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Literary Analysis [course]

Hegemony in *Oscar Wao*: Sexualization as a Means of Control from Within

Hegemonies are a means by which societal groups may control each other. Most frequently, a socially dominant group with the loudest voice or the most access to mainstream media will disseminate a worldview that places itself above others, causing people within that culture to, ideally, adopt that worldview and judge themselves and others accordingly. For example, in terms of hegemonic sexuality, the dominant group propagates the idea that males and females should have specific body types with ideally shaped and proportioned secondary sex characteristics, and they should comport themselves in particular and distinct ways according to their gender. For instance, women should dress in stereotypically feminine ways, and those who do not will be socially chastised. The end result is that those individuals who fit the hegemonic standards are considered appropriately and admirably masculine or feminine, and those who do not fit the parameters are considered inferior or other—as less of a man or a woman as the case may be. Viewed in conjunction with *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, this idea of genericicing male and female bodies into something as simple as sexual objects serves to elaborate on why individuals displaced from their original cultural identities begin to deem one another as belonging or not belonging to their Dominican heritage based on their possession of hegemonic sexual characteristics or the lack thereof. As such, the hyper-sexualization of the Dominican characters in *Oscar Wao* serves as an example of how hegemonies have been used as a means of subjugation from within. Junot Díaz's main characters showcase certain consequences of this hyper-sexualization: Abelard and his family provide a distinctive case study of how Trujillo uses hegemonic sexuality as a mode of cultural domination; Yunior exemplifies

the socially dominant group who determine their belonging to a heritage by apt compliance to the hegemonic ideal, while Oscar epitomizes those not capable of fitting into that model and as a result become forcibly excluded from it; and finally Lola and Belicia typify those who recognize the sexual hegemony and either utilize or defy it in an attempt to escape or alter their sitations.

Considering Abelard and his daughters first, we have an exceptional case study of how a dictatorial power took the socially imposed pervasiveness of sex in Dominican culture and used it as a weapon of political control. Taking the hegemonic line of true Dominicans as being a highly sexualized people, Trujillo created a method of exacting unbelievable obedience to his regime: by demanding the daughters, wives, or female relatives of numerous followers, Díaz shows Trujillo comporting himself according to the sexual hegemonic ideal with an insatiable sex drive and the ability to bed virtually any woman. Importantly, though, Trujillo used this rouse of painting himself as the ultimate Dominican male to simultaneously detect insubordination in his subjects. In *Oscar Wao*, Trujillo greeted disobedience with a kind of mental terrorism that did much to destroy a person's constitution long before any literal punishment was doled out, thus creating one more layer of control Trujillo exercised over the nation: "[Abelard] waited for his daughter to turn up missing on her trip back to school. Lost nearly twenty pounds during his awful vigil. Began to drink copiously. Nearly killed a patient with a slip of the hand […] screamed as his daughters and wife almost every day. Could not get it up much for his mistress" (223). Vital to note, the most important result of Trujillo's genre of mental torture is that it interfered with Abelard's ability to adhere to hegemonic masculinity: Abelard lost weight, was reduced to an anxious state, could not properly do his job, and could not perform sexually for his mistress. And yet, in the end, Díaz's narrator commentates that it was, "Strange, though, that when all was said and done, Trujillo never went after Jackie, even

though he had Abelard in his grasp" (246). Strange to the narrator, perhaps, but this is not strange viewed in the grand scheme of events. The fact that Trujillo did not pursue Jackie insinuates that the point of Trujillo's demands for the wives and daughters of his (often most loyal) subjects was not (entirely) to satisfy his overzealous sex drive; rather, he used his own hegemonic sexuality as a means of emasculating others: by getting another man to give up his wife or daughters, Trujillo forced that man to surrender the masculine quality of protecting his dependents; by mentally terrorizing those who resisted into losing their masculine physiques and abilities (as he did to Abelard), Trujillo found yet another way of taking away their masculinity. The end result: Trujillo ultimately portrayed himself as the most masculine of any male he might have to compete against, creating a highly unique and effective form of political control.

Yunior and Oscar, respectively, exemplify those who portray the role of the dominant social group who enforce the view that Dominicans are hyper sexual by nature as well as those who lack the sexual characteristics and behavior that would allow them to be placed in the dominant category, causing them to be labeled as inferior. Yunior, first, determines his belonging to the Dominican heritage by apt compliance to the hegemonic sexualization of his culture. Most basically, Yunior defines himself as a Dominican male by his possession of "G," essentially his propensity for finding girls who cannot wait to jump into bed with him. In recalling why he was usually too busy to spend time with Oscar, Yunior states, "I had my job and the gym and my boys and my novia and of course I had my slutties" (172). More than once, Yunior reaffirms this attitude that one woman is simply not sufficient to satisfy a true Dominican male's sex drive. Furthermore, Yunior's defining of himself as male by his ability to regularly and frequently have sex as well as his painting women as little more than objects to have sex *with* underlines the binary opposition at the heart of hegemonic sexuality: men behave this way,

and women behave that way. This underscoring of how men should act to comply with the hegemonic guidelines for masculinity causes Yunior to define Oscar as something completely and totally other: "To say I'd never in my life met a Dominican like him would be to put it mildly" (171). Continuing along that line, Díaz's narrator describes Oscar:

> "[He] had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks. He wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses—his 'anti-pussy devices,' Al and Miggs, his only friends, called them—sported an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded." (19-20)

Basically, despite Oscar's insistence that he is Dominican, male, and heterosexual, his culture practically refuses to define him as such because he lacks every qualification for hegemonic masculinity. Díaz's narrator continues:

> "Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we're talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands. Everybody noticed his lack of game and because they were Dominican everybody talked about it." (24)

As a result of Díaz's excessive descriptions of Oscar's shortcomings, it becomes abundantly clear why others are so loath to define Oscar as a Dominican male: there is a pervading social belief, continually disseminated by those Yuniors in the socially dominant group, that Dominican

males ought to be identified by their compliance with hegemonic masculinity. Oscar does not, rather Oscar *can*not, do this and so is routinely told that his is not a true Dominican man.

Finally Díaz gives Lola and Belicia as takes on various female reactions to hegemonic sexuality. Both women have been forced to acknowledge the permeation of sex their culture and the pervading belief that women are sexual objects. In their own ways, both women use this or defy it as a means of escaping or bettering their circumstances. Of the two women, Belicia is the first and most apt to comply with the demands of hegemonic sexuality in order to get what she wants: a way out of her present situation. First with Jack Pujols and again later with the Gangster, Belicia recognizes that her body causes her to flawlessly fulfill men's stereotypical expectations of what a woman should be: a sexual object. The narrator states, "Where before Beli had been a gangly ibis of a girl, pretty in a typical sort of way, by summer's end she'd become un mujerón total, acquiring that body of hers, that body that made her famous in Baní" (91). Rather than defy the pressures of hegemonic femininity, Belicia used it completely to her advantage, receiving gifts from admirers and the promises of a marriage and a better life outside Baní from Jack Pujols and the Gangster. Lola, on the other hand, is sexually assaulted in her youth, and initially reacts in stark contrast to Belicia. The narrator states:

> "When she was in fourth grade she'd been attacked by an older acquaintance, and this was common knowledge throughout the family […], and surviving that urikán of pain, judgment, and bochinche had made her tougher than adamantine. Recently she'd cut her hair short—flipping out her mother yet again—partially I think because when she'd been little her family had let it grow down past her ass, a source of pride, something I'm sure her attacker noticed and admired." (25)

Where Belicia embraced what made her hegemonically feminine, Lola shunned it, cutting the long hair that had been such marker of femininity. In fact, the only instances in which Lola truly utilizes her ideally feminine traits are moments where she, like Belicia, trades them for something she wants: "When I pulled my pants down you never saw anybody so happy. Until I asked him for two thousand dollars. American, I emphasized. […] Two thousand in those days could have taken you anywhere" (206-207). However, unlike Belicia, Lola recognizes that as part of hegemonic sexuality, men do not see women as equals and goes out of her way to ensure that she is not cheated.

In various ways, the main characters of Junot Díaz's novel exemplify adherence to, deviation from, and crafty utilizations of hegemonic sexuality. Abelard's experience with Trujillo demonstrates how a dictatorial power might use a pre-existing hegemonic standard to make himself into an ideal while pushing other men out of the hegemonic classification and pulling women more firmly into the limitations of hegemonic femininity. Yunior and Oscar offer an example of the mechanics for how hegemonic sexuality functions with one dominant group disseminating a particular view that others try to adhere to. Finally, Belicia and Lola provide samples of how women typically utilize or defy hegemonic femininity. What readers ought to remember, however, is that this phenomenon is not limited to the world Díaz portrays, nor is it restricted to Dominican males and females. Rather, the practice of hegemony is alive and well in practically every society and oftentimes across societal and cultural boarders.

Works Cited

Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead, 2007. Print.

Alex,

I'd love to get your comments on this paper—good or bad they can only be helpful, and I'm happy to have them either way. My email is kewils@umich.edu. Thanks for a great semester. I have really enjoyed being a part of your class.

Sincerely,

Katherine