat, with Yuniór failing to get the girl, failing to embody the Dominican stud, and showing signs of emotional distress, anxiety, guilt, and shame. This emotional timbre likewise reflects the self-help genre in which, following Eva Illouz, a narrative of

suffering and victimhood actually define the self. Indeed, the therapeutic narrative functions only by conceiving of life events as the markers of failed or thwarted opportunities for self development. Thus the narrative of self-help is fundamentally sustained by a narrative of suffering. This is because suffering is the central “knot” of the narrative, what initiates and motivates it, helps it unfold, and makes it “work.”²⁵⁵

Yuniór's failures here are just such “opportunities for self development” that his older self will capitalize on – older Yuniór has learned his stud lessons well. However, older Yuniór's narrative in the parodic self-help stories I examine becomes even more clearly a narrative of suffering *because* those stud lessons were so well learned. Guilt and shame are recurrent themes in those stories, often accompanying the behaviors prescribed by the Dominican stud type. The pathos of “How to Date's” ending foreshadows the emotional destination of Díaz's later collection *This is How You Lose Her*, which culminates in a similar tone of dejection in its final story, if for different reasons. We will see there how Yuniór's suffering is indeed “the central ‘knot’ of the narrative, what initiates and motivates it,” to apply Illouz's formulation of the self-help narrative

²⁵⁵ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 173.

to Díaz's fictional one. Let us now turn to that collection, and three stories therein that trace the Dominican stud at the next stages of his development.

13 “Miss Lora”: the Dominican Stud’s Psyche

13.1 Doubles and Foils, Contradictions and Inversions

“Miss Lora” treats a teenage boy’s initiation to sex (and to cheating) with an older woman who is a teacher in his high school. The second-person narrative is focalized through Yuniór, whom we encounter at different ages in other stories in the collection. The three stories I will discuss from *This Is How* read like first-person narratives in which Yuniór talks to his younger self in the present tense. Without “How to Date’s” formal parody of the instruction manual, these stories obviously originate in Yuniór’s own experience. Yuniór is once again a doubled and split figure, split between his younger self acting the story and his older self narrating the story. This split is revealed from the story’s first line: “Years later you would wonder if it hadn’t been for your brother would you have done it?” (*TIH* 149). The teacher-student dynamic plays out here in a different way than in “How to Date”: Miss Lora, though older, wiser and more experienced, is neither Yuniór’s teacher in school, nor his sexual instructor in any explicit way. Rather, their sexual encounters are where Yuniór explores sex for the first time, since his girlfriend Paloma refuses to have sex with him. Miss Lora’s professional role is that of teacher, and she does encourage Yuniór academically, leaving him brochures about undergraduate programs and offering to pay their application fees. However, their relationship is instructive for Yuniór in an organic, rather than a deliberate, way. He develops an attachment to Miss Lora beyond their sexual relationship, and long after their liaison has ended, he carries a photo of her with him and tries, but fails, to find her.

At this stage in his developmental trajectory, the Dominican stud-in-training has moved past the trials and failures described in “How to Date” and for the first time is meeting with sexual success, albeit circumscribed. The girlfriend who is his age refuses him sexually, while the older, single woman – a pariah in her community for her lack of children, her tanned skin, and her wiry frame – consents, provided their liaison is kept a secret. The secret is as much for his sake as for hers. Yuniór’s loss of his virginity signals a crucial crossing into the masculine

belonging he has anxiously awaited;²⁵⁶ however, he also feels guilty about cheating on his girlfriend. More importantly, he feels ashamed to be having sex with an older woman whose figure departs from the curvaceous ideal he and his male peers prefer. Having sex with an older woman is ideal Dominican stud behavior, and Yunior's brother Rafa is the ideal Dominican stud.²⁵⁷ But Miss Lora's body type does not fit the ideal of femininity he has been taught to value:

Miss Lora wasn't nothing exciting. There were about a thousand viejas²⁵⁸ in the neighborhood way hotter, like Mrs. del Orbe, whom your brother had fucked silly until her husband found out and moved the whole family away. Miss Lora was too skinny. Had no hips whatsoever. No breasts, either, no ass, even her hair failed to make the grade. She had her eyes, sure, but what she was most famous for in the neighborhood were her muscles. [...C]hick was wiry like a motherfucker, every single fiber standing out in outlandish definition. Bitch made Iggy Pop look chub, and every summer she caused a serious commotion at the pool. Always a bikini despite her curvelessness, the top stretching over these corded pectorals and the bottom cupping a rippling fan of haunch muscles. [...] But who could take their eyes off her? Not you or your brother. (*TIH* 153-4)

Yunior's description of Miss Lora is surprisingly derogatory, considering the liaison they will have. Given Yunior's misogynistic outlook, he likely uses the derogatory terms "chick" and "bitch" as 'neutral' designations for females. Nonetheless, he likens her to "an old shoe" and "a plastic bag full of worms" (*TIH* 154) and uses repeated negations to describe what she lacks: she "wasn't nothing exciting," with "no hips [...] No breasts, either, no ass." Why, then, his fascination with her? The answer: Rafa.

²⁵⁶ Yunior's devirginization and entrance into Dominican masculinity echoes Oscar's triumphant devirginization at the end of *Brief Wondrous Life*, although Oscar nonetheless fails to become the Dominican stud and therefore dies. Yunior in "Miss Lora" more successfully integrates his brother's lessons in studliness and survives – unlike Oscar, and unlike his brother.

²⁵⁷ Rafa is attractive ("had always been the most beautiful of boys" (*TIH* 107)), favored by their mother ("No matter what the fuck he pulled – and my brother pulled a lot of shit – she was always a hundred percent on his side, as only a Latin mom can be with her querido oldest hijo" (*TIH* 107)), seductive and womanizing ("my brother never kept a girl, ever; dude had thrown away better bitches than Pura on the regular" (*TIH* 105); "he also had mad girls in orbit" (*TIH* 37)), and misogynistic (after fingering Nilda on the bus, Rafa tells Yunior, "Smell this [...] This is what's wrong with women" (*TIH* 34)).

²⁵⁸ old women

It is not the older, female teacher who instructs the younger, male student here; an older female's authority is limited and temporary, restricted to when the boys are young. Rather Yuniór's older brother is the real mentor, for the only instruction that matters is transmitted among men. Here, the older, wiser male models the Dominican stud role, and his tastes and decisions shape Yuniór's. Rafa – a wiry boxer himself²⁵⁹ – likes Miss Lora's wiry body, and so, then, does Yuniór, even if his description would imply the opposite, and even if the neighborhood boys disagree: “All the other guys hated on her – how skinny she was, no culo,²⁶⁰ no titties, como un palito²⁶¹ but your brother didn't care. I'd fuck her” (*TIH* 149). What Rafa would do, Yuniór does; younger brother identifies with and emulates older brother, in a bid to achieve the approval of his older male role model and to attain the Dominican masculinity Rafa embodies. Given the critical tenor of Yuniór's description of Miss Lora's physique, we can wonder if he is actually attracted to her, or if he is merely mimicking his brother's taste. We see here again the production and transmission of desire from male mentors to male mentees; Rafa's desires will or have become Yuniór's.²⁶² For Yuniór, proving himself on Rafa's terms – the terms of the Dominican stud – is more important than anything else, including having a clear conscience. Michael S. Kimmel frames masculinity as homosocial enactment and approval: “We test each other, perform heroic acts, take tremendous risks, only because we want other men to attest to our virility.”²⁶³ Rafa's desire for Miss Lora is explicitly stated here, despite the other boys' disagreement, and Yuniór will follow his lead, in mimicry of his brother's desires and in fraternal competition with him. In his study of Dominican masculinity, Antonio de Moya has found that

²⁵⁹ Yuniór describes Miss Lora's and Rafa's wiry physiques in similar ways: “Rafa was still boxing then and he was cut up like crazy, the muscles on his chest and abdomen so striated they looked like something out of a Frazetta drawing” (*TIH* 31).

²⁶⁰ ass

²⁶¹ like a stick

²⁶² Nilda, in the eponymous story, is another example of a girl Rafa desires (and dates) whom Yuniór also desires (and would like to date.) That story begins: “Nilda was my brother's girlfriend. This is how all these stories begin” (*TIH* 29). This “this is how” echoes the collection's title and its rephrased ‘How To,’ and it signals that fraternal role modeling and fraternal desires are profoundly instructive for Yuniór.

²⁶³ Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia,” 129.

homosocial relations among men are experienced as competitive gendered relations in terms of domination-subordination, at least at the ‘definitory stage’ of new dyadic relationships, where they establish, probably on an unconscious basis, who is ‘the male’ (leader, initiator) and who is ‘the female’ (follower) among them.²⁶⁴

We see tense dyadic relationships between men in many of Díaz’s stories: between teacher and student in “How to Date,” between Yunior and Rafa or other men in *This Is How*. Here Yunior is clearly in the subordinate, follower position. As social relationships, these dyads instantiate gendered competitions; as strategies of characterization, they form literary doubles or foils. Yunior is split and doubled as younger actor and older narrator here; Yunior and Rafa are also doubles, opposites in some ways but identical in others. Finally, as we will see, to Yunior, Miss Lora becomes a double – in this case, a substitute – for Rafa when Rafa dies of cancer.

Before and after his passing, Rafa is Yunior’s real teacher and indirectly encourages him to pursue Miss Lora, “the profesora.”²⁶⁵ The cliché and taboo around teacher-student relationships also fuels the connection between Yunior and Miss Lora:

Today you come back from a run to find her on your stoop, talking to la Doña.²⁶⁶
Your mother calls you. Say hello to the profesora.
I’m sweaty, you protest.
Your mother flares. Who in carajo²⁶⁷ do you think you’re talking to? Say hello, coño,²⁶⁸ to la profesora.
Hello, profesora.
Hello, student.
She laughs and turns back to your mother’s conversation.
You don’t know why you’re so furious all of a sudden. (*TIH* 155)

Miss Lora jokes about Yunior’s inferior position in the age hierarchy, and Yunior is indignant: both older women have just put him in his place, yet his machismo requires that he assert his dominance. Kimmel describes the adolescent’s pursuit of masculinity as a “flight from femininity [that] is angry and frightened, because the mother can so easily emasculate the young

²⁶⁴ De Moya, “Masculinity in the Dominican Republic,” 77.

²⁶⁵ teacher

²⁶⁶ the Missus

²⁶⁷ the hell

²⁶⁸ damn it

boy by her power to render him dependent.”²⁶⁹ The repudiation of the mother, and of her ‘feminine’ traits (i.e., empathy, nurturance, etc.) indicates the acquisition of masculine gender identity. Here, two women (one, his mother, and the other, a woman his mother’s age) exercise their age-based authority over Yunió, thereby emasculating him. His burgeoning masculinity requires him to retaliate via his ‘manly’ physicality:

I could curl you, you say to her, flexing your arm.

And Miss Lora looks at you with a ridiculous grin. What in the world are you talking about? I’m the one who could pick *you* up. (*TIH* 155)

Miss Lora gets the last word, winning another round in this gendered power struggle. He, the “steroid-addicted block” (*TIH* 46), an “amateur weightlifter” turned “goddamn circus freak” (*TIH* 152), embodies a muscular ideal of masculinity; meanwhile, her physique is unusually muscular, an anti-ideal of femininity, as the neighborhood boys see it. Her musculature challenges his. In addition to her superior position in terms of age, experience, and status, she questions his physical prowess, which is at the core of his masculine self-image. Her claim, “I’m the one who could pick *you* up,” is a double entendre referencing both her musculature and the flirtation of the moment; in another gender reversal, the woman is hitting on the man, and not vice versa. His masculinity twice challenged, his anger flares; he will later seek revenge sexually and physically, rather than rhetorically. At later stages in other stories, as the stud matures and gains in age and status, the women around him lose status and power; he becomes the one with the clever rejoinder, the sly manipulation, and the power play. This instance of women ‘winning’ the gendered struggle is the exception, not the rule, and is predicated on Yunió’s lack of authority as a young person.

Much as the budding Dominican stud rejects signs of the feminine in himself by refusing empathy and by treating women harshly, here we see the obverse in the brothers’ desire for Miss Lora. A woman whose physique and independence speak of the masculine is a form of the feminine they want both *for* themselves – in the context of sexual conquest – and *within* themselves: seducing a woman like Miss Lora permits the integration of her desirable ‘masculine’ qualities into these boys’ budding masculinities. Miss Lora’s wiry gymnast frame

²⁶⁹ Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia,” 127.

resembles Rafa's wiry boxer frame, and both are physiques the bulky bodybuilder Yunior admires. Though Yunior has taken pains to distinguish himself from his older sibling, both physically and otherwise, his admiration for Rafa is clear. Physically as well as morally, Yunior identifies ambivalently with Rafa, trying both to emulate his brother and to distinguish himself from him.²⁷⁰ They are alike and different, twinned doubles and opposite foils. Despite vocal critiques of Rafa's behavior, attitude, and treatment of him, Yunior aches for his brother's love and approval; his desire for Miss Lora, a woman critiqued by the neighborhood boys but valued by Rafa, is a case in point. Yunior's desire for Miss Lora's body is ultimately a transferred desire for Rafa's body – a wiry, male physique unavailable to Yunior physically just as Rafa is unavailable to Yunior emotionally. Rafa's cruelty to Yunior is illustrated in multiple stories in both *Drown* and *This Is How*.²⁷¹ During his illness, he tries to run away multiple times, thereby physically absenting himself, and in his final weeks, he refuses to speak to Yunior or their mother, becoming emotionally absent:

In those last weeks when he finally became too feeble to run away he refused to talk to you or your mother. Didn't utter a single word until he died. [...] It wounded you, that stubborn silence. His last fucking days and he wouldn't say a word. You'd ask him something straight up, How are you feeling today, and Rafa would just turn his head. Like you all didn't deserve an answer. Like no one did. (*TIH* 150)

After Rafa's passing, Yunior has only Rafa's memory, including the lessons Rafa taught him, to hold on to. Yunior's intimacy with Miss Lora's body is, within a heterosexual paradigm, the closest he can get to closeness with his brother, his only male family member and mentor. Interestingly, though Miss Lora's body recalls the masculine within the feminine and her

²⁷⁰ In "Nilda," Yunior describes Rafa: "You should have seen him in those days: he had the face bones of a saint. [...] He had us all, the way only a pretty nigger can. [...] I had an IQ that would have broken you in two but I would have traded it in for a halfway decent face in a second" (*TIH* 30-1). We see Yunior's admiration for Rafa's attractiveness and seductiveness, contrasted with his perception of his own unattractiveness. At the same time, Rafa dates Nilda, has sex with her, and mistreats her, and Yunior disapproves: "I wanted to kill myself with embarrassment" (*TIH* 38).

²⁷¹ Rafa threatens and exerts physical violence against Yunior: "I'll fucking cut your throat" (*TIH* 109); "I'm going to burn you alive" (*TIH* 132); he throws a padlock in Yunior's face and taunts, "Didn't I tell you I was going to fix you?" (*TIH* 118).

character is atypical, her emotional countenance with Yuniór is stereotypically feminine: she is caring, nurturing and empathetic with Yuniór during his time of grief.

Miss Lora's superior social status as older adult, the taboo against their relationship, the secret of the cheating, and of course, Yuniór's initiation to sex make their liaison all the more exciting. And yet Yuniór is simultaneously guilty and anxious. The story opens on a guilty note that immediately transfers blame to an older male role model: "Years later you would wonder if it hadn't been for your brother would you have done it?" (*TIH* 149). Yuniór shifts the responsibility for his error – his infidelity to Paloma, his pursuit of an older woman with an unconventional physique – onto his brother's endorsement. This practice of deflecting blame onto the brother and father in whose footsteps Yuniór follows is a recurrent justification he offers for his infidelity and womanizing. And justifications are required because, according to another moral logic that inhabits Yuniór alongside the logic of the stud, he feels his actions are wrong. For reasons we have seen, these young Dominican American men are compelled to pursue the Dominican stud role at all costs, but this is not without a degree of internal tension with regards to the hurt and dishonesty this lifestyle requires. Indeed, the narrative arc of the stories of *This Is How* follows the developmental trajectory of the incorrigibly unfaithful Dominican stud who hurts many women along the way. Only when he himself is finally hurt by the fiancée who leaves him does he fully register the errors of his ways and take responsibility for his past.

Across the different stories, we glimpse moments of Yuniór's discomfort with lying and cheating. However, these negative feelings are most often outweighed by the social benefits that stud behavior brings him. As we will see, Díaz gives us some explicit evidence of Yuniór's guilt and unease; on other occasions, we hear women reproaching men, and thereby transmitting the moral judgment to which the men are subject – a parallel moral logic of non-lying and non-cheating that they have also internalized, but that conflicts with the exigencies of the Dominican stud type. In these ways, we witness the internal moral dissonance the young men manage, for Díaz's younger Yuniórs are anything but cold, heartless womanizers; on the contrary, they are sensitive, emotionally vulnerable young men who feel truly for the women in their lives. In mature Yuniór's final form in the collection's last pages, we see him *begin* to acknowledge his identification and empathy with women, *begin* to integrate female moral perspectives into his own, and *begin* to turn away from the macho stud role. In "Miss Lora," Yuniór is negotiating

both the exigencies of masculinity, which demand harshness and insensitivity, and his own sensitivity and susceptibility, evident here:

You were at an age where you could fall in love with a girl over an expression, over a gesture. That's what happened with your girlfriend, Paloma – she stooped to pick up her purse and your heart flew out of you. That's what happened with Miss Lora, too. (*TIH* 150)

Yunior is many seemingly contradictory things, including a young man who falls in love in a heartbeat. This teenage Yunior, for his sentimentality and vulnerability, is certainly not the hardened Dominican stud he wishes to and will be. While he notes Miss Lora's physique at the pool with his stud-instructor brother, he also notes her personality and humanity:

So you talked about the Coming Doomsday to whoever would listen – to your history teacher, [...] to your boy stationed in Panama [...], to your around-the-corner neighbor, Miss Lora. That was what connected you two at first. She listened. (*TIH* 152)

Yunior is not yet the social stereotype of the Dominican stud, though he strives to achieve it. Díaz characterizes Yunior sympathetically: Yunior, in his multiple marginality, his adolescent angst, his grief, and his apocalyptic fantasies, is certainly worthy of the reader's compassion.

While sexual success serves a vital social function for Yunior – acceptance by his male peers and therefore a sense of collective belonging – in the case of this secret liaison, Yunior does not share his success with his friends. On the contrary, even years later, he is petrified that someone will find out. He receives no external validation for this first studly accomplishment; sex does not serve as a means of social climbing in this instance, although he may feel privately gratified by his success. His relationship with Miss Lora, while obviously about satisfying the desires of an adolescent boy discovering sex for the first time, is emotionally powerful. After he and Miss Lora have intercourse for the first time, he thinks, “You wonder if she feels like you do. Like it might be love” (*TIH* 159). Once their affair has ended and they have both moved away, he has trouble moving on and connecting with girls his age. His emotional attachment is apparent to readers, filtered as it is through his older self's narration, but it is stilted and inarticulate to the women he cares for. It is because of these attachments to both Miss Lora and Paloma that guilt and shame accompany his deceitful behavior. Male role modeling is often

identified, both by the guilty and by the women they deceive, as the justification for their behavior.

Yunior wishes to distinguish himself from Rafa and from the unfaithful behavior he disapproves of, but ultimately Yunior follows suit. He claims, speaking to himself, “You ain’t your brother, who would’ve run right over and put a rabo²⁷² in Miss Lora” (*TIH* 156). This statement of non-equivalence shows Yunior’s attempt to differentiate his identity from his brother’s, almost as an adolescent boy might differentiate himself from his father during adolescence. There is no father to separate from here, so Rafa is the older male standard from which Yunior seeks to deviate. Yet his desire for Miss Lora – something learned from the brother he also ambivalently emulates – remains strong. His dreams reveal the inner turmoil he suffers: “You have a couple dreams where you are about to touch her and then the bomb blows NYC to kingdom come” (*TIH* 157). The forces pushing against his pursuit of Miss Lora are ultimately weaker than those pushing for it. Despite claiming “You ain’t your brother,” shortly thereafter he muses, “Maybe if you were someone else you would have the discipline to duck the whole thing but you are your father’s son and your brother’s brother” (*TIH* 158). Yunior succinctly defines his identity here in relation to the important male figures in his life and to their unfaithful ways. His ambivalence²⁷³ is captured by this blatant contradiction. In psychoanalytic terms, this contradiction reflects the conflicts 1) between the id’s drive for sex and the superego’s moral proscription against infidelity;²⁷⁴ and 2) between the faithful self Yunior wants to be, and the shadow self who does things he does not endorse. Rafa embodies this conflict within Yunior: he is the shadow Yunior wants to separate from, but that is a part of him; he is Yunior’s dark side.²⁷⁵ We will return to Jung’s notion of the shadow below.

²⁷² tail (vulgar); cock

²⁷³ In her analysis of Díaz’s “melancholic brotherhood of the street” in *Drown*, Sandín identifies consistent ambivalence in the narrators’ relationships with their doubles. Here, the doubles are literally brothers, and Yunior’s ambivalence is evident. Sandín, *Killing Spanish*, 116.

²⁷⁴ In Freud’s model of the psyche, the id is the psychological agency that is unconscious, containing repressed instincts and drives; it is the “great reservoir of libido.” The superego is the conscience that strives to maintain a balance between desire, morality and action and often comes into conflict with the id’s sexual and aggressive desires. Teitelbaum, “Id,” 849-850; and Beit-Hallahmi, “Superego,” 1754.

²⁷⁵ Carl Jung’s notion of the shadow builds on Freud’s formulation of the unconscious and the id. Stephen A. Diamond defines it as follows: “The shadow is the unknown ‘dark side’ of our

Once Yuniór has sensed Miss Lora's interest, he sees her unloading groceries in the neighborhood. He is more frightened than tempted:

You consider bolting but your brother's law holds you in place. *Never run*. A law he ultimately abrogated but which you right now cannot. You ask meekly: You want help with that, Miss Lora? (*TIH* 158)

It is his "brother's law" – to rise to a sexual challenge, to pursue any available woman, to mask fear and perform confidence – that holds Yuniór; indeed, it binds him even more strongly than it binds Rafa, who literally ran away from home during his illness. The figure of the Dominican *tiguere* (tiger) connects closely to the figure of the Dominican stud; we could say that the stud is a subcategory of *tiguere*s. Christian Krohn-Hansen defines the *tiguere* as a figure of hegemonic Dominican masculinity; one of the *tiguere*'s salient characteristics is that he is a *mujeriego*, a womanizer.²⁷⁶ In addition, the *tiguere* is a survivor, a gifted talker and trickster who is cunning, convincing, courageous and intelligent. He is an ambiguous figure of masculinity, for he is seen both positively and negatively.²⁷⁷ Krohn-Hansen writes: "He does not at any time step back, stop chasing, or lose sight of his aim (be it women, money, a job, a promotion, etc.)."²⁷⁸ Rafa is certainly the paradigmatic stud and a *tiguere*: an egregious womanizer, a gifted talker and manipulator. An ambiguous figure, he is likeable (at least by women) and, in Yuniór's words, "a super asshole" (*TIH* 149). Rafa's "law" compels his brother to follow suit: to never run, to survive. Ironically, in his last months, Rafa does run, and does not survive cancer. Yuniór holds his ground here and survives, later becoming the stereotypical Dominican stud. We see Rafa's "law" of Dominican masculinity here upheld as a mechanism of survival; Rafa's failure to never

personality – dark both because it tends to consist predominantly of the primitive, benighted, negative, and socially or religiously depreciated human emotions and impulses like sexual lust, power strivings, selfishness, greed, envy, aggression, anger, or rage, and due to its unenlightened nature, obscured from consciousness. Whatever we deem evil, inferior, or unacceptable and deny in ourselves becomes part of the shadow, the counterpoint to what Jung called the persona or conscious ego personality."

Diamond, "Shadow," 1641.

²⁷⁶ Krohn-Hansen, "Masculinity and the Political," 115.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 120, 123.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

run can be connected to his failure, in the end, to survive. This split between foil characters that succeed and fail echoes hegemonic stud Yuniór's survival and counter-hegemonic anti-stud Oscar's death in *Brief Wondrous Life*.

Rafa's "law" of normative Dominican stud behavior is more powerful than the voice of Yuniór's insecurity, than the punishment presaged by his apocalyptic dreams, and than the voice of moral dissent he hears in his conscience, a female voice made articulate by his girlfriend Paloma:

That old fucking hag? That's *disgusting*.
You're telling me, you say in a forlorn tone.
That would be like fucking a stick, she says.
It would be, you confirm.
You better not fuck her, Paloma warns you after a pause.
What are you talking about?
I'm just telling you. Don't fuck her. You know I'll find out. You're a terrible liar.
Don't be a crazy person, you say, glaring. I'm not fucking anyone. Clearly. (*TIH* 157)

Yuniór appears to integrate Paloma's moral position and proscription into himself, but he is lying – apparently not such a terrible liar after all. Away from Paloma, Yuniór succumbs to temptation, going against the moral imperative women (i.e., girlfriends, mothers) announce as he follows the behavioral imperative his brother's model of masculinity outlines. Yuniór's liaison with Miss Lora echoes Rafa's liaison with Mrs. del Orbe, which caused their mother to punch him, "helpless with shame and fury, which only made him laugh" (*TIH* 156). The logic of the stud trumps all other logics; and the norms compelling his performance of the stud role are stronger than any counter force.

Girlfriends issue warnings, mothers punch in fury, but women are depicted as helpless when faced with the Dominican stud's wily ways. Years later, when Yuniór has spoken of his high school affair with his college girlfriend, she slyly brings it up with his mother:

Your mother shakes her head in disgust. He's just like his father and his brother.
Dominican men, right, Doña?
These three are worse than the rest. (*TIH* 170)

Here we see men and women alike attribute the Dominican stud's blameworthy behavior to patrilineal descent, and treat it as a genetic imperative rather than the exercise of an individual's

free will. Yuniór's pleas that he is his "father's son" and his "brother's brother" attempt to absolve him of responsibility for his behavior, as he helplessly follows the path laid out by his male antecedents. This is the path of the *sucio*, the Dominican stud/slut:

Both your father and your brother were sucios. Shit, you father used to take you on his pussy runs, leave you in the car while he ran up into cribs to bone his girlfriends. Your brother was no better, boning girls in the bed next to yours. 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 kidding yourself. The blood always shows [...]. (*TIH* 161)

Here as Yuniór reproaches his male family members, he is speaking for himself (deflected through the second person), but rehearsing the moral judgment his mother announced above. He has integrated his mother's voice into himself and internalized her moral judgment of him, even as he behaves contrary to her moral code, following his brother's law and his father's example. He treats his cheating as a regrettable genetic imperative and inevitability; mothers and girlfriends corroborate this, even as they critique unfaithful Dominican men. Clearly guilty and regretful, Yuniór's tone is defeated: "the blood always shows." Older male blood relatives, and a broader cultural lineage ("Dominican men, right, Doña?") came before him, laying out the path for him to follow. This path is that of the stereotypical Dominican stud. De Moya describes infidelity as a component of hegemonic Dominican masculinity, which is commonly treated as patrilineal inheritance:

Sporadic or recurrent unfaithfulness to one's wife, or having a mistress and children, may be a common power display, as part of a certain transgressiveness allowed to the hegemonic male [...]. Men's loyalty is directed towards their children, mostly to boys, who are supposed to "inherit" their father's masculinity.²⁷⁹

Yuniór pleads powerlessness in front of a force stronger than his will: "You are sixteen and you have a feeling that now that the Ass Engine has started, no force on the earth will ever stop it" (*TIH* 165). He and his mother both claim helplessness; like the "malcriado" from "How to Date," Yuniór is her husband's spawn, not her own, and her rules and reproaches are to no avail. In effect, her boys prove her right: she is powerless to control them and their infidelities, and his

²⁷⁹ De Moya, "Masculinity in the Dominican Republic," 82.

college girlfriend echoes the older woman's defeatist attitude. We see here how multiple voices texture Yunior's moral fabric; the self includes the mother, the brother, the father, and others. Sometimes these voices conflict, and Yunior's discomfort is palpable here. Dominican masculinity requires the silencing of the female voice within.

Claiming, as Yunior and the women in his life do, that his woman-chasing and infidelity are inherited by patrilineal descent places socially produced, learned behaviors on a par with biological descent. Yunior blames "the blood" as he simultaneously offers anecdotal evidence of behavioral models he has observed and emulated (i.e., his father's "pussy runs"). Yunior's rationalization glosses nurture as nature, in an attempt to deny his responsibility. This move reveals two contradictions. In the first contradiction, Yunior's appeal to a genetic predisposition to cheat contradicts a performative understanding of identity. When Yunior claims his infidelity is due to "the blood" and "the gene," he advances an inheritance defense that treats learned behaviors (i.e., infidelity, masculinity, machismo) as if they were inherited. Performativity, in contrast, treats identities as learned and performed, even those identity features often seen as innate (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender). As my discussion has shown, Díaz's treatment of identity follows the logic of performativity: his play with the instruction manual form and his sustained depiction of male-to-male instruction represent identity roles as taught, learned and performed, and their adoption as socially compelled, not innate. Yunior's stud logic, with its inheritance defense, therefore inverts Díaz's performative logic. This is another instance where Yunior says the opposite of what Díaz means, at least with respect to this specific issue. Contradiction and inversion are literary modes Díaz uses. One effect they have is to obscure the author's position, which is masked behind his character's, thus making his intervention harder to pin down.

In the second contradiction, two incompatible readings are invited. We can read Yunior's inheritance defense as valid, given the social pressures and exclusions that have shaped him: Yunior has 'inherited' (learned) the stud role from his father. Or we can read the narrative trajectory of *This Is How*, which traces Yunior's developmental trajectory toward mature masculinity, as confirming Yunior's individual responsibility for his actions, therefore invalidating the inheritance defense. In the first reading, Yunior's inheritance defense is a misphrased way for him to point to the role of environment and cultural training in his cheating. Understood this way, as a claim about Yunior's socialization rather than about his genetics, Yunior's claim bolsters Díaz's sustained representation of the overpowering influence of social

and cultural norms, particularly for those vulnerable in other ways. Díaz emphasizes the ways his Dominican American male protagonists are multiply marginalized and socially vulnerable, and therefore follow in older male role models' womanizing footsteps *because of* their vulnerability and because they have no alternative role models of masculinity. Such a reading makes Yuniór a blameless product of his environment and upbringing (which he erroneously identifies as "the blood"). However, in the second reading, Yuniór's inheritance defense captures a particular phase in his developmental trajectory – one in which he denies responsibility for his actions and seeks to transfer blame onto others – that will be rectified in maturity, when he comes to accept responsibility. Yuniór's stance evolves from stud wannabe ("Miss Lora"), to confirmed Dominican stud ("Alma" and "The Cheater's Guide"), and then to reformed stud ("The Cheater's Guide"). In this final phase, mature masculinity involves taking responsibility for his choices, facing the consequences of his dishonesty, and renouncing the Dominican stud role. Díaz has said that this collection is "about love and consequences";²⁸⁰ indeed, Yuniór grows out of the inheritance defense to accept consequences. Such a reading makes Yuniór an agent with free will responsible for his actions, not the helpless product of his environment. These two readings conflict, yet Díaz's narrative invites both. In this hip, modern *bildungsroman*, there is a tension between an individualistic, free will model of coming of age, and a socially contextualized model emphasizing the role environment (including familial role modeling) plays in a person's development. While Yuniór evolves from denying responsibility to accepting it, and this developmental trajectory fits with the novel as *bildungsroman*, this tension affects how we interpret Díaz's treatment of the stud. Is Yuniór responsible and therefore reproachable, or helpless and therefore blameless?

Here I rephrase the nature-nurture debate as a debate between free will and therefore personal responsibility, on the one hand, and the power of socialization and therefore limited personal responsibility, on the other; both debates lack a clear conclusion. Yet the contradiction between these two visions of individual responsibility participates in what I argue is Díaz's ambivalent treatment of the Dominican stud. For Yuniór is endearing, likeable, and very forgivable here in this story; this readerly stance is meticulously constructed by Díaz at the story's opening. Yuniór's liaison with Miss Lora is framed first as the result of his older

²⁸⁰ Díaz, "Fifteen Questions."

brother's guidance (and therefore not Yuniór's fault); then we promptly learn of Rafa's death and Yuniór's "fulgurating sadness over it" (*TIH* 150). Guiltily cheating on his girlfriend is really nothing compared to losing a brother. Yuniór is vulnerable to his circumstances, and therefore excused for his less than upstanding behavior. This, in my view, *justified* excuse for Yuniór's adolescent cheating behavior lays the groundwork for, in my view, a *less justified* sympathetic depiction of Yuniór's womanizing later in life when he is more empowered, more mature, less distraught, less aggrieved. Older Yuniór has gained status, power and experience and should be held responsible for his actions, rather than forgiven. Yet even when Yuniór is less deserving of sympathy and forgiveness, Díaz continues to characterize the misogynistic stud in a sympathetic way. My analysis of "Alma" and "The Cheater's Guide" will flesh out this contrast and show how Díaz's continued sympathetic treatment of the Dominican stud can easily be read as condoning the stud's misogynistic ways rather than critiquing patriarchy and heteronormativity.

13.2 Losing Her, Losing Him: Melancholic Introjection

Miss Lora is ridiculed by the neighborhood Dominican community for her nonconformist behaviors and body type. She is an outcast of sorts, and Yuniór feels himself to be, too:

It was 1985. You were sixteen years old and you were messed up and alone like a motherfucker. You also were convinced – utterly convinced – that the world was going to blow itself to pieces. Almost every night you had nightmares [...]. In your dreams the bombs were always going off, evaporating you while you walked, while you ate a chicken wing [...]. You would wake up biting your own tongue in terror, the blood dribbling down your chin.

Someone really should have medicated you. (*TIH* 150-1)

Yuniór is drawn to Miss Lora because they are both outcasts, but also because she is a source of great comfort to him during a particularly painful time in his life. In this story, Yuniór is suffering from three forms of loss, loss being a central theme identified in the collection's title. With Rafa's death, Yuniór has lost 1) a brother, 2) his only older male relative and role model, and 3) his mother's attention, as she has grown absent due to grief. As previously mentioned, "Miss Lora" opens when Yuniór assigns blame to his brother for his liaison with Miss Lora. This

opening is followed immediately by Rafa's death:²⁸¹ "Your brother. Dead now a year and sometimes you still feel a fulgurating sadness over it even though he really was a super asshole at the end" (*TIH* 149). This is the reason given for Yuniór's emotional vulnerability ("you were messed up and alone like a motherfucker") and his desire for female companionship ("You were at the age where you could fall in love with a girl over an expression, a gesture"). The structure of the story's opening sets out the connections among loss, grief and the pursuit of an older woman who, we have seen, is a surrogate and double for the departed brother. Though a mere two paragraphs are devoted to Rafa's death at the beginning of the story, his death and Yuniór's grief pervade the text as the central absence that animates Yuniór's actions and decisions. Freud's notion of melancholia is useful here to understand Yuniór's process of ambivalent identification with Rafa and his negative affect.

Melancholia is a depressive state following the loss of a love object –sometimes, although not necessarily, the death of a loved one. Freud describes the principal traits associated with melancholia: "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment."²⁸² Alban Jeanneau characterizes melancholia as "a form of pessimism [...] accompanied by ideas of guilt and unworthiness, which find expression through self-accusation and can even give rise to delusion."²⁸³ Indeed, Yuniór has nightmares about the apocalypse, expecting to be "evaporat[ed]" (*TIH* 151) by bombs that destroy the world; these anxieties can be read as delusional expectations of punishment resulting from loss and grief turned inwards and against the self, though Yuniór is of course not at fault for his brother's death.

²⁸¹ Rafa's death is explored more thoroughly in "Nilda" and "The Pura Principle," the second and sixth stories of the collection. His formerly lean, athletic physique gives way to an emaciated, cancer-ridden frame. For Yuniór, Miss Lora's skinny body may call up either Rafa's healthy or sick body, and closeness to her body in the wake of his brother's passing is a way for Yuniór to grasp at an impossible closeness with his departed brother.

²⁸² Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 243.

²⁸³ Jeanneau, "Melancholia," 1037.

The grieving, melancholic person turns against himself and attributes his negative affect and loss to his own failings. This occurs through the process of introjection, wherein the melancholic person's identity blurs with that of the lost loved one. When the lost love object is introjected, what is felt and thought about the self is in fact in reference to the lost other. Freud explains that the melancholic's violent self-accusations are

hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but that with insignificant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love. [...] [T]he self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it onto the patient's own ego. The woman who loudly pities her husband for being tied to such an incapable wife as herself is really accusing her husband of being incapable.²⁸⁴

When Yuniór says of himself, "you were messed up and alone like a motherfucker," "Someone really should have medicated you," and describes his terror and anxiety at the forthcoming doom he dreams about, he is really describing Rafa who, ill with leukemia that at first goes untreated, is "messed up," unmedicated, terrorized and isolated by his impending death. The melancholic introjection – an unconscious identification with the lost love object and an unconscious adoption of his attitudes and behavior – is apparent here. Yuniór's identity blurs with Rafa's, his literary double and foil, as he mimics his brother's behavior. In his aggrieved state, Yuniór begins to engage in cheating behaviors that his own conscience proscribes and for which he reproached Rafa. This cheating occurs with the woman who is the surrogate for the lost role model he emulates. Even as reproaches of the self are covert reproaches of Rafa, Yuniór also fulfills the promise of infidelity announced by his predecessors and makes himself worthy of the same reproach. Yuniór accuses his father and brother of being "sucios of the worst kind" and then turns this accusation on himself: "now it's official: you are one, too" (*TIH* 161). This moment entails both a melancholic deflection of reproach for Rafa, and since Yuniór has adopted Rafa's behavior and identity, a direct reproach of Yuniór himself. He is gloomy and guilty, but despite promises to stop there, he returns to Miss Lora many times, both during his relationship with Paloma and after. His critique of his brother becomes a self-fulfilling self-critique, as he parrots his brother's cheating behavior with a woman named parrot who is a stand-in for his departed brother.

²⁸⁴ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 247.

Díaz's choice of names is significant. In Spanish, a *lora* is a female parrot. Parroting calls up the intertwined processes of mimicry and performativity: normative masculinity is acquired by mimicking behavioral models and demands that men assert their masculinity performatively at all times. Yuniór parrots Rafa's behaviors and desires when he pursues Miss Lora, the parrot; incidentally, her body recalls Rafa's since it parrots a masculine ideal of lean musculature. A *paloma* is a dove, and Paloma is Yuniór's girlfriend who refuses him sex. Her sexual refusal likewise refuses Yuniór access to the masculinity he seeks (and that Miss Lora provides). Paloma's name can then be understood as the feminization of *palomo*, a term we've seen applied to Oscar in *Brief Wondrous Life* to refer to a man at the bottom of the hierarchy of heterosexual men. Yuniór, as a virgin refused sex by Paloma, is therefore a *palomo* until he successfully parrots Rafa's sexual success with Miss Lora, the parrot. Furthermore, Yuniór is Rafa's junior, and (at least in *Drown*) his father Ramón's namesake: Ramón Yuniór (*Drown* 204). Yuniór's name thus confirms his paternal inheritance in terms of name and unfaithful Dominican stud status. Yuniór may also be Díaz's double and junior.

We see here the connections among several processes central to my argument: *literary doubling*, which reflects the competitive gendered relationships of male dyads; *melancholic introjection*, whereby the identities of the doubles blur. The unconscious adoption of the other's behaviors that results from melancholic introjection calls up both *mimicry* and *performativity*, both of which are processes of identity role acquisition. Closely related to these last two, a *stereotype* is a subtype of identity, also transmitted by instruction and mimicry and also performative. Here we see Rafa, the stereotypical Dominican stud, first reproached by his younger brother Yuniór who judges Rafa's infidelity harshly; so Rafa is Yuniór's literary foil and Jungian shadow. The two brothers are opposites and competitors in a contest of masculinity. Then we see Rafa introjected into Yuniór's self as Yuniór mimics his brother's stud behavior and speaks to himself as an unconscious way to speak to his lost brother; so Rafa is Yuniór's literary double, melancholically introjected. The stud stereotype's behavior is transmitted and perpetuated by processes of socialization, explicit instruction and unconscious psychological mechanisms that include performativity and mimicry (of which introjection is a kind).

In moments of sexual and emotional intimacy with Miss Lora, Yunion attains closeness with his brother via this female form that resembles Rafa's. Miss Lora and Yunion have anal sex (*TIH* 163), therefore calling up homosexual sex between Yunion and Rafa²⁸⁵ via heterosexual sex between Yunion and Miss Lora. During the sexual act, Yunion is able to identify and commune with his departed brother by penetrating a body that resembles Rafa's, a body that Rafa also desired. The guilt he feels about this liaison may derive not only from the moral tension he feels as he cheats, but also from a subconscious slippage between brother and lover, as the taboos against both incest and homosexuality that categorize the Dominican stud's sexual logic are breached here, if indirectly. Indeed, Yunion's description of Rafa as a "super asshole" can be read to corroborate this redirected homosexual desire.

Even though Yunion penetrates Miss Lora sexually in a grasp at closeness with his late brother, he reacts strongly when Miss Lora draws her own connection between the two brothers. She says: "You know, you look like your brother. [...] I couldn't believe how good-looking he was" (*TIH* 162). Yunion responds with anger and aggression that he expresses sexually. Although being with Miss Lora is a circuitous way of emulating and communing with his brother, and although Yunion is transferring a need for closeness with Rafa onto a need for closeness with Miss Lora, Yunion is angered when she performs her own transference between the two brothers. Her comments imply that she too is transferring desire from a lost love object onto a surrogate, essentially having sex with Yunion in a wish to have sex with Rafa, just as Yunion is having sex with Miss Lora in a wish to have sex with, or at least be close to, Rafa.

²⁸⁵ In "The Pura Principle," when Rafa is rummaging through his mother's bedroom looking for money to steal, Yunion happens upon him: "He came out of the closet" (*TIH* 112). The phrasing seems too apt to be accidental. If Díaz is here hinting at some closeted homosexuality in Rafa, the Dominican stud *par excellence*, and/or in Yunion, his successor, then this passage can again be read in contradictory ways. Read from the aggressively heterosexual position Rafa and *This Is How* advance, it calls out Rafa's secret, shameful failure at heterosexual Dominican masculinity, critiquing Rafa's queerness on his own patriarchal and heteronormative terms and therefore reinforcing these. Alternatively, from the perspective of the politically leftist critique-of-heteronormativity position Díaz advances outside his fiction, the passage can be read to highlight the artifice of the Dominican stud role and its excessive performances of heterosexuality: hinting at Rafa's homosexuality highlights that his performance of heterosexuality is over the top, excessive.

Miss Lora, for her part, responds to Yuniór's anger with caring. Though she is not his teacher in any sense, she is an older, wiser figure offering care and companionship at a time when Yuniór has none: his father absent, his brother deceased, his mother "somewhere else" (*TIH* 165) since the death of her eldest son. Miss Lora soothes him in a time of grief and loneliness, as he wrestles with his own manhood and the loss of his two primary male role models. Miss Lora offers a female model of empathy that, at this stage, Yuniór is only beginning to value. Though Yuniór plays the cold, unemotional macho, we see his efforts at care and empathy, asking Rafa, "How are you feeling today?" (*TIH* 150), massaging Rafa's aching shins (*TIH* 37), and checking in on him when he goes to work ill (*TIH* 98). We also see Yuniór uncharacteristically praising of his ex-girlfriend Paloma as they part ways: he tells her, "I am proud of you [...]. You are an extraordinary young woman" (*TIH* 168). At this stage, Yuniór is vacillating between different modes of emotionality, trying on the postures of the unemotional, unempathetic male modeled by his brother, while also revealing a more sensitive, romantic, and empathetic side that he shows only rarely. The caring, empathetic kindness of his older, female lover is a model he does not consciously emulate, consumed as he is by the task of following his brother's model. Signs of a latent emotional generosity appear from time to time, and as Yuniór matures, we can trace his shifting relationships with machismo and empathy. Yuniór's sensitive, caring moments and melancholic grief contribute to Díaz's sympathetic depiction of him. Following Miss Lora's empathetic example, the reader's empathy is encouraged by Yuniór's sad tale of fraternal loss.

Yuniór's grief for Rafa is ambivalent and complicated, as his brother was at once an asshole and a mentor, a loved one and a jerk giving his family the silent treatment. Yuniór replicates much of Rafa's behavior, including his silence when Miss Lora asks Yuniór, "How are you doing? How is your mother? And you never knew what to say. Your tongue was always swollen, raw, from being blown to atoms in your sleep" (*TIH* 155). The boundary between self and brother blur, and Yuniór manifests the depressive, self-accusatory and pessimistic traits of the melancholic who identifies ambivalently with his lost love object. Jeanneau writes, "For melancholia to occur, the object relationship must be ambivalent: hate and love must be in

contention [...] doing battle against one another in various parts of the unconscious psyche.”²⁸⁶ Love and hate for Rafa are in tension within Yuniór, just as different voices jostle for dominance in his conscience: the male voice advancing machismo and infidelity, embodied by Rafa, and the female voice advancing fidelity and empathy, embodied by Paloma and Yuniór’s mother. It is noteworthy that Miss Lora, a female with a ‘masculine’ physique, does *not* speak out against his infidelities as other women do, but rather enables them. Her physique indexes her moral position and voice, and these parrot those of macho studs who cheat. Yuniór’s ambivalence about Rafa, the quintessential Dominican stud, echoes Díaz’s ambivalent treatment of this stereotype.

Yuniór’s use of second-person address to ostensibly address himself is complicated here by the deflection of accusation inherent in melancholia. In his second-person narration, he addresses himself as ‘you,’ describes his gloom and guilt, and reproaches himself for his own weakness. However, the state of melancholia explains these self-accusations as deflected accusations intended for the lost love object. Though Yuniór appears to address himself as ‘you,’ here he is first addressing Rafa, accusing his dead brother of various moral failings that he redirects onto himself. In the disguised manner of the melancholic, Yuniór manifests his unresolved grief and pain by accusations against a ‘you’ that, this time, is in fact *not* the self but an other – the lost other for whom his grief is unresolved, with whom he identifies uneasily and ambivalently. Whereas in “How to Date,” the speaker feigns to address another as ‘you’ but is more likely addressing himself, here the speaker feigns to address himself as ‘you’ but is in fact addressing another – his departed brother. Díaz uses inversion once again. Yuniór both admires and reproaches this brother, whose “law” and voice he has imperfectly integrated into his psyche alongside contradictory female voices of morality; whose shoes he wishes to fill but whose behavior he condemns then mimics; whom he loves but also dislikes. Given Yuniór’s mimicry of Rafa’s reprehensible behavior, the melancholic Yuniór’s indirect reproach of his lost brother then *also* addresses Yuniór himself.

Yuniór’s imperfect integration of his brother’s and others’ voices into his self makes for the dizzying self-reflexivity of his second-person address: the ‘I’ speaking to ‘you’ is always Yuniór, but his voice is also a channel for a number of other voices and positions (mothers,

²⁸⁶ Jeanneau, “Melancholia,” 1038.

girlfriends, brothers, friends). The second person at times also addresses Miss Lora. Yuniór pursues the woman Rafa wanted and whose physique resembles Rafa's; the slippage between brother and lover also occurs vocally, for Yuniór's speech and thoughts about Miss Lora can at times be read as referring to Rafa and to his grief for Rafa. "You're scared she'd laugh at you" (*TIH* 156), as his mocking older brother would. "So you try to keep your mind off her" (*TIH* 156), as he tries to keep his mind off his brother's death, but "It takes a long time to get over it" (*TIH* 169). To add one more layer to this complex matrix of perspectives, Yuniór sometimes uses the second person to speak to Miss Lora as a way to speak to Rafa. He tells her, "I dreamed that something happened to you" (*TIH* 163), and then, "You know this ain't going to last, you tell her" (*TIH* 169), just as something happened to Rafa and this (admittedly fraught) closeness came to an end. He will lose Miss Lora, as he lost Rafa, as he lost his father. This is one further example of the polyvocality that the second-person address permits. 'You' is a prism through which multiple identities are refracted, and through which our protagonist's multi-layered identity plays out.

The fact that Miss Lora's company – physical as well as emotional – is a great comfort to Yuniór during his time of trial confirms the deeper motivation guiding his behavior: his liaison with Miss Lora, more than a mundane act of adolescent cheating, brings him much-needed comfort during this period of melancholic grieving following Rafa's passing. And Rafa's passing, a significant loss in itself, calls up the foundational loss that Yuniór and boys like him, suffer: the absent father. Yuniór's anxious search for identity and relentless pursuit of the stud role seeks to fill the vacuum left by absent male role models in a context where belonging is vital and elusive, and where men are exclusively empowered to confer it. Identities blur in a sequence of substitutions, introjections and doublings that respond to, but fail to compensate for, the loss that drives the stud's existence. Skinny female lover stands in for skinny deceased brother, who stands in for absent father. Sandín argues that, in *Drown*, Rafa is a "textbook melancholic" grieving his absent father.²⁸⁷ In another sequence of substitutions, I see Yuniór as melancholic grieving his deceased brother, who replaced their absent father for whom Rafa was melancholic. Melancholia refracts through the generations and introjection guides the assimilation of the stud

²⁸⁷ Sandín, *Killing Spanish*, 118.

role into the self. The second person instantiates formally the psychological distress and fragmented identity of the Dominican stud-in-training.

Díaz's collection, ostensibly about losing "her," is thus as poignantly about losing "him": absent, departed and deceased male elders whose scant guidance models maladaptive relationships with women. When successful, these male-male relationships could compensate for other forms of powerlessness and exclusion, but in Díaz's treatment, they are always fraught, if not completely broken. Excluded from white hegemonic forms of belonging in the U.S., Díaz's protagonists seek inclusion and legitimacy in a Dominican community of men but rarely receive it, and if they do, it is only at the expense of other men. Norms of masculinity, and the Dominican stud role in particular, are amplified and over-valued precisely because male role models are few and often absent, leaving only their memories and the memories of their lessons behind. Male mentorship and authority matter more for their scarcity, in contrast with female mentorship and authority, which are omnipresent, accessible, and therefore devalued and disobeyed. Moreover, male love is missing. Unfortunately, love from men or even acceptance among them is impossible when all that matters is one-upmanship in this theatre of gendered competition. Men and women both are losers in this contest of masculinity, for macho studly behavior entails both the defeat of male competitors and the mistreatment of women.

In these first two stories, we have seen how pedagogy and performativity interact to transmit the Dominican stud role to adolescent boys. This stereotypical role also entails the stereotyping of others, as the boys cast girls in simplistic racial/ethnic categories in order to understand girls' behavior and to guide their own. The pedagogical and mentoring relationships we have seen signal male homosocial relationships as the prevailing resources for belonging that these racially, ethnically and culturally marginalized Dominican American boys reach for. Dominican masculinity is a means to social acceptance for these boys who are marginalized in the U.S., and it entails very precise yet unattainable expectations. We have witnessed the psychic distress and 'downness' these boys experience as they strive for, yet are doomed to fail at, the role of the Dominican stud. Between brothers, friends, and fathers and sons, we see one male dominate another, as he guides his subordinate to dominate women. Men and women both participate in the cultural and sexual formation of the Dominican stud, and different voices espousing different values jostle for space in the young Dominican male's consciousness; his

anxiety and discomfort derive both from inevitably failing to achieve the stud, and from knowing that his attempts at misogyny and dishonesty are hurtful to women.

The imperative to become the Dominican stud is all the more urgent for the absence of male role models in these young men's lives. Although the stories of *This Is How* ostensibly address heterosexual relationships and the ways men lose women, Díaz's narratives highlight homosocial relationships among men and the ways that departed fathers, brothers and male mentors leave an unresolved, aching absence for boys struggling to becoming men and struggling to understand what manhood is. Rafa's passing instigates a melancholic state in Yunior, who transfers his desire for closeness with men onto a woman whose body is particularly muscular and 'masculine.' A deceased brother is certainly a particular case of male loss, but it also serves to signal others, namely the deeply affecting loss of fathers or other mentoring figures, departed for reasons of infidelity or immigration, emotionally absent or abusive if physically present. A series of doublings and substitutions – between Yunior and Rafa, between Rafa and Miss Lora – reflects Yunior's internal conflict about adopting the stud role he has been taught to emulate, and his failure to meet his needs for companionship, mentorship and intimacy. The social world Díaz's boys inhabit is a complex tapestry of multiple forms of social exclusion, multiple forms of loss, multiple and conflicting identities and moral logics. In his form and style, Díaz uses multiple registers of language, bilingualism, and the second person to signal multiple perspectives, communities, identities, voices, layers of self and of consciousness. He thereby instantiates the identity complexities, ambiguities and contradictions that his Dominican American boys struggle to resolve.

These first two stories have addressed Yunior's process of learning and coming into the Dominican stud stereotype. In the next two stories, Yunior has arrived at stud status and, although the same social pressures and exclusions shape his experience, we no longer see the vulnerable, anxious, guilty Yunior trying to fit in. Instead, we see the cocky, dishonest, unfaithful Dominican stud who cheats on his girlfriends and is caught; we can trace the evolution of his responses to these situations. In "Alma," Yunior is unapologetic, more concerned about losing an exciting sexual relationship than with losing Alma. In "The Cheater's Guide," Yunior is the paradigmatic womanizer, with an impressive record of cheating and blatantly misogynistic attitudes. He tries but fails to brush off the loss of his fiancée, enters a depression, hits bottom, then reaches an epiphany at the end of that story, the end of the collection. The close of *This Is*

How entails a turn toward maturity, empathy and responsibility for one's actions, all of which were impossible for the younger stud. This shift guides Yunior away from the Dominican stud role and toward a new brand of masculinity that he is only beginning to sketch out at the collection's end.

The culmination of Yunior's developmental trajectory coincides with the culmination of the collection's narrative trajectory. I will trace, but resist, a first-degree reading that sees Yunior's downfall as evidence of Díaz's critique of the Dominican stud. In my second-degree reading, I will read Díaz against the grain. Yunior the confirmed Dominican stud is a much less sympathetic figure than his younger wannabe-stud self, and yet Díaz continues to depict him sympathetically. I will challenge this sympathetic treatment, which I argue undermines the critique of sexism, male privilege and heteronormativity Díaz makes in his public discourse. Díaz claims to represent racism and these problems of patriarchy in his fiction as a first step toward critique and social change.²⁸⁸ I argue, however, that his fictional treatment of the Dominican stud ultimately reinforces these dominant modes of oppression and renders the reader complicit in them. My analysis will distinguish between a first-degree reading I reject, which finds that Díaz's text critiques the stud's misogyny, and a second-degree reading I advance, which finds that Díaz's text reinforces it.

Díaz's engagement with reading and the reader make his intervention at once fictional, metafictional, and metacritical. We learn in "Alma" that Yunior is a writer, and in "The Cheater's Guide," a writing professor, like Díaz; it is suggested at the end of *This Is How* that Yunior is actually the author of the stories we've just read. Metalepses in both stories blur the boundaries between narrative frames, and between narrator and writer. In Díaz's fiction about narrators who are writers, we see the self-reflexive, self-contradictory modes typical of postmodern metafiction. Using Linda Hutcheon's work on this genre, I argue that *This Is How* is simultaneously critical and complicit with the Dominican stud's sexism. Postmodernism, according to Hutcheon, highlights and de-naturalizes some of the central tenets of society by

²⁸⁸ Díaz asks: "How can you change something if you won't even acknowledge its existence, or if you downplay its significance? White supremacy is the great silence of our world, and in it is embedded much of what ails us as a planet." See Díaz, "Search for Decolonial Love." In another interview, "Representing a subjectivity doesn't equate with approving the subjectivity." See Vitzthum, "Junot Díaz's Pro-Woman Agenda."

revealing them as constructed rather than natural. Díaz's engagement with white privilege, male privilege and heteronormativity serves this de-naturalizing, highlighting function. At the same time, it reinscribes the very categories and values it problematizes. We can read Díaz's Dominican stud, on the one hand, as a product and confirmation of racial and gender divisions and norms, or, on the other hand, as a problematization and subversion of these. I argue that race and racism are problematized and critiqued in this text, but that misogyny is ultimately reinforced. *This Is How* exemplifies Hutcheon's definition of the postmodern: it is "self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining,"²⁸⁹ it is "committed to [...] duplicity" as it both "reinforce[s] [...] and undermine[s] [...] the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge."²⁹⁰ I have illustrated thus far Díaz's repeated use of inversion and irony; these are duplicitous modes that leave the text open to contradictory interpretations, and ultimately render it politically ambivalent.

Following Hutcheon, any critique that uses the material it critiques to make its critique is necessarily ambivalent. Díaz cannot represent racism without having recourse to racism, even if to critique it. This does not necessarily nullify his critique, though it renders it ambivalent, imperfect, and contaminated. This logic echoes Rosello's and Herschenberg-Pierrot's when they claim that the enunciation of a stereotype involves an "unavoidable moment of allegiance,"²⁹¹ even when one attempts to counteract it. Díaz's ambivalence is much more forceful and problematic with respect to his treatment of sexism. Despite token critiques spoken by characters or implied by Yuniór's downfall at the end of *This Is How*, the text routinely celebrates women's sexual objectification and mistreatment; I call such instances 'boys club' moments. Alternately, the text treats sexism and misogyny in a 'neutral' manner; in such cases, sexism, misogyny and male privilege go unmarked and no critique is visible. This is in contrast to Díaz's treatment of whiteness and white privilege, so often unmarked but *not* in Díaz's fiction, which critiques these. As I will demonstrate, there is no such thing as a neutral representation of dominant modes of oppression; any representation that is not explicitly critical reinforces these. The force of this

²⁸⁹ Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁹¹ Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype*, 36.

reinforcement outweighs the comparatively few gestures of ostensible critique, resulting in a text that perpetuates sexism and misogyny.

14 “Alma”: the Stud’s (*Sin*)vergüencería²⁹²

14.1 Lessons for Everyman and Everywoman

A mere four pages, “Alma” treats the separation of Yuniór and his girlfriend Alma. Both raised in the U.S., they are concerned with the authenticity of their Dominican identities. Alma is introduced in the story’s first sentence by Yuniór (again, narrating in the second person), who qualifies her Dominicaness in terms of her physique, and specifically her *derrière*. “You, Yuniór, have a girlfriend named Alma, who has a long tender horse neck and a big Dominican ass that seems to exist in a fourth dimension beyond jeans” (*TIH* 45). Indeed, a sexual partner’s physique is always a primary concern for Yuniór. Six of *This Is How*’s nine stories begin with reference to the female object of interest; “Miss Lora” and “Alma” are both titled for these women and start with physical descriptions of their bodies, for they are valued first and foremost as sex objects.²⁹³

²⁹² shame(lessness)

²⁹³ “Nilda,” “Alma,” “Flaca,” and “Miss Lora” indicate by title and incipit the female love interest; “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars” and “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” likewise begin with references to Yuniór’s girlfriend Magda and his unnamed fiancée, respectively. I follow Díaz’s approach by beginning my analysis of the Dominican stud in each story by a consideration of the women this figure operates in relation to. Like a photographic negative, analyzing Yuniór’s perceptions of women reveals the parameters of his Dominican stud role. “Otravida, Otravez,” written from the perspective of Yuniór’s father’s mistress Yasmin, follows the same strategy outlined above, but inverted: the first-person narrative begins with a physical description of her lover – Yuniór’s father Ramón – but the description is this time decidedly unsexy: unlike Alma’s revered “big Dominican ass,” Yasmin describes “the fat spread of [Ramón’s] ass popping my fitted sheets from their corners” (*TIH* 52). This unappealing description signals the writer allegedly behind Yasmin’s ostensible narrative: as Díaz has explained, Yuniór the writer is here imagining the perspective of his father’s U.S. lover, while (younger) Yuniór, Rafa and their mother in the Dominican Republic await news from him. See Díaz, “Sunday Rumpus Interview.” As the alleged writer of this story, Yuniór would not see his father’s sex appeal, although his lover Yasmin might; in Yuniór’s myopic heterosexual worldview, only women can be sexy, as the only women worth writing about are. Díaz utilizes a similar strategy of filtering a character’s perspective through Yuniór’s in “Negocios” in *Drown*, where Yuniór the narrator imagines his father’s point of view and writes the story from his perspective.

Despite her “Dominican ass” and Spanish-language name, Alma is of dubious Dominicaness, for she grew up in Hoboken and is atypical:

one of those Sonic Youth, comic-book-reading alternatinas without whom you might never have lost your virginity. Grew up in Hoboken, part of the Latino community that got its heart burned out in the eighties, tenements turning to flame.²⁹⁴ (TIH 45)

As an “alternatina” (rather than a mainstream Latina), her Dominican authenticity is a point of insecurity. Like the Latino community whose “heart burned out,” Alma’s Dominican soul²⁹⁵ is similarly threatened by her U.S. upbringing. So she exchanges her all-black wardrobe for thin summer dresses:

She says she does it for you: *I’m reclaiming my Dominican heritage* (which ain’t a complete lie – she’s even taking Spanish to better minister to your moms), and when you see her on the street, flaunting, flaunting, you know exactly what every nigger that walks by is thinking because you are thinking it, too. (TIH 46)

Her Spanish is patchy, but wearing sexy summer dresses and playing the role of the Dominican seductress is, like Spanish classes, a means to cultural authenticity for Alma. Meanwhile, she is many things dissonant with Yunior’s picture of traditional, docile, Dominican femininity, a picture implied by inversion in the following passage:

Alma’s nails are too dirty for cooking, [...] she says terrible whitegirl things while you fuck. She’s more adventurous in bed than any girl you’ve had [...]. She loves to talk while she’s being dirty. (TIH 46-7)

Being “terrible” and “dirty,” both physically and sexually, does not fit with conservative ideals of feminine subservience. As with Miss Lora, Yunior chooses the unconventional woman who asserts her sexual power in active, rather than passive, ways. Alma’s efforts to adopt the role and

²⁹⁴ Díaz is likely referring here to a string of arson cases in Hoboken in the late 1970s and early 1980s that resulted in a number of deaths and the scattering of Hoboken’s Latino community. Poor Latino tenants of ill-maintained tenement housing were edged out by a process of gentrification facilitated by incidents of arson, likely perpetrated by landlords themselves for insurance profits, or sometimes by tenants exacting revenge against neglectful landlords for the inadequate living conditions of these rental properties. See Joseph Laura, “Hoboken: Fear of Fire Haunts Many,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 1981, NY edition, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/08/nyregion/hoboken-fear-of-fire-haunts-many.html>.

²⁹⁵ Her name means soul.

mannerisms of the *dominicana* are driven by an anxiety about her own culturally mixed identity and by a desire for cultural belonging. Like Miss Lora, she has certain attributes that are typically seen as ‘masculine,’ and others that are seen as ‘feminine.’ Yuniór describes her in terms of stereotypes she fulfills and others she deviates from; for Yuniór, a woman’s individuality can only be defined by resorting to a dictionary of stereotypes. Her identity, like her notion of the sexy but conservative *dominicana* she emulates, is fraught with contradiction. Of course, all identities are fraught with contradiction. But this fact, universally applicable as it may be, is a point of focus in Díaz’s work. Although Díaz’s writing foregrounds the conflicting pressures men manage, it engages to a lesser degree with women’s negotiations of femininity, with female gender roles and with the possibility of gender mixing, alongside the racial, ethnic and cultural mixing that we have already seen. In all cases, the elements to be mixed (i.e., blackness, whiteness, maleness, femaleness) are never discrete, pure categories to begin with, though characters wrestle with themselves and their environments to fit into the clearly-defined categories of dominant discourses of identity.

Despite the dissonances in Alma’s identity, her boyfriend brings her closer to her ideal of Dominicanness. Though “she won’t even call herself Hispanic” (*TIH* 46), Alma thinks Yuniór embodies the cultural authenticity she desires:

She brags to her girls that you’re a “radical” and a real Dominican (even though on the Plátano²⁹⁶ index you wouldn’t rank, Alma being only the third Latina you’ve ever really dated). (*TIH* 46)

Alma’s Dominicanness may be inadequate, but it is bolstered by her relationship with a “real Dominican” who, we discover, likewise questions his Dominican authenticity. And his questionable Dominican authenticity, cleverly indicated by his non-ranking on “the Plátano index,” is in turn determined by the number of Latinas he has dated. We see how both men and women hinge their cultural authenticity on that of their partners. Sex confers authenticity, and both characters brag to their same-gender peers about the aspects of their partners those peers value most: for Alma’s “girls,” it is Yuniór’s Dominicanness and radical politics; for Yuniór’s “boys,” Alma’s music collection and her sexual adventurousness count. Unsurprisingly, Yuniór

²⁹⁶ Plátano is a derogatory term for Dominican immigrants recently arrived in the U.S.; they are treated here as arbiters of authentic Dominicanness.

must inform his male peers of his sexual exploits, because Alma's desirability is inseparable from her desirability to other men. Envy is respect.

Cheating is a central component of the Dominican stud stereotype and, for some men and women, part of what it means to be a Dominican man. For Alma, however, cheating upends her endorsement of her "real" "radical" Dominican boyfriend:

one June day Alma discovers that you are also fucking this beautiful freshman girl named Laxmi, discovers the fucking of Laxmi because she, Alma, the girlfriend, opens your journal and reads. (Oh, she had her suspicions.) (*TIH* 47)

In several of the collection's stories, women discover male partners' infidelity through written proof. Here, in this written account of Alma's discovery (which she made via a different piece of writing), Yuniór the writer – older, wiser – distances himself from younger Yuniór the cheater with his use of the second person and the gerund, "the fucking of Laxmi." Writing necessitates a certain critical distance and meta-awareness, which the older Yuniór demonstrates in this shift from active to passive voice, and from present progressive verb to gerund. He further distances himself from the female actors in question by casting them in impersonal roles ("the girlfriend" and the other woman, "this beautiful freshman girl"). Yuniór the writer thereby reveals the repetitive nature of this sequence of events and the redundancy of the resulting narrative: boyfriend cheats, girlfriend discovers, boyfriend lies, girlfriend leaves. The story's final line drives home the utter predictability of the outcome, again in terms that extrapolate the general from the specific: "This is how you lose her" (*TIH* 48). Older Yuniór, with his writerly meta-awareness and narratorial distance from the event, formulates a lesson in 'How To' form that addresses both his younger self and his implied reader. This implied reader is the straight man who shares Yuniór's heterosexual perspective and belongs to the 'boys club.' At times, he is also of color and of Dominican background, like Yuniór. But our savvy, seductive narrator targets different readers with his appeal, both Dominican and non-Dominican. Real readers, in all their diversity, receive Yuniór's narrative in divergent ways.

I draw out the subtle instruction-manual resonances of this final line here, as I see Díaz's play with this genre as subverting the ostensibly neutral, allegedly raceless, universalizing discourse characteristic of self-help and 'How To' texts. (Racelessness is in fact unmarked whiteness.) The authoritative tone we expect in these genres is audible in striking moments of

explicit instruction, as we saw in “How to Date,” or of moral judgment, such as the final line of “Alma.” However, Díaz’s assertive voice of instruction subverts the white, standard English typical of the genre, challenging reader expectations with a voice that is anything but raceless. The unmarked Everyman typically targeted by instructive texts is here a body of particularities, rather than universals. Yuniór writes of Alma’s seductive saunter: “when you see her on the street, flaunting, flaunting, you know exactly what every nigger that walks by is thinking because you are thinking it, too.” (*TIH* 46) Here, the universal Everyman is narrowed to “every nigger”; the “you” reading may or may not fit this description, and may or may not be thinking what Yuniór is. While self-help and ‘How To’ texts profess to address universal human experiences in standard English, Díaz emphasizes the particularities of his protagonist’s experience in a narrative voice rich with multiple cultural influences. The second person polices the boundaries of ingroup and outgroup and subverts the instruction manual’s usual disingenuous universalism. Díaz here flouts expectations of the genre and its stereotypical voice. His critique of white privilege and of whiteness’s typical unmarkedness is apparent here.

By highlighting race, ethnicity and culture in his characters and language, Díaz both gives voice to subjectivities silenced or excluded from the universalizing tone typical of such texts and performs exclusions of his own. The reader has two options. She/he may identify with Yuniór, responding to Yuniór’s ‘you’ and adopting Yuniór’s objectifying gaze. This is a pleasurable readerly stance to adopt, as it means being included rather than excluded, taking on the ‘boys club’ reader identity Yuniór so often invites, and going with the flow: being with, rather than against, our seductive narrator Yuniór.²⁹⁷ Yuniór’s ‘you’ invites this readerly complicity, shepherding the reader onto the path of least resistance, so she/he can enjoy Alma’s ass and Laxmi’s fucking vicariously, or at least enjoy the camaraderie of boasting and strutting. Alternatively, the reader may choose not to identify with Yuniór or with “every nigger” like him, be this on racial/ethnic or gender/sexual grounds. Then the reader is pointedly raced and gendered, othered by the straight man of color narrating here who, so often othered himself, now

²⁹⁷ Always the lucid critic of sexism *outside* his fiction, Díaz acknowledges “the gleeful temptations of patriarchy,” noting “a seduction component to patriarchy for men.” Díaz, “Important Things,” 540. Indeed, such celebratory ‘boys club’ moments attest to patriarchy’s seductiveness, even for Díaz who replicates it here by writing Yuniór’s tale in such seductive terms.

initiates the othering gaze. This discursive revenge, whereby the empire writes (or the diaspora strikes) back,²⁹⁸ aligns with Díaz's use of African American and Dominican vernaculars as we have seen it in "How to Date": it is a celebration of these identities and of their cultural capital in the U.S. The white reader, the straight female reader, and the queer male reader are among those who may feel excluded by Yuniór's second-person, vernacular discourse of woman-objectifying brotherhood. This discursive revenge is well-placed when received by a white reader, for that reader occupies a position of dominance that this vernacular narration challenges. References to Plátanos and fires in Hoboken's Dominican community in the 1980s imply readers from that community who already know about them. The counter-hegemonic here speaks back to the hegemonic. However, when this exclusionary move is received by straight women and queer men²⁹⁹ – both occupying non-dominant positions – it reinforces marginalization already historically in place. When these readers are also of color, the layers of exclusion multiply. Any actual reader can read in any way; I do not seek to dictate how readers of certain identities will necessarily read. Instead, I highlight the various axes along which Díaz's vernacular-heavy, heterosexist narrative includes and excludes certain reading constituencies in order to illustrate the oppressions that narrative reinforces, alongside those that it resists.

In this subtle parody of the instruction manual's false universalism, roles are thrown into relief. The narrator pedantically repeats the characters' names and roles in this love triangle to insist on the identity categories they inhabit – boyfriend, girlfriend and lover: "You, Yuniór, have a girlfriend named Alma"; "Alma discovers that you are also fucking this beautiful freshman girl named Laxmi, discovers the fucking of Laxmi because she, Alma, the girlfriend, opens your journal and reads." The repetitions here sound like instructions for a forgetful idiot³⁰⁰ who might forget his girlfriend's name, his own, or which girl is which. Older narrator Yuniór's instructive,

²⁹⁸ I borrow Salman Rushdie's well-known postcolonial phrase, and Juan Flores's subsequent reformulation here. Flores's phrase refers to the Puerto Rican diaspora's claim to full-fledged national belonging, despite experiences differentiating them from their Island-based compatriots. See Rushdie, "Empire Writes Back," 8; and Flores, *Diaspora Strikes Back*, 4-5.

²⁹⁹ Anyone with any identity can feel excluded or included by Yuniór's tale and by the values advanced therein; I do not seek to essentialize here. Furthermore, anyone can see a person they desire with an objectifying gaze; straight women, queer women, and queer men are not immune to these practices. Rather, I seek to highlight constituencies that might more obviously feel excluded by the straight male perspective advanced in the text.

³⁰⁰ The *Idiot's Guide* instruction manual series resonates here.

moralizing tone is audible here. With “she, Alma, the girlfriend,” three words signal the same person, identifying both her generic role in Yuniór’s life (“the girlfriend,” as opposed to the more personalized “your girlfriend”), and the individual who inhabits it (Alma). Unlike the narrator from “How to Date” who referred to girls stereotypically by their race/ethnicity alone, the more mature Yuniór writing this emphasizes the individual playing the role alongside the role itself. Alma’s individuality is not effaced, although it cannot exist apart from stereotypical roles. This girlfriend role maps onto the pronoun “her,” the final word in the story’s final line: “This is how you lose her.” The “her” of this line, extrapolated to the collection’s title, is not Alma in particular, or Paloma, or any of the other girlfriends in the collection. Rather, in Díaz’s parody, “her” refers to the generic girlfriend, the Everywoman an instruction manual might demystify. But here, the text is not a guide for dating but rather an ironic guide for breaking up and losing “her.” Díaz inverts the generic universalisms of the ‘How To’ genre and offers a faux-instruction manual no one would want.

The generic girlfriend in the generic instruction manual reminds us of generic categories Díaz is working with: social roles (i.e., girlfriend, boyfriend, lover), identity stereotypes (i.e., *la dominicana*, the Dominican stud), and literary genres (i.e., instruction manuals, self-help books, shorts works of fiction). Genre is in effect a *literary* stereotype, and the instruction manual genre comes with its own formal and substantive expectations. The reader expects certain things of a ‘How To’ text, as Alma expects certain things of her “real Dominican” boyfriend. Díaz toys with the reader’s expectations of genre to highlight his/her readerly stereotypes, both about texts and about bodies. The reader expecting a short story is surprised by a second-person narrative with instruction manual overtones. Yet that narrative lacks the explicit instruction, ‘standard’ narrative voice, and universalizing discourse one expects of the instruction manual genre. Alma is an unconventional “alternatina” and Yuniór an unconventional, outspoken narrator. These particularities in character, voice, and form betray the failures of stereotypical categories and of the expectations they arouse, at the same time that expectations and stereotypes endlessly animate Yuniór’s and Díaz’s narratives. Alma can only be an “alternatina” in opposition to a stereotype of Latinas; Díaz can upset reader expectations of genre only by anticipating them. Irony and inversion abound as Díaz endeavors to anticipate, arouse and then unsettle reader expectations.

When Alma confronts Yuniór about his infidelity, he plays stupid, “powered by the last fumes of your outrageous *sinvergüencería*.³⁰¹ Hey, muñeca,³⁰² you say, prevaricating to the end. When she starts shrieking, you ask her, Darling, what ever is the matter?” (*TIH* 47-8). Yuniór’s speech follows a Spanish-language term of endearment with a “Darling” reminiscent of English soap opera drama. Both terms seek, in different registers, to cover his blunder. He is not ashamed, feeling instead “sadness at being caught, at the incontrovertible knowledge that she will never forgive you” (*TIH* 47), rather than at hurting her. More than Alma’s personhood, he laments the loss of Alma’s body, sexually objectified and misogynistically described: “You stare at her incredible legs and between them, to the even more incredible *pópola* you’ve loved so inconstantly these past eight months” (*TIH* 47). However, older Yuniór, narrating in the present tense this break-up experienced in the past his younger self, acknowledges the outrageousness of the latter’s shamelessness and implies his own contemporary shame as he recalls the incident. The moral compass we glimpse in “Alma” is transmitted by an older, wiser Yuniór, split from and critical of his younger self. This moralizing narrative voice appears in judgment-laden depictions of Yuniór’s “inconstant” love (*TIH* 47) for Alma, his “outrageous *sinvergüencería*,” his “prevaricating” and his “dissembling” ways (*TIH* 48). Doubled, split Yuniór gazes at and narrates his younger self, the older ashamed at the younger’s shamelessness.

Charles Horton Cooley’s notion of the “looking-glass self” entails three elements upon which one’s sense of self is established: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification.”³⁰³ Here older Yuniór’s narrative voice inserts some moral judgment into its telling of the events, judging Yuniór the Younger for his *sinvergüencería* and mendacity. We see

³⁰¹ shamelessness. Puerto Rican writer Melissa Coss Aquino writes of the term’s broader, negative connotations: “to be called *una sinvergüenza* is an insult of the highest order. It translates literally as shameless or without shame, but it has larger connotations of revealing, to the invisible we of a world that is always watching, that you are callous, heartless, and somehow don’t care about your family or community. It is heavy with bad intentions, and infused with the idea of willful disregard for all that we were taught as children, mostly to keep our heads down in shame.” Yuniór’s *sinvergüencería* therefore implies his bad intentions, his lack of care for those he should care for, and the watchful world judging his error. His shamelessness is indeed very shameful. See Aquino, “Una *Sinvergüenza*,” 390.

³⁰² babydoll

³⁰³ Charles Horton Cooley quoted in McCall, “The Me and the Not-Me,” 20.

thus foreshadowed in an older, moralizing narrative voice the ground that Yunion the Dominican stud will cover along his journey to maturity. Further along that journey, the older Yunion of “The Cheater’s Guide” will come to judge himself harshly, feeling mortified at the self he sees in his ex’s metaphorical looking glass.³⁰⁴ At this earlier stage, however, younger Yunion is more concerned with how his male peers perceive his studliness than with how his girlfriend perceives his infidelity. His bragging to his “boys” about Alma’s sexual adventurousness and his inadequately disguised infidelity confirm Yunion’s hierarchy of values. Here in this scene with his girlfriend, younger Yunion’s frame of reference remains his male peers; they hold his looking glass and are the arbiters of social acceptance. The wrath and loss of his girlfriend are ultimately peripheral concerns at this stage.

Alma is livid, and her verbal attack on Yunion strikes at the heart of his cultural authenticity, his masculinity and his sexual prowess:

She calls you:

a cocksucker

a punk motherfucker

a fake-ass Dominican.

She claims:

you have a little penis

no penis

and worst of all that you like curried pussy.

(which really is unfair, you try to say, since Laxmi is from Guyana, but Alma isn’t listening.) (*TIH* 48)

Her reproach of his infidelity – a pillar of the Dominican stud type – attacks his heterosexuality and his anatomy (therefore his masculinity), and his Dominican authenticity and loyalty all in one swoop; her insults imply an equivalence or coherence among these. Her critiques catalogue and reinforce features characteristic of a real Dominican man: he must be heterosexual, well endowed, and consort only with women in his cultural group. Alma’s insult of Laxmi’s “curried pussy” – a combined ethnic-sexual slur – indicts Yunion for pursuing non-Latina women. Yunion’s defense – that Laxmi is Guyanese and therefore from the Caribbean – fails to show the

³⁰⁴ We will explore Yunion’s final epiphany further in my discussion of “The Cheater’s Guide,” where he sees himself in a shocking new way: “You are surprised at what a fucking chickenshit coward you are. [...] You are astounded by the depths of your mendacity” (*TIH* 212).

sexual loyalty to one's cultural group (Latina/os, or Dominicans) that Alma would require, above and beyond the sexual loyalty she requires of her partner; Yuniór's comically weak excuse glosses these two. Alma's insults, rather than sincere critiques of Yuniór's anatomy or his lover's ethnicity, are intended to wound Yuniór where it matters: in his Dominican authenticity and his masculinity, the two primary features of the Dominican stud role. Yuniór's betrayal of Alma not only entails all of the usual fallout that accompanies infidelity, but also withdraws a principal resource for her *own* cultural authenticity, which Yuniór, as an alleged "real" *dominicano* boyfriend, conferred upon her. Her indignation at his cheating is thus doubled, calling forth this ethnic insult of his lover. Yuniór protests, but Alma is not listening: upon reading her boyfriend's journal, she can no longer read him the same way. Even to Alma, Yuniór has become split and doubled, now "a cocksucker, a punk motherfucker, a fake-ass Dominican" rather than the paragon of Dominican masculinity she idealized. By reading Yuniór's writing, by becoming a reader, Alma sees Yuniór unmasked: writing reveals the writer, and readers see truth. But of course, the truth is never so simple, especially when Díaz is behind the mask.

We will see more plainly in the next story what begins to be visible here: the Dominican stud's journey to maturity entails an internalization and integration of female voices, including those critical of male cheating, and a growing sense of empathy, which is understood as a 'feminine' attribute. This female-influenced, moralizing voice is audible in older Yuniór's as he narrates younger Yuniór's foibles and failures. The story ends with younger Yuniór's final attempt to vindicate himself and reveals older Yuniór's critique:

Instead of lowering your head and copping to it like a man, you pick up the journal as one might hold a baby's beshatted diaper, as one might pinch a recently benutted condom. You glance at the offending passages. Then you look at her and smile a smile your dissembling face will remember until the day you die. Baby, you say, baby, this is part of my novel.

This is how you lose her. (*TIH* 48)

Yuniór's foolishly ineffectual plea to Alma – "baby, this is part of my novel" – is an example of reactive identity work, and what Erving Goffman calls corrective practice, or the means by which a person responds to a challenge to his/her identity.³⁰⁵ Yuniór responds here to the

³⁰⁵ See McCall, "The Me and the Not-Me," 22.

accusation of infidelity and to Alma's casting him in the identity of a cheater (among other insults) by attempting to correct her by asserting his identity as a writer.

Older Yuniór's voice intervenes with judgments in this passage and ends his narrative with a 'How To' lesson: "This is how you lose her," by cheating, "dissembling," failing to fess up and "[cop] to it like a man." To a mature Yuniór, manliness, then, means owning up to one's mistakes with honesty. Dominican masculinity is beginning to be recast here, as the mature Yuniór narrating values honesty over (or at least alongside) studliness, as he appreciates the weight one's wrongs bring to bear on the self and the shame one carries ever after. In losing "her" here, younger Yuniór is losing "Alma," whose name ("soul") implies the loss of something much greater than a girlfriend of eight months. He will remember his own "dissembling smile" – his dishonesty and subsequent shame – more than he will remember Alma the individual "until the day [he] die[s]." The period and line break between the story's last two sentences – "this is part of my novel. This is how you lose her." – indicate the split between younger Yuniór, who offers a lying excuse, and older Yuniór, who offers a moral judgment. The parallelism here also suggests an equation to capture that judgment: lie = loss. At the most obvious, first-degree level of reading, this is the moral of this story, and the lesson older Yuniór transmits about his younger self's error. The collection's final story will take us the remaining distance into a full appreciation of "love and consequences" – what Díaz identifies as this work's primary concern – as an older, cheating Yuniór hits bottom, registers the errors of his ways, and arrives at a life-changing epiphany. It is possible, however, to read between the lines of this blatantly moralistic conclusion, and to tease out alternative, second-degree readings. Aware of Díaz's taste for subtlety and complexity, we should be suspicious of such a singular and obvious conclusion.

14.2 Equations and Transgressions

A complex relationship between writing, reading and self emerges at the end of "Alma." As older Yuniór uses writing to narrate the events of his youth and to formulate a moral lesson (in rephrased 'How To' format) for his audience, younger Yuniór invokes writing as his excuse for the infidelities Alma discovers transcribed into his journal. Younger Yuniór is also a writer, the writer who will become the older Yuniór narrating this story. When younger Yuniór claims his journal entries about Laxmi are part of his novel, he claims to be a writer of fiction, writing about the affair in the second degree, rather than a journal writer of non-fiction, writing in the

first degree. Following older Yunior's lead (as the reader is always encouraged to do), we assume younger Yunior is lying, seeking to cover up his affair by presenting it as fiction for his novel-in-progress. But since younger Yunior is also an aspiring writer, his line may also be true: Yunior slept with Laxmi, wrote about it, and plans to use this material in his novel. This implies that younger Yunior's life is like a novel; that Yunior's novel is in fact rooted in autobiography. Yunior's biography mirrors Díaz's in many ways, and Díaz claims to use autobiography as a starting point for his fiction.³⁰⁶ Similarly, Yunior may be constructing fiction based on his life; or Yunior may be constructing himself through fiction.³⁰⁷ It is unclear which comes first: the actions, or the writing of them. Clever Yunior, like cleverer Díaz, blurs the line between the fictional and the 'real,' between the before and the after, and between the narrator and the writer.

If we read the story as younger Yunior, the aspiring novelist, writing himself into the self he wants to be (the Dominican stud), his second-person narration then has a particular force: Yunior is talking to himself, in intimacy and in self-instruction. This is the same function we have ascribed to the second-person narration in "How to Date." The opening and other key moments of "Alma" lend themselves to this reading – the young man writing the story of his relationship and of himself in a self-instructive manner. The present tense reinforces this interpretation:

You, Yunior, have a girlfriend named Alma. (*TIH* 45)

Yes – it's an opposites-attract sort of thing, it's a great-sex sort of thing, it's a no-thinking sort of thing. It's wonderful! Wonderful! (*TIH* 47)

your heart plunges through you like a fat bandit through a hangman's trap. [...] You are overwhelmed by a pelagic sadness. (*TIH* 47)

The instructive tone here is strengthened by the writer's emphatic "Yes," as if he is dialoguing with himself about his narrative ideas. The act of writing, necessarily a self-aware practice that entails the act of reading, makes Yunior a split self, split between acting in the narrative, narrating it, writing it, reading it and revising it. Doubled, split Yunior dialogues with himself;

³⁰⁶ Díaz admits: "It's true I play with autobiography. [...] No matter how hard I try to be autobiographical, the demands of fiction transform the material." See Díaz, "Fiction is," 905.

³⁰⁷ Danny Mendez's analysis of *Drown* corroborates this finding: he situates Yunior in a process of "writing himself into history" and "reconstructing himself through the instructing, unplaced voice of the narrator." Mendez, "A How-To Guide," 139, 135.

his duality is captured in his name's sonority, made audible in the line "You, Yunior." This younger writer Yunior writing an affair "for [his] novel" is also split from the older writer Yunior who intervenes here with moral judgments, and who allegedly pens the stories of *This Is How*. There are multiple Yuniors,³⁰⁸ each of whom is multiply split. The second person signals these simultaneous Yuniors, each of which entails its own 'you.'³⁰⁹ We are again in a hall of mirrors, where Díaz reflects multiple perspectives and multiple levels of awareness and self.

Here Díaz, via multiple Yuniors with different degrees of self-reflexivity, plays with the formal device of the framed narrative, for in this economical little story, we find multiple narrative frames and multiple texts written by multiple writers. The second-person narrative, with its diaristic quality of intimate self-talk, here contains reference to Yunior's journal; therefore we have a journal within a journal, the first written by younger Yunior (which Alma reads), the second written by older Yunior (which we read). In different ways, each writing Yunior is necessarily 'outed' when his journal or journal-like story is read. Younger Yunior's alleged novel is a story within a story – that written by older Yunior here, which is itself situated inside Díaz's collection of stories. This narrative *mise en abyme* condenses these multiple frames, journals, stories, writers, Yuniors and 'yous,' alongside Díaz's unavoidable authorial presence in the narrative; together they make for a dizzying self-reflexivity. These narrative techniques offer a *formal* picture of identity and its multiplicities and complexities: there are multiple selves within oneself, influenced by others' voices and constituted in others' gazes. The hall of mirrors image, with its infinite refractions, fragments and superimpositions, is apt.³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ Machado Sáez identifies multiple Yuniors with slightly different biographies across the stories of *Drown*. See Machado Sáez "Dictating Desire," 531. Across his three published works, Díaz affirms that "they're exactly the same character" with some biographical modifications. See Díaz, "*Mil Máscaras*."

³⁰⁹ Díaz says, "my multiplicity, my complexity, my simultaneity" is nothing less than "the essence of who I am." The multiple, simultaneous Yuniors Díaz depicts echo this description of his own identity; again, we see Díaz model Yunior after himself. Díaz, "Sunday Rumpus Interview."

³¹⁰ On the subject of refractions and fragments, Díaz describes Americanness as "fractured" rather than unified: "There's no such thing as an American!" In contrast, Díaz sees himself as part of multiple unified communities and invokes multiple, overlapping labels to describe his identity: "I have absolutely no problem with being Latino as long as it doesn't eliminate the fact that I'm also Dominican, and African diasporic, and from New Jersey." See Díaz, "Junot Díaz:

Gérard Genette's work in narratology is helpful here to elucidate what is at stake in Díaz's play with multiple narrative frames. Genette's analysis of voice captures the various subject positions that connect to an action in narrative; these subject positions include the person who *does* an action, the person who *reports* the action (the narrator) and those who *receive* the narrating activity (the narratees/readers/audience). Genette analyzes the relations between stories and storytellers; the latter include both narrators and writers, for "the role of narrator is itself fictive, even if assumed directly by the author."³¹¹ He makes several important distinctions: between the narrating instance and the instance of writing, between the narrator and the author, and between the recipient of the narrative and the reader of the work. Although these distinctions pertain to "Alma" and the other stories of *This Is How*, Díaz goes to lengths to obscure them, blurring boundaries to upset distinct categories. By making older Yuniór a writer, and the ostensible writer of the text we read, Díaz blurs the narrating instance with the instance of writing. By deliberately modeling Yuniór's biography on his own, Díaz blurs the line between narrator and author. The second-person address Yuniór/Díaz use can signal multiple addressees and readers at once: 1) Yuniór's younger self; 2) Yuniór's implied reader, who ambivalently includes young men like him as well as readers unlike him; and 3) Díaz's actual readers, in all their diversity. Díaz's manipulation of narrative frames, writers and readers blurs the categories Genette outlines to describe the subject positions connected to an act of narration; this move echoes Díaz's subversion of ethnic/racial/cultural identity categories in his characterization. However, as I will show, Díaz's blurring of the writer and narrator positions troubles the political intervention he claims to make.

Genette's terminology nonetheless proves useful to illustrate the transgression of narrative levels operating at the end of "Alma." Genette defines two narrative levels (the *diegesis*, or first-level narrative; and, in the context of a metanarrative, the *metadiegesis*, or second-level, outer narrative that frames the first) and three kinds of narrators (*homodiegetic*,

'We exist.'" Díaz's conception of his identity differs strongly from Laferrière's, who (as we saw in Part One) refuses national, cultural and ethnic designations entirely, wishing to be described as a writer, good or bad, rather than a Haitian, or Canadian, or black writer. In contrast, Díaz, when asked, "Are you a writer?" replies "No, I'm a Dominican writer." See Díaz, "Fiction is," 896.

³¹¹ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 213.

who is also a character in the narrative; *extradiegetic*, who is not; and *metadiegetic*, who exists within the first-level story-world she/he narrates and who also has a narrative of her/his own at the second level).³¹² Narrative levels can be transgressed, following Genette, most often by narrators who intrude into the tale they are telling (though characters can also transgress the boundaries of their story-world by entering that of the narrator). Such a transgression between the world of the narrator who is telling the story and the world of the story she/he tells is called a metalepsis. Genette writes: “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse [...], produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical [...] or fantastic.”³¹³

Metalepsis operates at several levels in these final lines of “Alma.” First, we examine the fictional world of the novel younger Yuniór is allegedly writing and that he invokes in his defense.³¹⁴ When younger Yuniór pleads to Alma, “baby, this is part of my novel,”³¹⁵ he treats the material in his journal as a fictional world that he narrates homodiegetically. The irony and dishonesty here lie in the fact that the act he claims is fiction – “the fucking of Laxmi” – is not, and that he is at once actor and narrator. Second, we examine the fictional world of “Alma” as older (fictional narrator) Yuniór narrates it. From his second-level story-world, older Yuniór the narrator reproaches younger Yuniór and offers lessons to Yuniórs-in-training when he adopts the all-knowing voice of the ‘How To’ instruction manual and says, “This is how you lose her.” Here, older Yuniór is an extradiegetic narrator of the episode recounted in “Alma.” (The fact that older Yuniór is the same person as younger Yuniór, but at a later stage of life, does not undermine his extradiegetic narrative function here.) In classic metaleptic form, older Yuniór intrudes into the narrative he recounts, entering the first-level story-world with his verdict, spoken to younger Yuniór: “This is how you lose her.” That this line then becomes the title of the collection signals (a) the work’s central themes – love, loss, lies, and infidelity – and (b) the

³¹² Ibid., 228.

³¹³ Ibid., 234-235.

³¹⁴ I would call this the zero level story-world, for we do not read Yuniór’s alleged novel/journal, though Alma does.

³¹⁵ This action occurs in the first-level story-world: the story of younger Yuniór and Alma’s breakup, narrated by older Yuniór.

narrator's voice as central authority, with its capacious, multivalent 'you' and the layers of self, writer and reader it implies.

Older Yunior is an indeed an authoritative narrator.³¹⁶ He speaks with authority; his narrating style and idiosyncratic voice are appealing and attractive; and that voice is singular and dominant in the stories of *This Is How*. Only one story, "Otravida, Otravez," is written from someone else's perspective – Yunior's father's mistress – and Yunior is completely absent from that story. Older narrator Yunior therefore remains the authority on (and ostensibly, the author of) all things concerning himself and his history; for us readers, his perspective and position are

³¹⁶ Díaz discusses the problematic of a narrator's univocal authority with respect to the Yunior who narrates *BWL*. Díaz likens Yunior's endeavor to an act of narrative dictatorship: "This novel (I cannot say it enough) is all about the dangers of dictatorship – Trujillo is just the face I use to push these issues – but the real dictatorship is in the book itself, in its telling. [...] We all dream dreams of unity, of purity; we all dream that there's an authoritative voice out there that will explain things, including ourselves. [...] In dictatorships, only one person is really allowed to speak. And when I write a book or a story, I too am the only one speaking, no matter how I hide behind my characters." Díaz, "*BWL*: Questions for Junot Díaz." Díaz's play with the narrator's authority is different in *TIH*, as the latter text does not treat the geopolitical problematic of dictatorship that *BWL* does. It seems that, in *TIH*, Díaz has carried over a familiar narrator with familiar misogyny, but without the political superstructure of dictatorship *BWL* used to shape and justify that authoritative, dictatorial narration. Yunior is clearly a narrator that works for Díaz, in all three of his books. Yunior evolves from a younger, less authoritative and less misogynistic figure in *Drown* (where Rafa is the real Dominican stud and is treated quite unsympathetically) to an authoritative, misogynistic adult Yunior in *BWL* (where a critique of misogyny may still be hard to locate, but where a broader structural challenge to dictatorship via dictatorial narration critiques Yunior's authority, and where female characters are more developed, humanized, and even granted sections of narration for themselves). In *TIH*, however, the same, attractive narrator Yunior operates, without development of the female characters he objectifies, without the obvious historical and discursive critique we see in *BWL*. When *TIH* is taken as a text on its own, its treatment of the Dominican stud's misogyny and dishonesty is troubling indeed, for the critique Díaz claims to make is ultimately undermined by contravening material. (For an insightful analysis of the narrator's authority in *BWL*, see Machado Sáez, "Dictating Desire." Among other things, Machado Sáez argues that Yunior the dictatorial narrator asserts his authority over Oscar's narrative and life, censoring Oscar's queerness to incorporate him into normative Dominican diasporic masculinity. This arrival into manhood occurs when Oscar finally loses his virginity, at which point he also becomes a rival to Yunior, who (as narrator-author) promptly has him killed. The narrative choices Yunior makes about Oscar's coming-of-age story, she argues, reflect his own insecure masculinity and disguise a repressed homosocial romance between Yunior and Oscar. I echo Machado Sáez's suggestion of a repressed homosocial romance in my analysis of Yunior and Rafa relationship in these terms in "Miss Lora.")

all we have access to. This myopic, monologic focus on Yuniór's world contributes to the intimacy, affinity and sympathy the reader feels with Yuniór. Díaz fosters this close connection between reader and narrator and makes us like Yuniór. Metalepsis is another technique Díaz uses to encourage the reader's identification with Yuniór.

Genette describes metaleptic moments as strange and troubling because they signal the permeability between worlds thought distinct, and thus the instability of the reader's position. Metalepses, Genette writes,

demonstrate the importance of the boundary they [...] overstep, in defiance of verisimilitude – a boundary *that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself*.³¹⁷ a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells. Whence the uneasiness Borges so well put his finger on: "Such inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious." The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative.³¹⁸ (original emphasis)

When older narrator Yuniór steps down a narrative level to speak to the younger Yuniór acting in the story "Alma," that younger self is the 'you' his older self's implicit 'I' addresses. Doubled and split, Yuniór's younger 'you' and older 'I' suddenly belong to the same narrative via metalepsis. Simultaneously, older narrator Yuniór's second-person address moves him up a narrative level to speak to us, the readers of Díaz's story. Addressed as 'you' by the implicit 'I'

³¹⁷ In metalepsis, the act of narrating is the performative enunciation itself – it performs the action of transgressing narrative frames by its speaking. We recall from our discussion of performativity in Part One the link Judith Butler drew between Austin's notion of performative speech and the performative manner in which identity is enacted repetitively. By changing levels as Díaz does in metaleptic moments, a performative moment in the narrative's structure echoes the performative mechanisms of identity. We have seen how Alma performs the identity role she strives for -- Dominican femininity -- in her clothing, her saunter, her Spanish classes, her choice of boyfriend. What's more, as young Yuniór's lying excuse ("This is part of my novel") transgresses truth by attempting to cast reality (his cheating behavior) as fiction (a story he is writing) – itself a transgression of narrative boundaries – he hides his transgression of sexual fidelity by *performing* the role of faithful boyfriend-and-aspiring novelist *via this enunciation*. These are words that *do* things. Of course, his performance fools no one. Multiple transgressions and multiple identity performances are distilled into this dense moment of narrative play.

³¹⁸ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 236.

speaking, we are drawn into Yuniór's world. Via metalepsis and second-person narration, this "you and I" dyad suddenly belongs to the same narrative. In effect, both of these techniques serve to draw 'you,' the reader reading *This Is How*, into the narrative alongside Yuniór, so that you *identify with* him in his multiplicity and his multiple marginality, so that you belong to *his* narrative where the fact of belonging is so very complicated. Belonging to his narrative also means sharing in, becoming complicit in, Yuniór's misogyny.

Drawing the reader into Yuniór's world sensitizes her/him to the protagonist's experiences, challenges, exclusions and injustices and encourages the reader's sympathetic identification with him. In "Alma," that sympathetic identification is elicited for older Yuniór, at the expense of younger Yuniór, the lying cheater who is 'outed' here. In the final sentences of "Alma" cited above, younger Yuniór attempts to vindicate himself in Alma's eyes by treating his journal as fiction; older Yuniór, our judging narrator, refuses this vindication by illustrating the consequences of younger Yuniór's lie: "This is how you lose her." One might read this line as Díaz's critique of younger Yuniór's studly cheating and lying, transmitted via older Yuniór's moralizing narrative voice. In this reading, Yuniór the narrator's judgment would then equate with Díaz's; narrator Yuniór would serve as Díaz's mouthpiece. However, I am suspicious of such moral and literary simplicity; furthermore, we have seen how Díaz at times means the opposite of what his narrator Yuniór says.

Borrowing Díaz's favorite technique of inversion, I see older Yuniór's reproach of younger Yuniór's cheating as a subtle, paradoxical means of vindicating *older* Yuniór the stud and enticing the reader into sympathy with him. Older Yuniór is the real protagonist and narrator here. By explicitly demonstrating older Yuniór's judgment of younger Yuniór at the close of "Alma," Díaz encourages the reader (as always) to adopt his seductive narrator Yuniór's perspective. This perspective – here one that explicitly critiques cheating and lying – fits with the hegemonic values of sincerity and loyalty, which most of Díaz's readers will not question. But it also contradicts Díaz's preference for subtlety by offering a clear moral, suspiciously tailored to hegemonic values, at the end of his story. This critique of younger Yuniór serves two functions: 1) it compensates for and offsets the many moments when Yuniór's and other men's infidelity is celebrated, treated as an unspectacular, unavoidable inheritance, or depicted neutrally; and 2) it draws the reader into a sympathetic identification with older Yuniór's judgment here, making the reader endorse *that* Yuniór's position and align with him against younger Yuniór. Paradoxically,

when older Yunior refuses to vindicate younger Yunior here, older Yunior absolves himself of his own errors, whether in his distant or recent past. Older Yunior's critique of younger Yunior's lying and cheating incites the reader's endorsement of and identification with the older Yunior who pronounces it. Yet, as we will see in "The Cheater's Guide," older Yunior is also a liar, a cheater, and a misogynist. Split and doubled, critiquing his younger self as if he were a separate person, older Yunior masks his own blameworthy behavior. The reader can forget that the moralizing voice is himself also guilty: older Yunior, in his forties, is the same serial cheater and liar that younger Yunior is in his twenties.³¹⁹ In a rhetorical sleight of hand, clever narrator Yunior disguises his own errors behind his judgment of younger Yunior's.

In another sleight of hand, clever narrator Yunior renders his younger self's lie true: younger Yunior's disingenuous claim – "this is part of my novel" – ultimately *becomes* true when his older self includes this anecdote in *his* story. Here we have a metalepsis in the opposite direction: the anecdote of younger Yunior's relationship with Alma exits that first-level story-world to enter the second-level story-world of older Yunior, our narrator. In this *mise en abyme*, both of these narrative levels are subsumed within that of Díaz's collection. And of course, Yunior (older and younger) is an invention of writer Díaz, the true force behind "Alma" and the other stories. Any sleights of hand, contradictions, inversions, and reader manipulations are the responsibility of Díaz, not his narrator.³²⁰ By making Yunior the ostensible writer of the stories of *This Is How* (a fact revealed only at the collection's close), Díaz adds an additional

³¹⁹ The anachronic stories of *TIH* do not follow Yunior's development linearly the way I do, although the final story involves the oldest Yunior we encounter. The reader nonetheless glimpses an adult cheating Yunior in the first story, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars" and therefore can infer older Yunior's continued infidelities based on that story when reading "Alma."

³²⁰ In reading scholarship on Díaz, I am surprised to see how little Díaz the writer is held accountable for the machinations and oppressions his narrator Yunior performs. It is as if Díaz -- the brilliant self-reflexive writer, the eloquent politically leftist public speaker and activist, the darling of the Academy -- could only do political good, even as his recurrent narrator does bad. In criticism on *BWL* and *TIH* (for Yunior in *Drown* is rarely the confirmed stud), the scholar's finger points only at Yunior for perpetuating misogyny, sexism, heteronormativity, etc. Yunior proves an effective shield behind which Díaz is protected. My analysis, in contrast, seeks to reveal the edgy, politically ambivalent, even harmful game author Díaz is playing in invoking a racial-gender stereotype who behaves in racist and sexist ways, and in making that central character such a seductive figure and narrator.

metafictional level and hides behind his narrator Yuniór³²¹ who speaks here. The story's final two lines, then, offer an alternative equation: my novel = *This Is How You Lose Her*. The 'I' speaking about 'my' novel is both Yuniór and Díaz, the collection's true author; Yuniór is a mask that author Díaz wears. The distinction between writer, narrator, and lying, cheating stud is deliberately blurred in this metaleptic, metafictional moment. This deliberately ambiguous narrative technique reflects the troubling political ambivalence of Díaz's intervention, for "my novel"³²² is first and foremost Díaz's, but is attributed here to the fictional narrator *and confirmed misogynist* Yuniór. Another equation is suggested here: Díaz = Yuniór. This deliberate but contradictory slippage between politically progressive public figure Díaz and agent of gendered oppression Yuniór is reiterated in the metalepsis at the collection's close; I will return to this issue in my discussion of "The Cheater's Guide."

14.3 "The Gleeful Temptations of Patriarchy"³²³

Díaz's ambivalent, critical but complicit treatment of the Dominican stud is apparent in the closing of "Alma." One Yuniór is the lying, cheating misogynist; the other Yuniór, his vocal critic, is guilty of the same sins. The two contradictory Yuniórs in "Alma" echo structurally the teacher-student/narrator-narratee relationship in "How to Date," as well as the tension between Yuniór the nascent cheater and Yuniór the critic of cheaters in "Miss Lora." Doubles and foils abound. Finally, the two contradictory Yuniórs in "Alma" are a microcosm of Díaz's fraught, contradictory political intervention here, where we see misogyny and its manifestations explicitly critiqued by women and, at times, by Yuniór himself, at the same time that we see sexism depicted in a celebratory, clever, likable, pleasurable, and uncritical way. Within the text, we see contradictions and inversions concerning the Dominican stud; outside the text, between Díaz's fiction and his publicly stated politics, we see additional fissures and contradictions. In both cases, critique and complicity go hand in hand.

³²¹ Indeed, Díaz admits, "when I write a book or a story, I too am the only one speaking, no matter how I hide behind my characters." Díaz, "*BWL: Questions for Junot Díaz*."

³²² *TIH* is of course a short story collection, not a novel; however, I do not feel this distinction nullifies the authorial slippage I see Díaz constructing here.

³²³ Díaz, "Important Things," 540.

These contradictions are fueled by the sympathetic manner in which Yuniór is depicted. Díaz meticulously constructs the reader's identification with and sympathy for Yuniór via subtle formal devices, like Yuniór's attractive narrative voice, his second-person narration, and his metaleptic judgments. We have seen the justifiably sympathetic depiction of adolescent Yuniór, the Dominican stud in training, in "How to Date" and "Miss Lora"; that Yuniór is multiply marginalized, isolated, anxious and grieving for absent fathers and deceased brothers. Díaz continues this sympathetic take on adult Yuniór, now the confirmed Dominican stud with few of his younger self's vulnerabilities, in "Alma" and "The Cheater's Guide." Adult Yuniór's deception and manipulation of women and his infidelities to them are perhaps commonplace, unremarkable human flaws; however, the ideologies of sexism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity that undergird these behaviors are anything but benign. Outspoken social critic Díaz would certainly agree, for he routinely decries these discourses in his public statements; his recurrent narrator Yuniór in turn replicates them. Indeed, the Yuniór in "The Cheater's Guide" is at the height of both his misogyny and his sympathy.

Yuniór's sympathy, likability and attractiveness along with the banality of his heterosexist perspective all shape the reader's reception of his tale and the values it advances. Pleasure is a guiding force operating there. Yuniór's unique voice, tone and worldview are pleasurable to discover; indeed, they contribute to Díaz's commercial success. Furthermore, they represent innovations in characterization and give literary space to under-represented communities. Díaz innovates formally with bilingualism,³²⁴ vernaculars, and postmodern metafictional devices to make the reading experience novel, unique and pleasurable. Yet these readerly pleasures make the reader unwittingly complicit in the oppressive discourses Yuniór, in all his likability, advances. And of course, sex sells. More precisely, certain kinds of sex sell, the kind Díaz is selling.³²⁵ Reading *This Is How* can be an unambivalently pleasurable experience

³²⁴ Sandín notes that Díaz's use of unitalicized Spanish words and his lack of quotation marks for dialogue in *Drown* were "downright revolutionary" in 1996 and that "almost every book written by a U.S. Latina/o writer since has copied one or both of these stylistic devices." Sandín, *Killing Spanish*, 5.

³²⁵ In a most surprising interview, Díaz unveils his thinking behind Yuniór's macho, sexist character in *BWL*: he imagined Yuniór as a survivor of sex abuse, like the female rape survivors in the story (Belí, Lola). No reader has detected this dimension to Yuniór, because, Díaz admits, it is not there to be detected: "The hint of this sexual abuse is something that's present

only if one ignores (or enjoys) its misogynistic content. Readers who know Díaz's public politics (which are irreconcilable with the text's misogyny) may be inclined to overlook the latter in light of the former – to assume the author's critique on faith, perhaps – or to overlook Yuniór's misogyny in light of his attractiveness and charming forgivability. The 'boys club' moments where women are enthusiastically, uncritically objectified include straight male readers in the boys club, so they can delight vicariously in Alma's ass and Laxmi's fucking.³²⁶ Even readers

in *Drown* and it is one of the great silences in *Oscar Wao*. [...] Perhaps it's too great a silence, which is to say, it's probably too small a trace to be read. Only visible, if visible at all, by inference. By asking: what is really bothering Yuniór? Why is Yuniór such a dog? Just because? Or is there something deeper? Think about it: isn't promiscuity another typical reaction to sexual abuse? Compulsive promiscuity is certainly Yuniór's problem. A compulsive promiscuity that is a national masculine ideal in some ways and whose roots I see in the trauma of our raped pasts. Like I said: it's probably not there at all – too subtle." Díaz's conceptualization of Yuniór is fascinating and, as he demonstrates here, masked in that novel. This is in sharp contrast to the rapes of women, which are out in the open and depicted in detail. I consider Díaz's authorial choices as *always* informed by aesthetic, political and market concerns; and I recognize that Díaz may have a range of reasons for his choices that I am not privy to. But if, as I suspect, Díaz is targeting a mainstream literary market among others, then the decision to exclude Yuniór's rape and include Lola's and Belí's may reflect his anticipation of mainstream readers' desires. I daresay that market is much more permissive of tales of female rape than of male rape, and hungrier for tales of machismo and misogyny than the opposite. (This opposite is embodied in *BWL* by Oscar who, at the end of the novel, arrives into heterosexual masculinity by having sex with a prostitute and then is killed; his death indicates the text's final judgment of his ultimately inadequate, effeminate, geeky masculinity. In another surprise, Díaz imagined Oscar's obesity as the manifestation of an "intergenerational transfer of rape trauma between mothers and their sons.") Díaz's revelation of Yuniór's rape in *BWL* would, of course, completely change our view of him and his dysfunctional relationships. We would in fact see him with more sympathy. In an alternate reading of that decision, then, perhaps Díaz sought to limit reader sympathy for Yuniór (who is nonetheless charming, seductive and likable in that novel also) in order to highlight, if ambivalently, the problematic aspects of his perspective on women. Díaz, "Search for Decolonial Love."

³²⁶ One (celebratory) male reviewer articulates these celebratory 'boys club' moments well: "This is one of Díaz's greatest gifts, the intimacy of his voice, the way he invites you over to his place to smoke a few bowls and talk about girls, the way, in story after story, he lets you in on the fun. From the story, "Nilda": "She was Dominican, from here, and had super-long hair, like those Pentecostal girls, and a chest you wouldn't believe – I'm talking world-class." Or from "Alma," who, it transpires, "has a long tender horse neck and a big Dominican ass that seems to exist in a fourth dimension beyond jeans. An ass that could drag the moon out of orbit." The scene is so vivid, so real: four or five guys sitting around an apartment, beer bottles and pizza slices everywhere, the blare of the TV drowning out the traffic outside, you pull up a seat,

with other orientations and identities may nonetheless delight in these, because the perspective being proffered is the dominant, familiar, and in some sense, comfortable one. In Part One, I invoked Richard Dyer's claim that Western narratives mobilize a male perspective by default and routinely place the audience in a superior position to the female character. Regardless of the reader's identity, Yuniór ushers the reader onto the path of least resistance and most pleasure: the straight male perspective enjoying women's objectification, like Yuniór does. These are hegemonic representations of gendered power relationships; they are unsurprising, easy to accept and even enjoy. They are also coming from our allegedly counter-hegemonic author, who is so adept at signaling unmarked whiteness, critiquing white privilege and racism, and valorizing other identities, values, voices and modes of being. Díaz's counter-hegemonic critique of race and racism is in utter contradiction with his hegemonic treatment of gender and sexism.

The bold, colorful, at times humorous, politically incorrect and provocative depictions of women's bodies, of women's sexualization, and of women being sexed *are never moments of gender critique*. Díaz, however, claims to represent a problem, writing "to acknowledge the deep sexism that pervades our culture"³²⁷ as a first step toward addressing it. He would call these depictions neutral representations of the social problem of sexism. They are not, however, neutral. Alma's anatomy is dissected, catalogued and sexualized (i.e., ass, neck, arms, nipples, vagina). When Yuniór realizes he will lose her, he stares sadly at her "incredible legs and between them, [...] that even more incredible pópola," for that is where her value lies. In a final equation, Alma = vagina = sex. Older Yuniór, the voice of critique audible here, only levies criticism at Yuniór for *inconstantly* loving Alma's "pópola," for Yuniór's "outrageous sinvergüencería," his "prevaricating" and "dissembling." Older Yuniór reproaches younger for shamelessness, evasions, dishonesty, and insufficient misogynistic love of Alma's vagina. If we do the math implied in the equations I have identified, older Yuniór offers no critique of misogyny here; the question is, does Díaz? Perhaps younger Yuniór's misogyny is supposed to be ridiculous and laughable here; if so, perhaps this ironic assessment of a woman's value is too

somebody passes you the pipe – and, boom, Yuniór starts in on one of his stories." Bourne, "The 'You' in Yuniór."

³²⁷ Fassler, "How Junot Díaz."

close to its unironic equivalent to make for a funny joke. Perhaps Díaz parodies the misogynistic stud here; if so, his parody repeats and reiterates the misogynist's dominant form of oppression. The parody may also go unperceived by the reader, for whom the stud's misogyny is thereby naturalized, normalized and reinforced.³²⁸ Perhaps a laughable, ironic, parodic moment of misogyny does not do the work of critiquing misogyny, but rather presents an opportunity for 'boys club' bros to high-five about culos-and-titties³²⁹ most colorfully, pleasurably described.

Bros are not Díaz's only reading constituency, and not the only readers who find pleasure in reading his salacious tales of misogynistic pleasure. These high-fiving bro moments can also elicit enthusiasm and endorsement from other readers cheerleading on the sidelines. For female readers enjoying Díaz's fiction, and enjoying Yuniór's sexual exploits, a more insidious dynamic may be operating: just like the colorism and racial self-hatred Díaz often mentions with respect to communities of color, some gendered self-hatred may make women like reading stories of women being wronged, just as Toni Morrison's Pecola Breedlove wants blue eyes or like Yuniór hides his Afro and loves white hair, lips, and skin more than his own. A dominant discourse, even one that devalorizes us, is necessarily inside us; we are complicit, despite ourselves, and its repetition may be pleasurable even as it is harmful and perpetuates ideologies and practices that harm.

Díaz, however, may be engaging with reader complicity in a subtle way. One effect of his postmodern metafictional manipulations (metalepses, second-person narration, self-reflexivity, etc.) may be to turn the reader's gaze back onto her/his own practice of reading, and to expose her/his complicity in the oppressions being represented. In his play with temporality, perspective, voice, and narrative frames, Díaz is playing with – directing, manipulating, sometimes duping – the reader. In the metaleptic close of "Alma," when older Yuniór intervenes from a higher

³²⁸ Hutcheon writes: "parody requires that critical ironic distance. [...] If the decoder does not notice, or cannot identify, an intended allusion or quotation, he or she will merely naturalize it, adapting it to context of the work as a whole." Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 34.

³²⁹ I borrow some of this language from two reviewers with radically different opinions of Díaz's treatment of sexism. Fassler writes that Yuniór "assumes we're high-fiving heterosexual males (just like he is)" and defends Díaz's representation of sexism; Vitzthum decries it and writes: "the constant dismissal of women as sets of culo-and-titties slams a door in my face." Fassler, "How Junot Díaz" and Vitzthum, "Junot Díaz's Pro-Woman Agenda."

narrative level with his authoritative verdict, the abrupt change in register (actually a change in perspective, from younger Yuniors to older) breaks the fictional spell. The reader is jarred by this sudden change in narrative register, and the story's story-ness is thrown into relief. When the fiction reveals its fictiveness (indeed, its meta-fictiveness), it necessarily reminds the reader of her/his reader-ness. Importantly, the practice of reading and the position of reader are neither neutral nor passive, as much as they are shaped by the self-aware writer anticipating and manipulating them.

Linda Hutcheon describes metafiction's "paradox of the reader" as the "two-way pull" between two demands: the text simultaneously insists that (a) the reader acknowledge that she/he is reading a fictional text, and (b) the reader actively participate in the text's "co-creation" by engaging with it "intellectually, imaginatively and affectively."³³⁰ In Díaz's stories, the second-person address and metalepses return the gaze onto the reader, making the reader aware of her/his own identity particularities and of her/his practices of reading. I have illustrated this in my discussion of Díaz's use of vernaculars in "How to Date," and also in my analysis of the subversion of the instruction manual's disingenuous universalism in "Alma." In both cases, Díaz performs strategic inclusions and exclusions in his readership. As a result, the reader is raced, sexed, and gendered, as Díaz's characters so plainly are. The gaze that polices inclusion and exclusion unmasks the reader's non-neutrality in terms of her/his identity particularities and the assumptions and expectations she/he brings to the text. In other words, the reader's participation – even complicity – in practices of stereotyping, in stereotypical reading practices, in ideologies of oppression like racism, sexism and homophobia, is unmasked. Metafictional devices jolt the reader out of the fictional world the Yuniors animate and into the contradictory metafictional world of author Díaz. In that metafictional world, the reader is actively involved, implicated and complicit in the power relationships unfolding. Díaz's intervention here becomes metacritical: it highlights the reader's responsibility as an active meaning-maker who brings prejudices and oppressive value systems to the text. However, acknowledging the reader's responsibility does not absolve Díaz of his writer's responsibility. The text and its representations are not innocent or neutral; they act upon the reader in ways that the author engineers (to the extent that he can). Before the gamut of literary choices Díaz *could* make, he often elects to represent forms of

³³⁰ Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, 7.

oppression in ways that, I argue, reinforce them. Even if they already inhabit us, even if we are already complicit, I believe there is some other intervention that could be made to weaken, rather than strengthen, them.

One might protest that the moments where misogyny, infidelity and dishonesty are judged in the text signal Díaz's underlying critique. I have cited instances in "Miss Lora" when mothers, girlfriends, and Yuniór himself speak against these qualities in the Dominican stud. Alma's rage, so colorfully described, likewise indicates her critique, although her language problematically reinforces the terms of heterosexual masculinity and homophobia that drive the Dominican stud's misogyny in the first place. Furthermore, in that passage, Alma is treated as an irate hysteric whose ravings become comic, rather than valid and worthy of sympathy. These token moments where the Dominican stud's masculinity and its constituent infidelity and dishonesty are critiqued are inadequate to compensate for or correct the many moments where misogyny goes unchecked and uncritiqued or the moments where it is celebrated. Yuniór's emphatic "wonderful! Wonderful!" to describe his "great-sex sort of thing" with Alma's meticulously sexualized body is one such celebratory example. The reader is expected to share and delight in Yuniór's heterosexual male gaze on her anatomy. In another 'boys club' moment, when Yuniór narrates, "you know what every nigger that walks by is thinking because you're thinking it, too," sexual objectification goes unchecked and uncriticized. This moment does not merely transmit the banality of the heterosexual male gaze – a gaze that, though quotidian and unsurprising, nonetheless burdens the women that receive it with their daily, unsurprising objectification and dehumanization. Such a moment in fact reinforces and endorses that gaze by virtue of its failure to critique an already dominant mode of sexist oppression. Sexism cannot be neutrally represented; given the force of this entrenched discourse of inequality, Díaz's decision to depict sexist attitudes in an unchecked, uncritical manner can only result in their reinforcement and advancement.³³¹

³³¹ My logic here about the impossibility of a neutral representation of dominant modes of oppression parallels the logic Rosello and Herschenberg-Pierrot advance about the impossibility of a critical or neutral invocation of stereotype. Racial and gender stereotypes are themselves tools of dominant modes of oppression. Given the established, familiar nature of both, there is limited hope for critical deployments, but ostensibly neutral deployments, like uncritical ones, are doomed to reinforce the oppressions they describe.

A broader ethical question comes into view here about the role of beauty (or in my terms, pleasure and likability) in art: is it ethical to represent bad things beautifully or pleasurably? Should the perpetrator of harm be made likeable? The visual depiction of a naked, raped and murdered woman being documented by police at the crime scene in the Argentine film *El Secreto de Sus Ojos*³³² has been described as beautiful; I am unable to see it that way, gripped as I am by the violence the image transmits, if after the fact. But if rape and murder could be depicted beautifully, should they be? By the same logic, should a misogynist like Yuniór be depicted likably and pleasurably, if one of the artist's goals in his public political intervention is to critique misogyny? Díaz sees art as representing the human condition – its flaws, contradictions and weaknesses – as beautiful: “Art has a way of confronting us, of reminding us, of engaging us, in what it means to be human, and what it means to be human is to be flawed, is to be contradictory, is to be often weak, and yet despite all of these what we would consider drawbacks, that we're also quite beautiful.”³³³ Although we may not want to demand art to be politically correct, this aesthetic commitment to represent humanness as beautiful troubles the artist's political commitment to critique forms of oppression.

15 “The Cheater's Guide to Love”: the Contradictory Stud

15.1 The Sympathetic Misogynist

“Alma” ends with a nod towards Díaz's formal parody of the ‘How To’ instruction manual with the phrase “This is how you lose her.” “The Cheater's Guide to Love,” on the other hand, begins with one. This story explores most fully the love and loss an older, forty-something Yuniór feels for his ex-fiancée. It is the closing story of *This Is How*, and the longest and most fleshed out. It completes the narrative arc of the collection as a whole as it completes Yuniór's developmental arc toward maturity. The story's title parodies the self-help and do-it-yourself genres and mocks both the genres and the figure at the center of this work: the cheating Dominican stud unsuccessful in love. The older Yuniór we see in this story is indeed a paragon of studly

³³² *The Secret in Their Eyes* (*El secreto de sus ojos*), directed by Juan José Campanella (2009; New York: Sony Pictures Classic, 2010), DVD.

³³³ Díaz, “Author Explains.”

misogyny above and beyond the stud we have met in other stories.³³⁴ Insofar as the title echoes *The Idiot's Guide* series of instructional texts – which purport to guide readers in all manner of activities, romantic and otherwise: dating, divorcing, beekeeping, fly-fishing – the implication is that a cheater is a particular kind of idiot needing a guidebook to love. (My reading of “Alma,” in which the narrator treats younger Yuniór like a forgetful idiot, fits here.) In this story, we once again have an older Yuniór narrating the experiences of his younger self; the identity of “cheater” in the title prefigures his final judgment at the story’s close, where he describes Yuniór’s “lying cheater’s heart” (*TIH* 213). Both the title and the final phrase capture a contradiction that animates this story and this collection, so rich in contradictions and inversions. Can the cheater love? Does the lying cheater have a heart? In both cases, yes, of course, even if his actions are hurtful and appear heartless. Love and fidelity are ideals in conflict, at least for Yuniór, because the intimacy and vulnerability of love are incompatible with the invulnerability and machismo of the sex-driven stud.³³⁵ This bind at the heart of Yuniór’s tale makes him and his story tragic: he fails in love, in sincerity, in connection and intimacy. The Dominican stud role he painstakingly learned as an adolescent has done him wrong. Díaz certainly seeks to unmask the “impossible” masculinity men are told to strive for, for it leaves men emotionally alone and broken like Yuniór. But, as Díaz himself articulates, “it’s not as if boys are victims. Boys, believe me, profit quite well from the patriarchal, heteronormative arrangement.”³³⁶

³³⁴ The Yuniór narrating *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is also a paragon – and possibly *parody* – of hypermasculinity, when he self-describes as follows: “Me, who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches *at the same time* and that wasn’t even counting the side-sluts I scooped at the parties and the clubs; me who had pussy coming out of my ears?” (*BWL* 185).

³³⁵ Díaz the public persona is ever lucid about the pressures and contradictions of masculinity. He states in an interview: “On the one hand, we’re told that the sort of proof and excellence of a man is measured by how many girls he can get, by his lack of vulnerability, by his indifference and often his hostility towards what would be considered traditional women’s arenas: domesticity, love, familial bonds, nurturing, family. And then there’s the other side, which is: Who the fuck can be whole, who the fuck can be human without intimacy, without encountering that profound terror that we call love? On the one hand, you’re being told that that shit doesn’t mean shit. That that shit is shit. And on the other hand, your heart is dying for it.” Statements like these convince us of Díaz’s progressive politics and make us assume his deployments of sexism must be subversive. In *TIH*, however, I do not find this to be the case. Díaz, “Fifteen Questions.”

³³⁶ Díaz, “Fifteen Questions.”

The central contradiction within Yuniór's character in turn prefigures a central paradox that my discussion will explore: is Díaz critiquing the Dominican stud, who is a lying cheater, or merely forgiving and sympathizing with the Dominican stud, who has a heart like the rest of us? One might find Díaz's critique of the stud in this story's parodic, mocking title, and in Yuniór's suffering, which can be taken as punishment for his sins. Given Yuniór's epiphany in the story's last two pages, where he finally realizes the errors of his ways, sees himself through his ex-fiancée's eyes, and humbly tries to adopt a new mode of being, one can read this final story as Yuniór's arrival into mature masculinity, which entails a renunciation (and therefore critique) of the Dominican stud role. This is one first-degree reading Díaz invites, which my discussion will track. However, I argue the contrary: that Díaz treats Yuniór with great sympathy, makes him likeable and forgivable, thereby reinforcing, rather than critiquing the stud's misogyny.

Both readings are possible, indeed invited by the text itself. Of course, we all do good and bad, like Yuniór. By intervening via paradox around the figure of the Dominican stud stereotype, Díaz leaves his artwork open to multiple, conflicting interpretations. I discern here the simultaneously complicit and critical intervention Hutcheon identifies in postmodern metafiction. Díaz's text is "self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining," for it reinforces and challenges the stud at the same time, and it invites readings that it then undermines, but incompletely and imperfectly. The work's artistic and hermeneutic openness translates into political ambivalence and inefficacy.

Divided in six sections for the six years it takes Yuniór to get over the heartbreak from this six-year relationship, "The Cheater's Guide" opens by identifying the central problem that animates this final story and the collection as a whole. The collection's structure is circular, for like the first story "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," "The Cheater's Guide" opens with the "girl" and her discovery of Yuniór's cheating:

Year 0

Your girl catches you cheating. (Well, actually she's your fiancée, but hey, in a bit it *so* won't matter.) She could have caught you with one *sucia*³³⁷, she could have caught you with two, but as you're a totally batshit *cuero*³³⁸ who didn't ever empty

³³⁷ slut

³³⁸ slut; stallion; stud

his e-mail trash can, she caught you with fifty! Sure, over a six-year period, but still. Fifty fucking girls? *Goddamn*. Maybe if you'd been engaged to a super open-minded blanquita³³⁹ you could have survived it – but you're not engaged to a super open-minded blanquita. Your girl is a bad-ass salcedeña³⁴⁰ who doesn't believe in open anything; in fact the one thing she warned you about, that she swore she would never forgive, was *cheating*. I'll put a machete in you, she promised. And of course you swore you wouldn't do it. You swore you wouldn't. You swore you wouldn't.

And you did. (*TIH* 175)

Aware of the stereotypical Dominican stud's cheating proclivities, the fiancée (who remains nameless) warns Yuniór of what she will never forgive. Her own stereotypical expectations are revealed here, if ultimately confirmed: he swears fidelity only to break his promise, try and fail to win her back. He minimizes the significance of their engagement, calls his fifty lovers "sucias" and "fucking girls," and reproaches his own oversight that led her to discover the infidelities, rather than reproaching his infidelities themselves. The misogynist tenor of his perspective is striking from the story's first paragraph, setting the tone for our encounter with the older Yuniór acting in this story (distinct from the even older Yuniór narrating it). This opening is admittedly unsympathetic in tone; Díaz does at times represent Yuniór in an unfavorable light. I see such moments as token critiques and will illustrate the overwhelmingly sympathetic reading Díaz encourages. Also noteworthy, if unsurprising, are Yuniór's racially grounded stereotypes of women, for the contours of the Dominican stud come into view only in relation to the females around him. Yuniór's perception of women's tolerance for cheating is contingent on race/ethnicity: an "open-minded blanquita" might have forgiven him, but the "bad-ass salcedeña," it is implied, is a traditional Dominican woman with traditional Dominican attitudes – therefore intolerance – toward cheating. This opposition contrasts racial/ethnic stereotypes whose attitudes and behaviors are predictable, like the "browngirl" and the "halfie" from "How to Date" and the "Nègre" and the "Blanche" from *Comment faire l'amour*. The individual is abstracted into a general role, based on race/ethnicity and gender, and the operative stereotype guides the protagonist's understanding of the woman in question.

³³⁹ white girl

³⁴⁰ from the Dominican city of Salcedo

Despite his performance of blasé insouciance, Yuniór's remorse is nonetheless palpable. In "penitent desperation" (*TIH* 176), his attachment to his beloved is strong, despite his infidelities:

You try every trick in the book to keep her. You write her letters. You drive her to work. You quote Neruda. You compose a mass e-mail disowning all your *sucias*. You block their e-mails. [...] You blame your father. You blame your mother. You blame the patriarchy. You blame Santo Domingo. You find a therapist. [...] You claim that you were sick, you claim that you were weak – It was the book! It was the pressure! – and every hour like clockwork you say that you're so so sorry. (*TIH* 176)

His many excuses are "tricks" rather than honest explanations, as Yuniór fits perfectly the stereotype of the dishonest boyfriend trying to talk his way out of the doghouse.³⁴¹ Yuniór again attempts to transfer blame for his errors onto others, and "the patriarchy" and Santo Domingo both figure in this list – origins of the Dominican stud role he now so successfully embodies. "Your father" and "your mother" also make the cut, as formative figures who shaped Yuniór's development into this role. As we have already seen, women as well as men transmit ideals of Dominican masculinity to boys and men. Though all of these are excuses to absolve Yuniór of responsibility for his actions, he is nonetheless lucid in identifying sources of influence: Yuniór himself invokes the patriarchy as an explanation for his behavior. Yuniór also invokes "the book" as a justification for his cheating; since the story's end will reveal Yuniór as the writer behind this story and likely this collection, this "book" may be the very book we are reading. In another case of circular logic, this would mean Yuniór the writer cracks under the pressure of readers' demands and cheats on his fiancée in order to write the book we read about his cheating. Narrative levels are again transgressed; readers' desires and expectations are discernable in the fabric of the fiction, as Yuniór's shows his concern about how his book is read. The narrator's negotiation with the reader is visible here, as is the author's play with his authorial identity, thinly veiled behind his narrator who claims authorship.

³⁴¹ This passage reads almost like a *parody* of the lying Dominican stud desperately trying to remedy his situation. If Díaz is parodying the stud, as I've suggested the story's title does, then this passage can be read as a mocking critique of the stud's disingenuous machinations. My two-tiered reading of Díaz's treatment of the stud admits both stances: that Díaz does, in limited ways, critique the stud, but more often and with more force, he forgives the stud and authorizes the stud's oppressive ways.

This catalogue of excuses and efforts at rehabilitation reads like a performance of guilt and regret, yet another disingenuous strategy to suit Yuniór's own purposes. What is absent from the narrative here is any real understanding of his fiancée's feelings. Though he sees her sadness, the narrative (a reflection of Yuniór's priorities) is concerned with narcissistically remedying *his* situation – winning back what he has lost by any means necessary, including more lies and excuses – rather than addressing hers: the hurt and harm he has caused. Unlike the anxious stud wannabe of “How to Date,” this Yuniór has perfected the now effortless performance of the Dominican stud, which in turn requires of him an *effortful* performance of the repentant boyfriend. Both roles depend on manipulation and deception to accomplish their goals.

When Yuniór's efforts fail and his fiancée leaves him for good, he reverts to the macho mode, denying his feelings as his understanding of masculinity requires, and criticizing her as his understanding of femininity likewise dictates:

At first you pretend it don't matter. You harbored a lot of grievances against her anyway. Yes you did! She didn't give good head, you hated the fuzz on her cheeks, she never waxed her pussy, she never cleaned up around the apartment. (*TIH* 177)

Her value as a woman is reduced to her sexual performance, her physical appearance and her domestic skills. We understand, as does he,³⁴² that he is now making excuses to himself, rather than to her, trying to justify their separation; but the misogynistic attitudes underlying this self-protective stance are nonetheless striking. Díaz, a vocal critic of patriarchy and heteronormativity *outside* of his fiction, here offers up a paragon of misogyny *inside* his fiction. The stereotypical Dominican stud that Yuniór has now become will meet his downfall shortly, but Díaz's sympathetic depiction of Yuniór's suffering troubles any potential critique:

You start losing your temper with friends, with students, with colleagues. You cry every time you hear Monchy and Alexandra, her favorite. [...] Almost on cue a lot of racist shit starts happening. 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. Before you can figure out what the fuck is going on they flip you the bird and peel out. It happens again and again. Security follows you in stores and every time you step on

³⁴² After pretending it doesn't matter, Yuniór acknowledges: “For a few weeks you almost believe it” (*TIH* 177).

Harvard property you're asked for ID. Three times, drunk whitedudes try to pick fights with you in different parts of the city. (*TIH* 178)

Yunior's emotional pain is given form here, in "moods become erratic" (*TIH* 178), in tempers lost and unmanly tears shed. Yunior crying is a big deal indeed and likely inspires reader sympathy; Yunior victimized by multiple racist incidents certainly does. In Díaz's deft move from 1) Yunior's catalogue of disingenuous excuses to earn his fiancée's forgiveness, to 2) his catalogue of misogynistic grievances against her, to 3) his catalogue of racist episodes, two acts unworthy of sympathy are followed by one very worthy of sympathy. Díaz's depiction of racism here serves both to critique whites' racism and racist rage, and to foster sympathy for Yunior's suffering. Díaz's logic is akin to Laferrière's but reverses the order of events: Laferrière presents the sum history of racism as justification for the *Nègre's* sexual objectification of the *Blanche*, while Díaz first presents Yunior's sexual objectification of women, but then follows it with sympathy-inducing depictions of Yunior's own racial victimization. In opposite directions, both writers use the same strategy: the man of color's sexism is justified or excused on the basis of the racism he is victim to.

Yunior's punishment continues, and the reader's sympathy grows. A writer and university professor, Yunior experiences writer's block, gets negative feedback from his students, injures his foot, ruptures a disc in his back, gains weight, feels depressed and isolated:

You've lost all the mutual friends you had in NYC (they went to her), your mother won't speak to you after what happened (she liked the fiancée better than she liked you), and you're feeling terribly guilty and terribly alone. (*TIH* 179)

As he loses "her," he loses other relationships also dear to him. The figure of the mother returns here briefly, after the previous mention of "your mother" as one locus of blame. In this brief remark, we see poignantly how same-gender loyalty between mother- and daughter-in-law trumps maternal loyalty between mother and son. As noted with respect to "How to Date," camaraderie and identification respect rigid gender lines. Mother identifies with fiancée more than with son in part because (as we know from other stories in the collection, including "Miss Lora") Yunior's father was also unfaithful. I note that the mother figure is, once again, the voice of scathing moral judgment.

Female voices critical of his infidelity or promiscuity enter Yuniór's narration, though often without any accompanying comment or response on Yuniór's part. The mother in "How to Date" calls her son "malcriado;" the mother in "Miss Lora" punches Rafa in fury and reproaches Yuniór for both sons' liaisons with older women; one of Yuniór's ex-lovers publishes a poem about him entitled "El Puto"³⁴³ (*TIH* 186). The unadorned inclusion of these voices nonetheless signals their significance: either in Yuniór's eventual development toward a less narcissistic, more empathetic mode of being (in my first-degree reading, where Díaz's critique of the stud is evidenced by Yuniór's downfall), or as token critiques of infidelity, strategically included by our author to compensate for the many moments of misogyny that go unchecked and uncritiqued (in my second-degree reading).

Yuniór's suffering is depicted in detail, transmitted by the older narrative voice telling his younger self's tale. The monologic, myopic focus on Yuniór's perspective continues here, at the expense of any developed exploration of female perspectives. (I will discuss the one exception to this shortly.) Yuniór's enraged or heartbroken girlfriends are given limited dialogue (which, when it appears, is either irate and hysterical, or cold and distant), but their interiorities are never explored. The reader is thus given no opportunity to identify with these characters or with their suffering. Indeed, in their occasional hysterics and, most often, silence, they are not depicted sympathetically, despite their victimization. In contrast, Yuniór's perspective and his pain consume us. This strategy suits Díaz's myopic focus on Yuniór's experience, and if we see through Yuniór's eyes, we see women as less human and are unconcerned with their suffering. This deliberate fostering of the reader's (dare I say) faithful identification with Yuniór at the expense of identifying with the women in his life, and especially with the women he hurts, discourages sympathy for these women so as to encourage sympathy for Yuniór. Indeed, there is no one else with whom we *may* sympathize.

Our loyalty to Yuniór is carefully constructed, in the hermetically-closed universe of the collection where only one story is told from someone else's perspective and does not involve Yuniór at all. Though Yuniór thinks and does things that are worthy of reproach, he also experiences things worthy of sympathy: racism, depression, injury, loss. Yuniór's sympathy and

³⁴³ womanizer, promiscuous male; homosexual male prostitute; coward (vulgar)

likability illustrate Díaz's manipulation of the reader's relationship with Yunior: she/he is encouraged to excuse his hurtful behavior. There is only one instance in the collection where Yunior's brokenhearted girlfriends directly express pain (as sadness, rather than anger or shock):³⁴⁴ when Yunior takes his fiancée to New Zealand in a bid to save the relationship, "She is immensely sad" and "Later, in the hotel, she will cry" (*TIH* 176). This single sympathy-inducing depiction of her pain is grossly outweighed by sympathetic depictions of Yunior's own pain, and counteracted by depictions of girlfriends acting hysterical and crazy (Alma) or cold and distant (Magda and, in most scenes where she appears, the fiancée). This almost dictatorial focus on Yunior the stud's position, sympathetically portrayed at the expense of anyone else's, serves to foster reader forgiveness of *and therefore complicity in* Yunior's misogyny.

I am not suggesting that every text must explore the entire range of subject positions represented by its characters. It is by no means necessary to include female perspectives in a text that is deliberately focused on a central male figure. But by privileging the straight male perspective, as Díaz so singularly does, he further privileges the male privilege he allegedly wishes to critique (outside his fiction) and represent as a problem (inside his fiction). When Díaz fails to develop and thereby humanize female characters here, Yunior's dehumanizing gaze upon them receives no counterbalance or challenge. The collection's sole gesture at exploring a female perspective involves that of the 'other woman,' Yasmin, the mistress of Yunior's father Ramón in "Otravida, Otravez."³⁴⁵ Yunior, the narrator-writer responsible for this collection, can write

³⁴⁴ In "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," Magda discovers Yunior's infidelity via a letter from his lover; she reacts by hyperventilating. Yunior narrates what follows: "Anyway I won't bore you with what happens after she finds out. The begging, the crawling over glass, the crying" (*TIH* 5). The tears are Yunior's, not Magda's: once again, he manipulatively wins our sympathies.

³⁴⁵ When we learn at the end of "The Cheater's Guide" that Yunior is a writer writing the story we read, we can then extrapolate that he is responsible for all of the collection's stories, including the one that departs most from the rest: "Otravida, Otravez" is written from Yasmin's perspective before Ramón brought his family to the U.S. Yasmin narrates in the first person her story of her relationship with Ramón; this is the only instance in *TIH* where a female character is developed and her interiority explored. Díaz explains this story's role in his strategy of Yunior's character development: Yunior, the adult writer writing the stories of *TIH*, also writes this one, adopting Yasmin's first-person voice. Yunior "imagines the woman that his father left his mother for as fully human and not simply some caricature of the Other Woman. This is an act of compassion, of sympathy he would never have been capable of at the beginning of his journey. The fact that the tale occurs when it does in the collection was meant to signal an increasing

Yasmin's perspective because Yuniór in "The Cheater's Guide" is briefly the 'other man' to a married Dominican woman visiting Boston. Their liaison places Yuniór in a role reversal: instead of being the cheater, he is now someone else's accessory to cheating; he is now the secret, illegal lover, excluded from photos the woman sends her children, privy to her complaints about her husband. Though there is no explicit acknowledgement on Yuniór's part of the parallels here, his experience as the 'other man' might give him access to some of Yasmin's experience. By contrast, Yuniór's mother, whom Yuniór's father cheated on, remains beyond the reach of his understanding and empathy, as do his own betrayed partners. As we will see, the close of "The Cheater's Guide" illustrates Yuniór's first steps into imagining and empathizing with his ex's position.

While Yasmin's position of 'other woman' certainly has its hardships, they are not akin to those of the girlfriends Yuniór hurts. "Otravida, Otravez" therefore fails to compensate for the collection's central lacuna: the absence of any representation of the harm Yuniór, and by extension, sexism do to women. In seeing Yuniór suffer, we see the harm sexism does to him (i.e., his emotional suffering from losing his beloved in this story, his anxiety as a younger man striving to embody the stud role) alongside the ways sexism benefits him (i.e., his cred as a stud, his celebratory promiscuity, his power to manipulate and dupe women, at least for a time). The hurt he causes women is inadequately represented, while the hurt he feels himself is overrepresented.³⁴⁶ Yuniór is a tragic figure, bound to a form of masculinity that makes an honest romantic relationship impossible for him. But his suffering, while created by the powerful ideologies of patriarchy and heterosexism that precede him, does not negate the suffering those

humanity in him." See Díaz, "Sunday Rumpus Interview." "Otravida, Otravez" (in the middle third of the collection, following "Alma") highlights the 'other woman's' otherness in the title's repetition of "otra" (other), but characterizes Yasmin with sensitivity and complexity, moving past caricature as Yuniór/Díaz desire. Yuniór remains unable to characterize betrayed girlfriends, fiancées or wives in more than a minimal, superficial way. (This is in contrast to Díaz's approach in *BWL*, where a significant section of narration is attributed to Lola, Yuniór's cheated-on girlfriend.)

³⁴⁶ On a related note, one reviewer, reacting to Díaz's claim to investigate the mysteries of "male subjectivity," comments that such a perspective, particularly its hegemonic, sexist manifestations in Díaz's fiction, is not "*under* reported." Vitzthum, "Junot Díaz's Pro-Woman Agenda."

ideologies and their manifestations (meaning, Yunior's behavior) cause women. Yunior is a vector for and proponent of these forms of oppression. When Díaz presents Yunior's pain to supplant that of the women he hurts, he inverts the flow of the reader's sympathy and reverses the direction of the potential critique: sexism is critiqued because misogynist Yunior suffers from it, not because women do. Sexism should be critiqued, and it does harm women and men, but not in equal ways. By treating Yunior as the victim here, Díaz negates women's victimization, reversing these victim roles. In this way, Díaz's fiction fails to represent his stated conviction: "it's not as if boys are victims [... for they] profit quite well from the patriarchal, heteronormative arrangement." More precisely, men are both victims of this arrangement and beneficiaries of it in a way that women are not, but only men receive sympathy in Díaz's text.

Parallels, inversions and role reversals abound in "The Cheater's Guide." Yunior is both the victim and the perpetrator of racism, deception, and hurt. Yunior gets involved with a much younger woman, "this young morena³⁴⁷ from the Harvard Law School" (*TIH* 189), who then leaves him for a younger, taller, fitter, and lighter-skinned classmate: "He's even lighter than you but he still looks unquestionably black. He's also like nine feet tall and put together like an anatomy primer" (*TIH* 191). With his physical injuries and diminished physical prowess, Yunior's Dominican stud status may be slipping.³⁴⁸ The successor's lighter complexion is another point of attraction, in addition to his physique; Yunior's darker complexion makes him less desirable to the African American law student. Díaz here highlights, in order to critique, white standards of beauty and the colorism present in African diasporic communities.

³⁴⁷ Yunior uses "morena" to refer to non-Latina, light-skinned African American women, another racial-gender stereotype operating in Yunior's personal grammar of identity. In the Dominican Republic, "morena" refers to any black Dominican woman.

³⁴⁸ Yunior may be becoming a less attractive man, but he is just as seductive as a narrator, even as his tale becomes increasingly melancholy:

"You're out all the time but no one seems to be biting. Not even the chicks who swear they *love Latin guys*, and one girl, when you tell her you are Dominican, actually says, Hell no and runs full-tilt toward the door. Seriously? you say. You begin to wonder if there is some secret mark on your forehead. If some of these bitches *know*.

Be patient, Elvis urges. He's working for this ghetto-ass landlord and starts taking you with him on collection day. It turns out you're awesome backup. Deadbeats catch one peep of your dismal grill and cough up their debts with a quickness" (*TIH* 182). Although Yunior is losing his *séducteur* game, his voice remains relentlessly seductive and misogynistic; the final line's hip hop rhythm captures Yunior's unique, attractive narrative voice.

The (nameless) law student returns claiming to be pregnant with his child, and in his journal (which she reads), he attacks *her* for their collective failure to prevent pregnancy. His attack is racist and sexist:

Only a bitch of color comes to Harvard to get pregnant. White women don't do that. Asian women don't do that. Only fucking black and Latina women. Why go to all the trouble to get into Harvard just to get knocked up? You could have stayed on the block for that shit. (TIH 198)

Yunior lashes out angrily here by reaching for stereotypes; they are powerful weapons of hurt, and easy to use in moments of strong emotion. (This is the same mechanism that operates when Alma reaches for stereotypes to critique Laxmi's "curried pussy.") Yunior's attack on "fucking black and Latina women" is particularly striking as he is himself a black Latino, but a man. His double standard is blatant (if made in secret in his journal), for Yunior's rant follows gendered lines and further victimizes women of color, already burdened with the double disenfranchisement of race and gender. Meanwhile, he critiques whites' racist behavior toward him throughout the story.

On some occasions, Yunior does to others what has been done to him; on other occasions, others do to him what he has done to them. It is surprising that someone so intelligent fails to recognize these parallels and role reversals. Díaz, for his part, subtly includes them in the narrative, allowing the careful reader to see the many blind spots of Yunior's perspective, but never critiquing them, or never critiquing them in convincing ways. In this example, the voice of critique we hear is the irate, below-the-belt attack of the law student; that attack renders her position unsympathetic. She (unethically) reads Yunior's journal – again, the writer unwittingly outs himself – and says terrible things that discourage the reader's sympathy with her: "I fucking *hate* you, she wails. I *hope* it's not yours. I *hope* it is yours and it's born *retarded*" (TIH 198). Yunior's response again shows that he fails to see the symmetries and role reversals: "How can you say that?" (TIH 198). One might ask him the same question with respect to the racist sexism of his journal entry. To cement the preemption of the reader's sympathy for the law student, she (pregnant and agitated) goes to pour herself a shot of liquor. Yunior's judgment – "More bad TV" (TIH 198) – confirms the reader posture Díaz invites here: sympathy for Yunior, none for the female law student. Her critical voice fails to critique Yunior's racist sexism as such and

furthermore, her position is delegitimized as “bad TV;” the critique thus negated, Yunion’s biases are left unchallenged.

It is revealed at the birth that the law student lied to him about the paternity of her child – another unforgivable gesture, as the narrative presents it. In another role reversal, Yunion must deal with the emotional drama and trauma of someone else’s dishonesty. In the delivery room, she says,

I don’t want him here. He’s not the father.

You didn’t think anything could hurt so bad. (*TIH* 201)

Yunion is hurt by a woman who lied to him, as he hurt the women he lied to, though he again fails to see this symmetry. Meanwhile, Yunion’s hurt is foregrounded and made explicit, while the hurt he causes women is consistently elided, glossed over, or counteracted in its narrative treatment. In a parallel narrative tangent, Yunion’s best friend and double Elvis, who cheats on his wife regularly, is also lied to by a former lover who claims she is pregnant with his child. Genetic testing reveals this deception, and Elvis reacts with this: “I told the bitch not to call me again. There is some shit that can’t be forgiven. [...] Fuck that lying bitch” (*TIH* 208). His own lies to his wife, or Yunion’s to his ex-fiancée, are conveniently forgotten here, and forgiveness is denied to the lying female offender. Sympathy for economically vulnerable women who lie to men in search of economic support for themselves and their offspring is out of the question: for Yunion (who has sympathy for Elvis’s deceitful ex-lover, but not his own), Elvis, and the implied reader. Both men and women are guilty of deceit; the narrative treats men’s deceit as permissible, but women’s deceit as unforgivable.

Yunion’s misogyny is at its height in this story, and so is his sympathetic depiction. These two are often juxtaposed, such that Yunion’s suffering counteracts his misogyny. One minute, “you’re calling a sucia and saying, You’re the one I always wanted”; the next, “you cry every time you hear Monchy and Alexandra, [the ex’s] favorite”; the next, indeed, “on cue a lot of racist shit starts happening” (*TIH* 178). One minute, “You’ve lost all the mutual friends you had in NYC, [...] your mother won’t speak to you [...], and you’re feeling terribly guilty and terribly alone;” the next, “You also keep fucking everything that moves;” the next, “Thanksgiving you end up having to spend in your apartment because you can’t face your mom. [...] That night you drink yourself into a stupor” (*TIH* 179). The rapid back-and-forth between unsympathetic and

sympathetic depictions of Yuniór makes the reader unable to judge Yuniór harshly for more than a moment, as his suffering soon elicits sympathy once again.

Yuniór's pain reaches a new level:

Depression rolls over you [...] like someone flew a plane into your soul. [...] Your little letters become more and more pathetic. *Please, you write. Please come back.* (TIH 180)

He also gains forty pounds, has insomnia, and feels suicidal impulses. To top it all off, "A white grandma screams at you at a traffic light" (TIH 181). Yuniór is multiply deserving of sympathy here, and honorably tries to adopt a new mode of behavior with women. Those attempts, however, remain as misogynistic as ever, revealing that Yuniór has not come to see women as humans instead of as objects:

You clean up your act. You cut it out with all the old *sucias*, even the long-term Iranian girl you'd boned the entire time you were with the fiancée. You want to turn over a new leaf. Takes you a bit – after all, old sluts are the hardest habit to ditch. (TIH 182)

Despite acknowledging that his "act" should be "clean[ed] up," no explanation is given as to why; it is not because he sees women differently, since they remain "*sucias*," "sluts," and "bitches," and habits hard to break, rather than human beings. Díaz's/Yuniór's idiosyncratic narrative voice remains appealing and intriguing, echoing the irresistible appeal these lovers have for Yuniór, while reinforcing the appeal Yuniór the narrator has for the reader.

Up to this point, Yuniór and his womanizing best friend Elvis have been doubles: a best friend dyad with shared values and behaviors. But Yuniór begins to change, moving away from the Dominican stud role and toward a mature, empathetic masculinity. When Yuniór's remedy to depression – running – becomes impossible due a foot injury, he turns to yoga on Elvis's suggestion:

Mad fucking ho's in there, he says. I'm talking ho's by the ton. While you're not exactly feeling the ho's right now, you don't want to lose all the conditioning you've built up, so you give it a shot. [...] There are mad ho's, all with their asses in the air, but none of them catch your eye. One miniature *blanquita* does try to chat you up. [...] What the hell are you going to do with a *blanquita*?
Bone the shit out of her, Elvis offers.
Bust a nut in her mouth, your boy Darnell seconds.

Give her a chance, Arlenny proposes.
But you don't do any of it. (*TIH* 188-189)

The 'boys club' chorus articulates the view of women Yuniór is moving away from; his female friend Arlenny offers a humanizing alternative. Yuniór is "not exactly feeling the ho's right now," even if his misogynistic gaze persists. At this turning point, Elvis now becomes Yuniór's foil, the model of Dominican studliness (at least in its lying, unfaithful aspects) that Yuniór is turning away from. Elvis embodies what Yuniór has been but wishes no longer to be. Yoga goes wrong when Yuniór ruptures a disc – another source of reader sympathy – and Elvis "arrives in a flash with a hottie in tow" (*TIH* 190) to take Yuniór to the emergency room. The "hottie" is "straight-up Cambridge Cape Verdean" and, according to Elvis, "She's got like the perfect pussy [...]. It's like putting your dick in a hot mango" (*TIH* 191). This line is the apex of the collection's misogyny, spoken by Yuniór's double-cum-foil, but in a voice just like Yuniór's. Díaz's colorful description of a woman's genitalia and its heterosexual penetration is creative in its imagery and voice. Nonetheless, it is, in my view, violently, unforgettably misogynistic.³⁴⁹ It is not Yuniór who speaks it; indeed, Yuniór replies with words of caution for his friend: "Just don't end up like me" (*TIH* 191). Yuniór no longer approves of his friend's infidelity. But Yuniór's former double and now foil Elvis sounds just like Yuniór; Díaz writes their dialogue in the same appealing vernacular register, blurring the fragile new boundary between them. A more important boundary – that between Yuniór and Díaz – is blurred in a metalepsis at the story's close.

15.2 The Epiphany

In the fifth year after the break-up, Yuniór is finally ready to face the bitter proof of his own dishonesty, cowardice and hurtfulness by reading the book his ex left him.

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 your cheating days, the ones the ex

³⁴⁹ I have debated including this quotation and others, for fear of repeating and reinforcing the misogyny it transmits, as I critique Díaz for doing. I include it with regret, regret for the sentiment and for the disturbingly unforgettable imagery it transmits, but do so in order to best communicate the heights of misogyny we find in this text.

compiled and mailed to you a month after she ended it. *Dear Yunior, for your next book*. Probably the last time she wrote your name.

You read the whole thing cover to cover (yes, she put covers on it). You are surprised at what a fucking chickenshit coward you are. It kills you to admit 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.³⁵⁰ You did the right thing.

She's right; this would make a killer book, Elvis says. [...] Hands you back the Book. You really should write the cheater's guide to love.

You think?

I do. (*TIH* 212)

Yunior, previously shielded behind his tough Dominican stud facade, is "astounded" to see himself through his ex's reproachful eyes and shocked at the ugliness of this image. So prone to lying, he finally admits "the truth": he is a deceitful coward and the woman he loves was right to leave him. She is also right, Elvis concurs, that these materials could become a book. Elvis's approval reminds us how important male validation is, even as it follows a woman's (perhaps ironic) advice. Díaz's collection ends with this story, whose title borrows from the book Elvis suggests Yunior write.

The second-person address in this pivotal moment near the end of the story highlights the multi-voicedness of Yunior's narration, and by extension, the multiple levels of reading and critique operating here. Five distinct 'yous' are operating in this passage: Yunior addressing himself; the ex-fiancée addressing Yunior in her note; Yunior replying to her directly; Elvis addressing Yunior; and finally, Yunior replying to Elvis. Perspective volleys among different

³⁵⁰ In Dominican (and other hispanophone Caribbean and Latin American) usage, *negra* is a term of affection that can, but does not necessarily, have a racial component. Reading Díaz's "negra" alongside his use of "Negro" ("you ain't that kind of Negro" (*TIH* 177)), and in light of his sustained engagement with race throughout the story and his oeuvre, it is difficult to ignore the racial valences *negra* can have. In my reading, it is both racialized and affectionate; this underscores the extent to which, in mature Yunior's worldview and relationships, race remains one of the principal lenses, if not *the* principal lens through which he conceives of others. His ex-fiancée's racial and ethnic background is foregrounded here, for these dimensions of identity are constantly foregrounded in Yunior's life. Even in an expression of humble validation toward his departed beloved, her race and ethnicity are inseparable from his love for her, fused in this term of endearment: "You did the right thing, negra." He expresses this loving acknowledgement with a colloquial Dominican term, addressed to his Dominican ex (in her absence).

speakers and points of view, which the second-person pronoun signifies flexibly. The rhythm of the passage accelerates as the pace of perspective shifts quickens. Yuniór's voice includes the voices of others important to him – Elvis and his ex – and this moment signals a major shift in Yuniór's ethics: away from Elvis's misogynistic mode of masculinity and toward an integration of female voices and perspectives, which are here integrated into the texture of Yuniór's narration. That Yuniór integrates both Elvis's and his ex's voices, despite their contradictory perspectives, is but one more example of the contradictions and oppositions that characterize him and Díaz's ambivalent treatment of him. We see for the first time some respect for Yuniór's ex's opinion and position. Respecting and empathizing with women are signs of mature masculinity as Díaz constructs it.

Yuniór sees himself for the first time from his ex's perspective and acknowledges his cowardice and mendacity. Following Cooley's criteria for the "looking glass self," Yuniór imagines his appearance in his ex's eyes, imagines her judgment, and feels mortification at the result. Robert Katz describes empathy as the moment in which "the sense of similarity becomes so strong that the two [individuals] become one – [the empathizer's] identity fuses with the identity of the other."³⁵¹ Yuniór's identity momentarily fuses with his ex's,³⁵² and for the first time, he empathizes with her suffering. This fusion occurs formally through (a) his absorption of her second-person address into his own second-person narration ("*for your next book*") and (b) his second-person admission, directed at her: "You did the right thing, negra." Out of respect for her position and opinion, and in homage to the wisdom of her suggestion, Yuniór follows her – and Elvis's – advice, turning this "Doomsday Book" into "The Cheater's Guide to Love" that we read. Her book and her advice are thus integrated into Yuniór's writing; her book – "the Book," capitalized – will become Yuniór's – and Díaz's – book-to-be.

³⁵¹ Katz, *Empathy*, 9.

³⁵² This fusing echoes the melancholic fusing of Yuniór's identity with Rafa's in "Miss Lora." Yuniór's split-doubled identity consistently blurs with others; in this story, it blurs with his double/foil Elvis, with his ex in the moment of empathy, and with his creator Díaz in the story's metaleptic close.

The “Doomsday Book”³⁵³ continues the science fiction-inspired apocalypse leitmotif that runs throughout Díaz’s oeuvre; it also implies the end of one thing and the beginning of something else. Indeed, confronting the written proof of his infidelity is what permits Yuniór to begin writing again, after a long period of writer’s block. He pens a good line: “*The half-life of love is forever*” (TIH 213), and this new writing project coincides with a new developmental phase. Yuniór has overcome some of the cultural training that formed him into the Dominican stud and is now capable of a nascent empathy for and identification with women. In transcending the denial he is accustomed to, Yuniór opens the door to transcending the Dominican stud role that has bound him. Yuniór is here at his developmental apotheosis, and writing becomes a way out of the stereotypical role he wishes to leave behind. Pointedly, it is through writing that Yuniór rediscovers hope and possibility, and also through writing that his fiancée discovered his infidelities. This story opens with that discovery of writing, and closes circularly with Yuniór’s rediscovery of writing. Writing is therefore a space of great consequence: of confidences shared and betrayed, of private disclosure and unauthorized intrusion, of creative practice, self-understanding, and personal progress.

By sympathetically depicting Yuniór’s suffering, epiphany and humble new beginning, Díaz secures the reader’s sympathetic takeaway at the story’s and collection’s close. Though Yuniór’s “half-life of love” line points to the love and regret he expects to feel forever, acknowledging this is also a means of moving forward:

It’s a start, you say to the room. [...] 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. (TIH 213)

³⁵³ The original *Doomsday* or *Domesday Book* was a census recording English landholders’ wealth performed at William the Conqueror’s request in 1086. The “Doomsday Book” Yuniór’s ex made for him is also a sort of census, documenting the fifty women he cheated on her with; similarly, *This Is How* documents women lost, as each story focuses on one woman lost by Yuniór, Rafa or their father. See Samuel Henshall and John Wilkinson, trans. *Domesday, or, an actual survey of South-Britain: by the commissioners of William the Conqueror, completed in the year 1086, on the evidence of the jurors of hundreds, sanctioned by the authority of the county jurors*, trans. (London: Bye and Law, 1799). The Doomsday book prefigures J.M. Wilson’s 1870 *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales* (London and Edinburgh: A. Fullarton and Co., 1870), which similarly surveyed landholdings, and more generally, the 19th century colonial-era gazetteers which offered compendia on colonized lands, peoples and cultures.

Through this self-critique in a tale of “love and consequences,” Yuniór’s story ends with a beginning, a kernel of hope and possibility reached through the act of writing. The move from second person singular to first person plural further implicates the reader in Yuniór’s experience, and encourages identification and camaraderie with him. “We” are in it alongside Yuniór; his successes and failures are ours as well, and we root for him. Yuniór gets “a start,” an opportunity to be a different kind of man, as Díaz invites the reader to benevolently give Yuniór another chance to be a good guy. This readerly forgiveness is encouraged by Yuniór’s final arrival into responsibility, accountability, and apology.

Over the course of “The Cheater’s Guide,” the Dominican stud is in a process of transition. In what I have called a first-degree reading, I have tracked Yuniór’s turn away from misogyny to a less objectifying, less dishonest mode of relating to women; this turn can be seen as Díaz’s critique of misogyny. Yuniór’s perspective shifts in part due to his own suffering and isolation, and in part due to his experiences with women who lie, cheat, hurt and reject him, though this connection is never made explicit. These symmetries, wherein Yuniór is punished by being hurt by women in the same ways he has hurt them, make a neat and clean narrative of cause and equal and opposite effect, of just desserts, of “an eye for an eye.” Among other kinds of readers, Díaz also targets those who read for pleasure and are ripe for a facile moral at the end of this tale of vicarious misogynistic pleasure and of the hero’s tragic downfall. Those readers get the twinned pleasures of salacious heterosexual male fun and politically correct critique to make it all okay at the end.

Because of its simplicity and tidy symmetry, I am suspicious of this reading. Díaz prefers subtlety and complexity and is not one for simplistic “moral tales.” Díaz says, “For the kind of sophisticated art I’m interested in, [...] the larger structural rebuke has to be so subtle that it has to be distributed at an almost sub-atomic level. Otherwise, you fall into the kind of preachy, moralistic fable that I don’t think makes for good literature.”³⁵⁴ Díaz expands on the mechanisms of political critique via literary subtlety in another interview:

In, say, *Drown*, we have a book where racist shit happens—but it’s not like at a thematic level the book is saying: Right on, racist shit! I was hoping that the book

³⁵⁴ Fassler, “How Junot Díaz.”

would expose my characters' race craziness and that this craziness would strike readers, at the very minimum, as authentic. But exposing our racisms, etc., accurately has never seemed to be enough; the problem with faithful representations is that they run the risk of being mere titillation or sensationalism. In my books, I try to show how these oppressive paradigms work together with the social reality of the characters to undermine the very dreams the characters have for themselves. So, Yuniór thinks X and Y about people and that logic is, in part, what fucks him up. Now if the rebounding is too blunt and obvious, then what you get is a moralistic parable and not literature. But, if it's done well, then you get both the ugliness that comes out of showing how people really are around issues like race and gender, but also a hidden underlying counter-current that puts in front of you the very real, very personal, consequences of these orientations.³⁵⁵

Díaz is, of course, lucid about his strategy, one that I find works better in *Drown* than in *This Is How*. The "sub-atomic" critique indeed feels too small, Yuniór's downfall too brief (compared to his many years of carefree misogyny), too sympathetically rendered and too quickly righted by the story's hopeful ending.³⁵⁶ Yuniór's "ugliness" around race and gender are authentic, but inadequately challenged. In privileging subtlety, the "hidden underlying counter-current" can be lost.

Díaz's text invites slow, critical reading practices that seek to unpack his subtlety and complexity. Yet even as I advance my slow, second-degree reading, I insist that the first-degree reading is nonetheless deliberately invited by Díaz, possibly as a strategy to preempt critical readings like mine. Beyond its un-Díazian simplicity, that first-degree reading contains additional flaws. It presents Yuniór's hurtfulness as rectified by Yuniór's own hurt. Of course, amends are not so smoothly made: Yuniór's ex, hurt by his infidelities, is not unhurt by Yuniór's

³⁵⁵ Díaz, "Search for Decolonial Love."

³⁵⁶ Virginia Vitzthum notes that Díaz's downfallen, "caught-with-their-pants-down narrators seem at most mildly, temporarily chastened and no closer to changing." She writes: "I've been reading about women through a lens of leering contempt forever. That men reduce women to body parts and to their sexual withholding/ putting-out/ performance is not a revelation. Recording that reductiveness without comment, exploration, or illumination does not a successful 'feminist-aligned project' make." Vitzthum, "Junot Díaz's Pro-Woman Agenda." In different words, Vitzthum affirms my point that a dominant perspective ("male subjectivity," as Díaz calls it in that interview) enacting a dominant mode of oppression (misogyny) requires explicit critique, and that Díaz's alternately celebratory or 'neutral' representation only bolsters the oppressive mode.

suffering at losing her; neither is her situation remedied when Yunion takes in the law student who then hurts him by lying about her child's paternity. Only by continuing to see women as interchangeable, less-than-human figures (i.e., hurt one, care for another, be hurt by another) could such a logic of just desserts operate. However, as I discuss in my conclusion, another possibility is that Díaz's (overly) subtle metacritical intervention resides in the interpretive openness and metafictional aspects of his text, which signal reader responsibility and complicity.

Only in the collection's final two pages does Yunion reach his epiphany, which is no more sophisticated than realizing he is a "chickenshit coward," never naming sexism, misogyny, male privilege, or heteronormativity as evils operating here, and this despite Yunion's career entrenched in the academy and its lexicon. And Yunion's vocabulary, for all its hip vernacular, is certainly erudite and sophisticated,³⁵⁷ making his failure to accurately describe the discourses of oppression he is guilty of perpetuating all the more suspect. Earlier on, he is able to invoke "the patriarchy" to blame for his behavior when defending himself to his fiancée. Yunion's inadequate self-reproach is incompatible with his academic, writerly persona, and signals Díaz's failure to successfully, unambivalently critique Yunion's misogyny by explicitly naming it as such. Of course, Yunion *is* also a victim of patriarchy and of the norms of masculinity it transmits; we see the fallout of these structures in the stories that depict Yunion at a younger age. But I stress that Yunion should not be the chief victim here, for his practice of patriarchy victimizes women. Men and women are both hurt by male privilege and dominance, but by definition (and as Díaz himself has acknowledged), men also benefit greatly from these, while women do not. Yunion's sins derive from values and discourses that precede him, that he was taught as he learned the Dominican stud role. He is not exceptionally bad, for his sins are commonplace and unsurprising. But to treat them as forgivable, and to make Yunion so seductive and likable, only serves to make his misogyny seductive and likable, which only serves to perpetuate and compound women's victimization. I therefore discount the simplistic, first-degree reading whereby Yunion's downfall and last-minute epiphany constitute Díaz's critique of misogyny.

³⁵⁷ "Atavistic" (*TIH* 150), "pelagic," "incontrovertible" (*TIH* 47) and "budget Foucaults" (*TIH* 15) are some examples from Yunion's narration that indicate his facility with academic-speak. Díaz's play with multiple, seemingly incompatible registers is one pleasurable aspect of his narrative voice; here, at the collection's close, Yunion's inability to use this register to accurately describe his behavior as forms of oppression signals his, and Díaz's, inadequate, non-specific, light-handed critique.

Instead, I offer a second-degree reading to identify the political ambivalence of Díaz's intervention here: a light-handed, closing critique of Yuniór's misogyny disguises the text's sustained reinforcement of misogyny.

15.3 The Hypertonic Alter Ego

At the end of "The Cheater's Guide," writing and reading are thrown into relief. There, the metafiction is aware of itself, as it is aware of *the* self, for writing is the place where one writes the narrative of one's self, articulates that self in a new form, and sketches out a new self to be. This is the narrative destination and developmental objective of the self-help genre as Illouz identifies it. Writing plays a similar function in the endings of "The Cheater's Guide" (itself the closing story of *This Is How*) and of Laferrière's *Comment faire l'amour*: in both metafictional parodies of the self-help genre, a writer finds hope and an exit from difficult circumstances by writing a text that self-reflexively mirrors the text we readers read. In Laferrière's text, the narrator's newly finished novel offers a possible exit from the socioeconomic disadvantage that plagues the black immigrant, stuck as he is in white Montréalers' stereotype of the *Nègre*. In Díaz's story, writing offers a possible exit from suffering brought on by the narrator's adherence to the Dominican stud stereotype, a role Yuniór adopts in response to a constellation of social pressures: exclusions exerted by the white U.S. hegemony, rigid norms of Dominican masculinity dictated by both men and women, a patriarchal system that normalizes machismo and misogyny. Both stud-narrators renounce sex in favor of writing: Laferrière's narrator rejects "la Grande" to have a writerly orgasm with his typewriter, while a melancholy Yuniór "cut[s] it out with all the old sucias" and "bend[s] to the work," which implies humility and submission, rather than the narcissism and domination that have characterized his relationships up to now. Yuniór's "start" at the end of his tale echoes Laferrière's narrator's "aube" / "dawn" (CFL 163/153) when his completed novel stares up at him in *Comment faire l'amour*'s final lines. Laferrière's text is not a manual for how *Blanches* can manage their *Nègre* lovers' sexual stamina, just as "The Cheater's Guide" does not teach its reader how to succeed in love. Instead, Laferrière's narrator's novel, *Paradis d'un drageur nègre* / *Black Cruiser's Paradise*, is a thinly veiled version of the novel we read; and Yuniór writes "The Cheater's Guide to Love" within the story itself. Díaz, thinly veiled behind (fictional narrator) Yuniór up to this point, ambivalently removes his Yuniór mask in the story's final metalepsis.

This closing metalepsis signals again the permeable border between fiction and reality (and also irony and sincerity): Díaz's character Elvis offers up an (ironic) title for the story in which he is a character, and offers it to Díaz's homodiegetic narrator Yuniór, and to writer Díaz, their extradiegetic creator. In this dizzying circuit of metaleptic³⁵⁸ transgressions, "The Cheater's Guide to Love" is both title and (ironic) conceptual frame for the story, and yet this framing title is generated *within* the story, two narrative levels below that of Díaz's story. In this final metalepsis, we come to realize that "The Cheater's Guide" is both the very text Yuniór was encouraged to write, and the "start" mentioned above – the start that culminated in, and paradoxically closed, the collection. Its parodic self-help title signals how it, and the collection as a whole, can be read. Here at the collection's end, Díaz reveals its structure and function: the stories contained therein are Yuniór's narrative of his life's relationships. In them, he returns to and works out relationships and selves past, narrating them with the older narrative voice we hear at varying distances from the Yuniór acting within the narratives. Since his father's and brother's voices and selves inhabit him, Yuniór also writes of women these important male role models lost (Ramón lost Yuniór's mother Virta and his lover Yasmin; Rafa lost Pura and Nilda (whom Yuniór also lost, in a different way), among others.) He seeks to make sense of predecessors, his patterns, his emotions and his suffering, in hopes of being redeemed. Illouz writes of the self-help genre: "The narrative of self-help and self-realization is a narrative of memory and of the memory of suffering, [... and] the exercise of memory brings redemption from it."³⁵⁹ The self-help narrative, like Yuniór's narrative here, is performative: "it is more than a story because it reorganizes experience as it tells it"³⁶⁰; quite literally, in the anachronic order of *This Is How's* stories, Yuniór reorganizes his experience. Yuniór's writing, then, is "a platform on which healing is performed"³⁶¹ and where self-change can occur. Austin's conception of performative speech acts – as words that *do* things – applies here on several levels: the story is named performatively within the story, writing about writing performs the writing itself, and the discussion of books ultimately constitutes the book. Furthermore, writing a

³⁵⁸ Here the metalepsis takes the form of an intrusion by a diegetic character – Elvis – into a metadiegetic universe – the universes of Yuniór's book-to-be, and of Díaz's *TIH*.

³⁵⁹ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 182.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

narrative of one's redemption and healing performs the healing and redeeming, following the dictates of self-help as this parodic self-help text does.

At the close of "The Cheater's Guide," narrative levels are transgressed, as they are at the close of "Alma," but what was suggested in that story is here confirmed clearly: Díaz, not Yuniór, is the master puppeteer pulling the strings behind this story and this collection. Of course, we know this: Díaz's name and photo appear on the covers of *This Is How*. But throughout the text, narrator Yuniór implies his own authorship. Yet, much as doubles Elvis and Yuniór are ultimately denied paternity by the women who dishonestly claimed it, Yuniór is ultimately denied the authorship of *This Is How* at its close when Díaz metaleptically reveals himself. Yuniór's first good line, about "the half-life of love," appears in Díaz's story, and the title Elvis offers Yuniór is the title Díaz assigns this story. The novel that Yuniór claimed in "Alma" is confirmed as Díaz's instead, and the authorship of "The Cheater's Guide" awarded to Díaz, not Yuniór. Yuniór's "next book" overlaps perfectly with Díaz's, and the Yuniór mask is removed.

In these metalepses that cross narrative levels, and by speaking through the recurrent narrator Yuniór, Díaz crosses into his narrative. This coherence in narrator and narrative voice, combined with his first- and second-person narration, seems to channel the author himself, who moreover deliberately blurs the line between fiction and autobiography. (The same can be said of Laferrière's first-person narratives.) Díaz seems to perform Yuniór, in a sense: he calls Yuniór his "hypertonic alter-ego" and admits, "I modeled Yuniór clearly on my own experience as an immigrant kid growing up in NJ."³⁶² Díaz's recognizable narrative voice can be traced in his different published works, as can biographical details from his own life, signaling the writer "hid[ing] behind" the narrator. "Alma" takes place at Rutgers,³⁶³ where Díaz went to college, as did Yuniór and Oscar in *Brief Wondrous Life*. The Yuniór in "The Cheater's Guide" is a writer and writing professor, like Díaz, and a runner with back troubles deriving from his work as a

³⁶² Díaz, "Sunday Rumpus Interview."

³⁶³ "Alma is a Mason Gross student" (*TIH* 45); this refers to Rutgers' Mason Gross School of the Arts, though only someone familiar with Rutgers would know this. Writer Yuniór (and writer Díaz) expect, even demand, their readers to know certain things. Not only is the author subject to readers' expectations, but readers are subject to authorial expectations.

pool table delivery boy in the past, like Díaz; that past is recounted in “Edison, New Jersey” in *Drown*. In an interview, Díaz says,

It’s true I play with autobiography. I love to play with it. It’s like a medium. [...] No matter how hard I try to be autobiographical, the demands of fiction transform the material. There was no possible way to be autobiographical. The same way a memoir is also a kind of fiction.³⁶⁴

Inverting our expectation that a writer of so-called fiction would strive first and foremost for fiction, Díaz quips (possibly with irony, possibly without) that autobiography is in fact his point of origin, but that fiction inevitably intervenes.

As Díaz’s work crosses boundaries between literary genres (fiction, autobiography, historical narratives, instruction manuals), between narrative points of view (first and second person), and between narrative levels, a series of doubles and doublings blur the lines between principal figures in his fiction. We have seen the doubling between teacher and student in “How to Date,” which can also be read as Yuniór, split and doubled, instructing himself to become the Dominican stud. We have seen Rafa as Yuniór’s foil-cum-double in “Miss Lora,” when Yuniór resists and then follows his brother’s instruction to learn and perform the Dominican stud role and seduce “la profesora” in a melancholic introjection of his brother’s identity. We have seen the two contradictory Yuniórs animating “Alma,” one who performs the stud, the other who pedantically critiques the stud. In “The Cheater’s Guide,” we see Elvis as Yuniór’s double-cum-foil, embodying the Dominican stud role that Yuniór is finally turning away from. In that story’s closing metalepsis, Díaz is unmasked as the real author behind *This Is How*, a collection with instruction manual overtones, and we see the doubling of (real) Díaz with (fictional) Yuniór, both of whom are professors. We see the intersections among identity performativity, identity pedagogy, doubled and split identities given literary form in doubles and foils, and metafictional devices that blur boundaries.

What is at stake in Díaz’s metaleptic play with Yuniór the writer-double is the contradiction between the author’s professed politics and those of his misogynistic character. His fiction is certainly celebrated in part for the clever metafictional maneuverings that please readers and critics alike. The problem is in Yuniór’s relentless sexism *in* the fiction, and how to

³⁶⁴ Díaz, “Fiction is,” 905-906.

reconcile it with Díaz's critique of sexism (and patriarchy, heteronormativity, and male privilege) *outside* the fiction. The confusing blurring of Yuniór's and Díaz's identities serves to suggest a connection that is simultaneously denied. In treating his fiction as Yuniór's, Díaz wears the macho mask of Yuniór. This may be an *ambivalent* strategy that deflects responsibility for the values advanced by his text: Yuniór says and does what author Díaz, given his publicly proclaimed leftist politics, does not say or do. And yet, by using just such metafictional techniques, such self-aware play with writing, reading and texts, Díaz simultaneously and *self-consciously* reveals himself beneath the mask. In addition to everything else, Díaz's dizzying play with multiple perspectives, doubles and 'yous' is also an obfuscation of the writer's ideological position, an evasion (but subtle suggestion) of writerly responsibility, and a deflection (but subtle invitation) of critique. The dishonesty, infidelity, sexism and objectification of women represented in *This Is How* are deflected – ambiguously, ambivalently – onto (invented) writer Yuniór, and away from (real) writer Díaz. At the same time, the self-aware, self-undermining postmodern writer self-consciously reminds the reader of his authorial (and authoritative) presence behind his narrator Yuniór.

Interviewers often ask Díaz about his relationship to Yuniór. Díaz is, understandably, uncomfortable with the connection readers draw between him and Yuniór – a connection that Díaz himself *invites*, both in and outside the fiction. Anticipating the critic's critique, he offers this, using the language of hiding and masking:

you can't know a person. [...] You can't see when I'm thinking. No matter how much I tell people who I am, that only increases the tension of unknowability. The suspicion will always remain: he must be hiding something. And, in fact, I'm hiding something. You can't talk about yourself without hiding something else.³⁶⁵

Díaz implies here that he is hiding something – something he will not say, something that we do not know. Because he is always two steps ahead with evasive statements like these, we can never know him or pin him down. Like Laferrière, he evades critical capture, slips the grip of any singular, certain reading, offering here in his "I'm hiding" claim the rhetorical equivalent of Laferrière's "grain of salt." The writer is unknowable, always hiding, always masking, always performing, like his narrator. Díaz explains his symbol for Yuniór's contradictory complexity by

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 906.

likening him to the Mexican wrestler *Mil Máscaras* (Thousand Masks): “If Yuniór has an alter-ego it’s this Thousand Masks, and I think the reason why I make Yuniór my alter-ego is because he is good at representing how many sides we have to us.”³⁶⁶ Insofar, then, as Yuniór is Díaz’s alter ego and double, Díaz also identifies himself with Thousand Masks and the multiplicity of identity that he represents. In this way, Díaz resists – on the one hand – the connection readers draw between him and his narrator, thereby deflecting responsibility for Yuniór’s misogyny away from himself. On the other hand, he also insists on their connection and, in a sense, takes responsibility for Yuniór. Díaz offers this with respect to the (similarly misogynistic) Yuniór narrating *Brief Wondrous Life*, a novel framed by political and narrative dictatorship: “In dictatorships, only one person is really allowed to speak. And when I write a book or a story, I too am the only one speaking, no matter how I hide behind my characters.”³⁶⁷ This ambivalence is perplexing and makes it difficult to define appropriate parameters for critique.

I am not suggesting here that Yuniór’s escapades or viewpoints are Díaz’s or that Díaz actually endorses Yuniór’s misogyny; I trust Díaz’s publicly announced politics to be sincere, and I support his continued vocal critique of forms of oppression, gendered, racial and otherwise. But in *This Is How*, more than in his preceding two works of fiction, Díaz’s fictional treatment of Yuniór the misogynist Dominican stud is politically ambivalent at best and reinforces modes of oppression at worst. I have shown how, in the fiction, Díaz’s often sympathetic portrayal of Yuniór counteracts moments of critique we also find there. Yuniór’s likability and seductiveness, as male character and as narrator, make the reader like him and make the reader complicit in his misogyny. ‘Boys club’ moments of the celebratory sexual objectification of women often go unchecked and uncritiqued; I have argued that there is no such thing as a neutral representation

³⁶⁶ Díaz qualifies his claim to underline how he and Yuniór differ: “I consider Yuniór my alter-ego. But for me an alter-ego is less about pursuing my autobiographical details than it is just having a conversation about how in this age, we’re very hungry for autobiographical details in an area, fiction, where we should not be looking for them. Yuniór has some things in common with me, but he certainly is not just a glossed [me]. I mean, he’s very different than me in many ways. Again, we share certain things – he’s coming out of me, so there’s clearly going to be a lot of connections. I think Yuniór’s sort of protein particularities are what’s most compelling to me. Because, you know, he can be very different from situation to situation. And for a writer, that’s a wonderful character.” Yuniór’s contradictions certainly do make for an intriguing character, like Díaz’s make for an intriguing author and public figure. Díaz, “*Mil Máscaras*.”

³⁶⁷ Díaz, “*BWL*: Questions for Junot Díaz.”

of dominant forms of oppression, for any representation that is not explicitly critical necessarily confirms the already dominant mode of oppression. The metaleptic blurring between the final male-male dyad and doubled duo I consider here – Yuniór and Díaz – further weakens the critique of sexism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity that Díaz seeks to make with “subatomic” subtlety in the text.

16 Conclusion: Inside/Outside

Díaz’s longitudinal engagement with the ‘How To’ and self-help forms across two published titles and four stories has framed my analysis of his treatment of the Dominican stud. We have seen how Díaz’s engagement with these genres points to pedagogical features of identity, among other functions. Like Laferrière, Díaz shows how men teach other men to perform stereotypical, racialized roles of heterosexual masculinity. In an interview, Díaz asks some ‘How’ questions that connect to a pedagogy of masculinity, and the pedagogy that instructs the Dominican stud in particular:

[*This Is How is*] really a book about the rise and fall of a Dominican male slut. How did the boy learn to be a male slut, or at least this particular boy? How he is formed, and how that formation undoes him in the end. Because one must reflect that many of the messages we labored under were piercingly contradictory.³⁶⁸

Díaz highlights the stud role as something learned and then unlearned, and as one role of many that young men must negotiate alongside other, opposing social pressures. The four stories considered here trace that process of learning and unlearning and bring to light the tensions inherent in all its stages. In “How to Date,” an older boy teaches a younger one (or his split younger self) how to become a man in the absence of paternal or adult male role models. In “Miss Lora,” our student of studliness has his first sexual success while cheating on his girlfriend with Miss Lora, demonstrating that he has integrated into his behavior the infidelity his brother and father modeled for him, at the same that he feels guilty and conflicted about having done so. In “Alma,” Yuniór learns a different lesson about manliness: now sexually successful and unfaithful to his girlfriend, he fails to fess up to his infidelities and “[cop] to it like a man,” and therefore learns that “this is how you lose her” (*TIH* 48). In “The Cheater’s Guide,” the mature,

³⁶⁸ Díaz, “Fifteen Questions.”

confident stud has lost the woman who mattered most, is losing confidence in himself and in his sex appeal, and eventually renounces the stud role and its unfaithful, dishonest ways. Here Yuniór again lacks a male role model to guide his transformation; his male friends remain stuck in the pattern that Yuniór now rejects, and he is alone as he begins the process of living differently, of adopting another role, of becoming a different Yuniór. We do not know if he will succeed.

At this turning point, we see a realignment of Yuniór's social frames of reference: he is now less concerned with acceptance by male peers, as his own behavior begins to depart from that of his former double Elvis, and he begins to identify more with female perspectives. For younger Yuniór, misogynistic sex and machismo were means of bonding with other men, of gaining respect, of sharing experience, of achieving closeness and perhaps even of touching men vicariously (as Yuniór does with his deceased brother Rafa via Miss Lora in that story). The Dominican stud role demands machismo and misogyny at the expense of vulnerability and intimacy; without these forms of closeness, Yuniór sees his father and brother as "assholes" (*TIH* 149) and "sucios" (*TIH* 161). They are not likable, even if they are enviable, even if Yuniór guiltily – and then unguiltily – follows their example. Yuniór, however, remains a likable figure throughout, even at his most misogynist. I have thus interrogated Díaz's sympathetic treatment of the likable, seductive misogynist Yuniór, for it beckons the reader to stand pleasurably in Yuniór's shoes and renders the reader complicit in Yuniór's sexism.

However, this fostering of reader complicity may signal Díaz's subtle, metacritical intervention. In representing the ugly, politically incorrect realities of machismo and misogyny, in refusing to water down these aspects of Yuniór's worldview into a more palatable, politically correct version, Díaz illustrates the extent to which all of us, regardless of our position on the political spectrum, are necessarily inhabited by the discourses of white and male privilege. Yuniór, a beneficiary of male privilege and a victim of white privilege, in turn inhabits us. Because Yuniór is a man of color, placing the reader inside Yuniór's perspective (via first- and second-person address and other sympathy-inducing strategies) has different effects concerning Díaz's treatment of racism, on the one hand, and of sexism, on the other. When we as readers imaginatively inhabit the racialized character of color, we experience (vicariously, imperfectly) the racialization and discrimination he experiences. We see how girls stereotype Yuniór somewhere between "Spanish guys" and "the blackboys"; we feel Yuniór's shame about his

“Afro” hair and his adoration of white features; we see Yuniór yelled at, flipped off, and showered with Diet Coke in instances of racist white rage. We witness the violence those with privilege do to those without from the perspective of the latter. When we as readers inhabit the sexist male character, however, we witness this violence from the perspective of former. We experience (vicariously, imperfectly) the “gleeful pleasures of patriarchy,” as well as the emotional fallout that results from Yuniór’s chronic infidelity and dishonesty. We inhabit Yuniór’s objectifying gaze on women’s bodies; we watch girlfriends react upon discovering Yuniór’s concealed infidelity; we feel Yuniór’s belated shame, regret, isolation, loss, and depression when he has lost his fiancée. When Díaz places the reader *inside* Yuniór’s unique perspective – disempowered in terms of race/ethnicity, empowered in terms of gender and sexuality – he makes the reader experience racism as a victim and sexism as a perpetrator.

Both of these positions have the potential to teach readers lessons in line with Díaz’s politics of anti-sexism and anti-racism. However, I fear Díaz’s representation of sexism serves more to reinforce than to challenge it, teaching readers the wrong lessons. The juxtaposition of sexism and racism may nonetheless prove fruitful if it encourages the reader to draw parallels between the two axes of power, as I have done. This is one, ever so subtle form Díaz’s metacritical intervention might be taking here. Another involves rendering the reader complicit in patriarchy’s modes of operation so as to unmask the fact that the reader was already complicit, even before the act of reading. Indeed, we are all always already complicit in patriarchy and white supremacy. Díaz makes a politically ambivalent intervention here and shows us the ambivalent, mixed perspective of Yuniór, perpetrator of patriarchy and victim of white supremacy. As in so many other cases, Díaz once again blurs discrete categories (dominant/oppressed), crosses frames (racial inequality/gender inequality), fuses identities (victim of racism/proponent of sexism) and mixes ideological positions (inside, therefore complicit/outside, therefore critical). Spheres thought separate are not; inside and outside are not real options, for we are all *inside* patriarchy and white supremacy – and they are inside us – even if we try to be outside and critical of these. We, too, are split and doubled, critical and complicit. Recognizing our complicity is part of the effort, always bound to fail but nonetheless essential, to stand outside.

An awareness of the discourses that inhabit us is certainly possible; we are able to conceptualize, analyze and critique them, even if we can never be fully severed from them.

Edward Said articulates the “profoundly perturbed and perturbing question of our relationship to others,” noting that

there is no vantage *outside* the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and nonimperial powers, between different Others, a vantage that might allow one the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating and interpreting free of the encumbering interest, emotions, and engagements of ongoing relationships themselves. [...] We are so to speak *of* the connections, not outside and beyond them.³⁶⁹

Any critique, whether via art or scholarship, is contaminated, impure and imperfect; this echoes Rosello’s treatment of stereotype as a form of contamination that “insinuates itself like some sort of bacteria to a general statement about a group or community”³⁷⁰ and cannot be easily ousted. Stereotypes, like the dominant discourses of oppression they mobilize, are not easily excised from our worldviews, our creations, our critiques. The final line of Pérez-Firmat’s epigraph to *Drown* resonates here: “My subject: how to explain to you that I do not belong to English, although I belong nowhere else.” By using Pérez-Firmat’s line to open *Drown*, Díaz highlights his state of being ambivalently, paradoxically inside English – another dominant discourse that Díaz challenges, ambivalently – because there is no outside. Resistance is vital, yet fraught. Díaz closes *This Is How* with a final lesson: “sometimes a start is all we ever get.” This single, anomalous invocation of ‘we’ may subtly align Yuniors’ futile plight – to write himself into a better self, to better “manage” the misogyny built into him – with the reader’s futile plight – to become a better reader: of bodies, of texts, of her/his own reading practices and the blind spots therein, and of the world around her/him.

³⁶⁹ Said, “Representing the Colonized,” 216-217.

³⁷⁰ Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype*, 37.

Conclusion: The Lessons We Learn

Both Díaz and Laferrière depict men trapped in stereotypical masculine roles and highlight identity's pedagogy and performativity in their parodies of 'How To' instruction manuals. Both writers illustrate, but fail to adequately critique, how these roles entail the misogynistic exploitation of women and are therefore hurtful to women. Díaz shows how men struggle with anxiety and insecurity as they try to fulfill the demands of studliness in the eyes of their male peers; and how they struggle with an incapacity for intimacy, vulnerability, empathy and fidelity in their relationships with women. Díaz shows how all stages of the process of learning and performing hegemonic masculinity are hurtful to men. Laferrière takes a somewhat different angle, as his focus is on the racialized component of the *Nègre* trope, its historical lineage, and the fantasies of black masculinity it calls up. Like Díaz, Laferrière nonetheless shows the restrictions these demands place on men, even as his narrator successfully exploits the role's advantages without the emotional devastation that Yuniór undergoes. In distinct but parallel ways, using irony and inversion in their depiction of stereotypical roles of masculinity (the *Nègre* explicitly named, or the Dominican stud implied), Laferrière and Díaz offer critiques of norms of masculinity, showing how these harm both women and men. Laferrière is decidedly less focused on the negative consequences these masculine roles have on women, as he depicts the *Blanches* as entirely complicit and content in their sexual relationships with the narrator and highlights instead the latter's gleeful practice of sexual retribution for racial wrongs. Laferrière is more focused on the historical conditions that produced the *Nègre* role, and how black men and white women engage with the role in the present. In *This Is How*, Díaz gestures only subtly at the conditions of production surrounding the Dominican stud role but attends instead to its conditions of perpetuation in the present and its emotional consequences on men and, to a lesser degree, women.

Díaz and Laferrière play rough with sensitive subjects. Their deployment of the stereotype of black male hypersexuality risks reinforcing it, for any subversive intent can be commodified by a market hungry for such stereotypical tales. That market is also hungry for

salacious tales of women's stereotypical sexual subjection, rendering these narratives of studs' promiscuity all the more easily coopted.³⁷¹ Playing with sexism is a risky game indeed, particularly for writers whose male privilege is real, not ironic. Jokes, jabs, irony and parody move more safely *up* the ladder of power (i.e., black to white), as when Laferrière's *Nègre* mocks the white male's sexual impotence or when Díaz parodies and subverts the faux-universalism of the instruction manual's 'standard' white English. But when these techniques move down the ladder (i.e., man to woman), as when Laferrière's narrator commands, "Fuck her viciously [...], violently, till it hurts" or when Yuniors reproaches "bitches of color" for their unintended pregnancies, they retrace and reinforce established forms of domination. These *representations* of misogyny are dangerously close to *replications* of misogyny. Díaz argues that representing oppression is a means to act against it.³⁷² When I and other readers bridle at these writers' representations of sexism, we respond to the risky decision an anti-sexist man makes to play ironically, parodically, subversively or 'neutrally' at sexism in fiction, when, in the real world, real men enact sexism against real women and it is neither neutral nor funny.

Díaz speaks lucidly about racism and sexism, and how the dominant discourses of white and male supremacy necessarily reside within us. He says, "White supremacy's greatest trick is that it has convinced people that it exists always in other people, never in us."³⁷³ He also explains boys' inculcation into misogyny and the challenge of writing female characters:

You grew up in a society that taught all boys to view women as subhuman. At every level. [...] I want to find something that makes young women [readers] say, "OK, it's a phoney bit of ventriloquism, but at least this is a guy who doesn't hate us 1,000%, he only hates us 800%, you know?" [...] I think that men are not cured of the misogyny that patriarchy builds into us – we only manage it. We only manage it.³⁷⁴

³⁷¹ Díaz's story "Summer Love, Overheated," printed in the July 31, 2008 edition of *Gentleman's Quarterly* magazine, loses any anti-sexist potential by its cooptation in this, most heteronormative, masculine venue, where the text is framed by photos of a woman looking sexy in negligée, including a close-up of her derrière that follows Díaz's line, "That ass she had, my fucking god." Díaz, "Summer Love, Overheated."

³⁷² See Fassler, "How Junot Díaz."

³⁷³ Díaz, "Search for Decolonial Love."

³⁷⁴ Hoby, "In Praise of Older Women."

In this bold admission of misogyny, Díaz seeks to point to the presence of these dominant discourses of oppression in all men and indeed, all people socialized within a patriarchy. Similarly, racism and white supremacy reside within all of us and “we only manage it.” If I critique Díaz for rendering me complicit in Yuniór’s misogyny, I must acknowledge that I am *already* complicit in misogyny, before reading Díaz’s text and without Díaz’s help. While I insist that this patriarchal world is not helped by both writers’ reinforcement of gender oppression, their texts may nonetheless expose the latent prejudices within us, as Laferrière’s deployment of the *Nègre* does. These prejudices are brought to the surface via the range of reader reactions possible here (i.e, vicarious pleasure witnessing Laferrière’s narrator’s sexual exploits; laughter at Laferrière’s and Díaz’s audacity and politically incorrectness; disgust at graphic, misogynistic depictions; discomfort at liking the likeable misogynist Yuniór). Some of those reactions will teach the reader valuable lessons about her/his latent prejudices; some of those reactions will only reinforce these. The perplexing ambivalence in the writers’ interventions around forms of oppression derives from the second-degree modes they use to represent them; these modes in turn encourage readers’ variable reception of the texts. The ironic or parodic critique of stereotype can nonetheless reinforce the stereotype; the irony can “misfire” or erode; the parody may go unnoticed and be naturalized and normalized. In various ways, readers may depart with dramatically opposed lessons after reading.

The clear lines that I wish to identify in order to distinguish the critical from the complicit may not exist. I am asking for clarity in a world of blurry lines. Indeed, the fiction I examine here critiques simplistic distinctions and inadequate categories, Laferrière by exaggerating the racial-gender binary of black man/white woman, Díaz by creating characters whose identities betray prevailing racial, ethnic and cultural categories. These fictions reflect the postmodern impulse to self-consciously interrogate categories, norms and conventions, at the same time that they offer critiques of some of these (alongside non-critiques of others). One does not finish reading with a nihilistic sense that none of these categories matter, but rather that they matter very much and have done much harm, which can be addressed by engaging with them. Laferrière and Díaz, for all their evasive preemptions, for their grains of salt and hiding behind, certainly have lines and limits of their own; these are visible in their critiques of race and racism. As I have shown, their treatments of sexism inhabit the ambivalent space of the critical-but-complicit postmodern, or

even the unambivalent space of the gleefully uncritical and the purposely provocative politically incorrect.

Reception is personal, as is one's sense of the acceptable. When a female reader reading *Brief Wondrous Life* writes that the novel's misogyny and many rapes left her "devastated,"³⁷⁵ and when another female reviewer claims that the "culo-and-titties" of *This Is How* "slam a door in my face," Díaz's study of "male subjectivity"³⁷⁶ and his 'neutral' representation of the problem of sexism are not received as critiques of these. In my own experience reading, rereading and misreading these texts, I have grown much more sensitive and much less tolerant to their misogynistic aspects. At first thrilled by Laferrière's easy French and biting wit and seduced by Díaz's hip tone and vocal mastery, the passages I could at first overlook have grown caustic as the pleasurable aspects of each writer's voice and approach have waned. My perhaps over-sensitive, politically correct critique may be an unpopular stance to take about such popular, fun, witty fiction. But it is the critique I wish to make, of writers whose brilliant writing and incisive political commentaries lead me to expect better of their treatment of gender inequality.

In an interview last year, Díaz offered a lesson to readers: "all of us, writers or readers, should encourage each other, should encourage ourselves [...] to read more to read more promiscuously, to read outside of our formulas, outside of our patterns, to make extra time for reading."³⁷⁷ While I certainly cannot be accused of fast reading (or fast writing, for that matter), Díaz would likely say that my reading has not been promiscuous enough, that it follows the

³⁷⁵ This reviewer, reviewing *BWL* for *GoodReads* website, writes, "I was just left really quite devastated by it. Women are objects in this novel. Objects for men to own, to destroy, to collect as many as they can. Almost every female character in the novel is cheated on, raped, attacked, beaten or murdered; sometimes more than once, sometimes all five. And while I understand the violence of the Dominican Republic during the time of Trujillo, I guess what pisses me off is the flippancy with which the narrator talks about it... I'm not necessarily offended by these things being written about in this way...if there's a point. Perhaps a scathing commentary about the misogyny in Dominican society. But he doesn't get there and I was left with so much anger and confusion." Fassler, "How Junot Díaz." Her comments, made in response to *BWL* which, unlike *TIH*, includes violence against women, nonetheless express the extent to which some of Díaz's female readers, myself included, can feel affronted by the raw depictions of misogyny found throughout his oeuvre.

³⁷⁶ Vitzthum, "Junot Díaz's Pro-Woman Agenda."

³⁷⁷ Díaz, "Why Junot Díaz."

contours of stereotypical feminist reading practices confined by, rather than outside of, established patterns. Strangely, it is by reading slowly and repeatedly that I have moved from a more celebratory, exuberant reading of both writers' clever, witty texts to a more (perhaps stereotypically) critical one – limited to each writers' treatment of gender, but nonetheless. The identity of the speaker is central to my evaluation of a joke, parody, or ironic enunciation's appropriateness; and the identity of the reader is likewise central to my interpretation. If the writers and I disagree about acceptability, this may be for reasons relating to our respective particularities, which include the major identity features I have focused on in my discussion, and also the myriad ways our own experiences, personalities, moods, etc., shape what we find funny, ironic, offensive, pleasurable, and so forth. This may also be because I am reading as a literary critic, and they are writing as literary writers. Though both are well versed in academic and literary discourses, in conversation with critical reading practices, and anticipating and preempting certain readings in their fictions ahead of the reader, their priorities as writers are distinct from and exceed my critic's demands for their political interventions. It is, of course, by writing provocative, popular, witty, fun fictions that these works have been published and read and that I have had occasion to read and use them to my own narrowly political scholarly ends. Had their texts been written in a manner to satisfy my political criteria, I would bet they would not be so fun, funny, popular, provocative or successful, and that conversations like these – very useful, I think, in addressing the social problems the writers ambivalently treat in their fictions – would not come to pass. Laferrière's oeuvre varies widely; the poetic, mature *L'Enigme du retour* is so very different in tone and theme from *Comment faire l'amour*'s explosive provocations that one wonders if the writer needed to write the first in order to get published and subsequently write the rest. Díaz's much more limited oeuvre seems to move in the opposite direction: I find his most recent collection more mainstream in its themes and values than his previous two works.

As I point fingers at the writers' blind spots with respect their representations of women, I am most certainly blinded in ways I cannot myself see. A white critic examining how writers of color treat racial stereotypes is also an unpopular position, for good reason, given the historical precedent of white scholars studying, racializing and oppressing people of color from the colonial period to the present day. Despite my efforts here to be cognizant of my white privilege and the ways it shapes my viewpoints, I am certain others will expose my failures to fully

appreciate the weight of that privilege and the ways I am unwittingly complicit in racism, despite myself. Once again, the writer cannot but reveal herself, and I humbly invite such criticism.

Irony is perhaps a mode well suited to these writers' examination of race and gender. Its ambivalence reflects the very fluidity of identity categories, the volatility of cultural signifiers in our ever-changing cultural environment, and the slipperiness of any political position, with its blind spots and unwitting complicities. Hutcheon notes that irony's power to destabilize is sometimes "an indirect attempt to 'work' ideological contradictions and not let them resolve into coherent and thus potentially oppressive dogma."³⁷⁸ What irony lacks in clear politics, it makes up for with its openness to contradictory interpretations and its slippery complicity, endlessly complicating without resolving the clear distinctions we must acknowledge as false. This openness may be *both* a refusal of falsely simplified distinctions and judgments, *and* a savvy maneuver by savvy writers, who write provocative tales of sex to sell books and get reactions, and who market those tales to multiple reading constituencies with conflicting political leanings (i.e., the mainstream pleasure reader, the 'boys club' reader, the academic reader of postmodern metafiction, the social justice reader). Reading is an active process, and readers have a responsibility, as do writers. As in irony, when first- and second-degree meanings inhabit the same enunciation, or in parody, when the original and the parody are invoked at once, these texts are two things at once: critical of forms of oppression, and complicit in them. And like Yuniors and Laferrière's narrator, the reader reading them is split and doubled: following the writers' directives, while actively making meaning in the text; inside the texts and complicit in the forms of oppression represented there, and outside, critical of these. In suitably duplicitous form, Laferrière and Díaz address the ironies and pleasures of race and gender in our time.

³⁷⁸ Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 31.

Epilogue: The Reader's Guide to Self-reflexive Writers

*Preemptive disclaimer: My apologies to those who may find the following content offensive.*³⁷⁹

1. Prepare to read.
2. (Don't read, for a long time. That's how this works.) When you're finally ready to read:
3. Assemble any necessary accessories. Tea, whiskey, pick your poison. Get comfortable. Put your feet up. (But not at the library where they will tell you "Madame, merci de poser les pieds par terre." Where they have literally *never been*.)
4. Open *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*. In public, you might wish to hide this little book inside a larger, less incriminating one, say, *Fifty Shades of Grey* or *Bad Boy Crush*. Consider the utility of the advice to come. Already, things are starting to get hairy.
5. Read.
6. Laugh out loud, if you dare and if you're not embarrassed; the weirdo on your right clearly isn't when he TAPS HIS MOUSE REALLY LOUD and gesticulates distractingly. You are in Rome and it's okay. Be as self-absorbed as you like. Otherwise, smile internally to your inner comedian. First reactions: you are pleased by Dany's daring, by his self-reflexivity, by his easy breezy French and his clear sight about race in North America. So pleased that all the sexist stuff is eclipsed by the good jokes and the well-placed political critique.
7. He is smarter than you. Consider the ramifications of this for your dissertation. You start to feel uneasy.
8. Return to Step 5 and repeat. 5,6,7,8. 5,6,7,8. Now you have entered the vortex. You will never stop rereading. Your life is over.

³⁷⁹ Among others I may have overlooked: lesbians, Dutch, Germans, Jews, my mother, Peter Sloterdijk, writers and consumers of self-help, UVA/UVB cynics, that guy at the library, my dissertation committee.

9. Somewhere around reread number 10, all the sexist shit starts to grate. Is this really funny? you wonder. You have a metallic taste in your mouth. Like a horse with a bit. You have been grinding your teeth lately, and Dr. Chow would surely object.
10. Read Sloterdijk, because it was recommended. Never mind that you can't spell his name (no one can spell yours), or that it sounds a lot like a terrible, politically incorrect thing to do to a lesbian.
11. You're feeling uneasy again. Think historically: have there been mass killings of lesbians in the history of the world? You know of none, but given the human capacity for atrocity, you'd bet on it.

Google search terms: "mass lesbian slaughter"

Results:

1. porn
2. porn
3. YouTube video of Lorena Bobbit-type story
4. porn
5. a book entitled "The Slaughter," about China, not lesbians
6. article on chicken meat without slaughter
7. Democracy Now report on mass slaughter (non-lesbian) in Sri Lanka.

You'd triple check on Wikipedia for 100% scholarly accuracy, but why bother? If you can't trust Big Brother Google, who can you trust? So you decide: we're safe. Well, we're not, when lesbian slaughter counts as erotic fantasy, but in terms of the joke, tentative green light. No historical precedent to negate comic value.

12. Stop. Wait. Think about this further. Lesbians have never oppressed you, and have certainly been oppressed themselves – not by you, but by your kind: #straightprivilege. Dany tries to make them racist, Junot ignores them. What does that matter anyway, those guys aren't your models here.
13. Protest: You like lesbians, really you do! You certainly mean no harm! You're only trying to be funny! But since there are people like you out there (in Norton's exalted terms, "self-centered narcissists" with "personal lines drawn in the sand"), prepare for fallout. Head to basement. Bring flashlight, whiskey, and cell phone. Call Dany: he's the pro here, he can advise. He proposes:
 - 1) plead ignorance of Dutch pronunciation (true!)

2) appeal to the Dutch reputation for progressive politics and dikes – oh wait, Sloterdijk is German... Sweeping ethnic stereotypes will only help you here – to dig your own grave. Holocaust pun unintended, but you're half-Jewish, so you have *carte blanche* anyways. The kind of *carte blanche* Dany's narrator had in his black book. But enough of these off-color jokes.

14. You are not, however, queer. Not in that sense at least. This too gives pause. Weigh comedic imperatives against political ones.
15. Dany says go, you say no. Objection! Sustained. Erase Steps 10-15. Even if it's too late.
16. Brush your teeth.
17. Read *Speculum al foder*, because it was recommended and might provide some useful tips, seeing as your self-help-happy self could always use some extra help. And since Laferrière's novel proved inadequate in that regard.
18. Your plight is perhaps helpless. In any case, you need more help. Turn to Junot: "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl or Halfie." Though these may not accurately reflect your intended dating pool as you imagine it today, this advice will prove useful. When all the reading is done, you will consider switching teams (in which case, the Sloterdijk joke would fly, but hey, why risk it?) After all, Junot plays both sides of the court, switch-hits, _____.
19. Catalogue your sports clichés. Call your mom. She is your resource for such things.
20. Return to the story. Some advice to retain: Don't wear the new sneakers in the mud. Whitegirls are easy. (That's a relief.)
21. Consider the ambivalence of this last remark. Milk it for all it's comedically worth (slightly more than your market value). Shout out Junot, now you get it.
22. Move on to *This Is How You Lose Her*. As always, you love the tone, the hip voice, the hip hop vibe. We're off to a good start.
23. Familiarize yourself with the Urban Dictionary. It will be a useful tool to you here. *Trigueña, prieta, dougla, indiecita* will be demystified as colloquial Dominican terms for ethnicity. Funny how they only refer to women and their sex appeal. Dudes are just dudes. Or rather, N-words you won't repeat, since dudes can only be white.

24. Raise an eyebrow at some explicit, soft-porn moments. Raise another eyebrow. And another, the mystical third eyebrow they're always talking about in yoga: your inner guide, your source for clear sight (in short supply these days).
25. At the "It's like putting your dick in a hot mango" line, close the book. The door has slammed.
26. ~~Blondes~~ Politically incorrect writers have more fun. As for their readers... that depends. But since you believe in protection (sunscreen, oven mitts, bike helmets, etc.), take a page from Junot's book: Say one thing, then say the opposite.
27. Run away, toward the playground, yelling over your shoulder: "Can't get me now!!"

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