

QUEER HYBRID HEROES: NON-HETERONORMATIVE MASCULINITIES

IN THE DIASPORA

by

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Queer Hybrid Heroes: Non-heteronormative masculinities in the diaspora

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This thesis deals with alternative representations of masculinity in the diaspora. The aim of this study is to question the heteronormative hero represented in these texts and to promote the exercise of subversive readings that recognizes the creative potential of queer and hybrid heroes. Three texts were used for this examination: one novel by Dominican-American author Junot Díaz *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and two films coming from popular Hindi cinema, *Kal Ho Naa Ho* and *Dostana*. A queer reading of these things concluded that the model of successful masculinity these texts champion is not only representative of hetero-patriarchy but also of upward mobility. Furthermore, the queerness and hybridity embodied in the main heroes and used in different stylistic elements within the texts represent the creative potential of including non-normative alternatives to traditional masculinity.

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QUEER HYBRID HEROES: NON-HETERONORMATIVE MASCULINITIES IN THE DIASPORA

Go home.

But beautiful girl, above all beautiful girls, he wrote back. This is my home.

Your real home, mi amor.

A person can't have two?

-Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

-*-

Introduction: Why queerness and hybridity? Why these texts?

The last words of this exchange between Oscar, the novel's protagonist, and Ybón, the woman he loves, echo the anxieties of subjects living in the diaspora. The conversation captures the many interwoven issues that appear in the films *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, *Dostana*, the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and many other books and films that have the diaspora as their subject. These texts interrogate: the construction of interpersonal relationships and national affiliations, the relation between love, family and the idea of the nation, the frameworks that shape a man that has two cultures, and how (romantic) relationships are shaped by both mobility and belonging. The complexities of these ideas suggest that categories such as gender and national identity are interconnected; that is to say that they depend on each other and cannot be dissected separately if one is to try to examine them. The mobile subject, who lives away from the homeland, faces the tension of hegemonic ideas of gender identity from the host country as well as the homeland. Hybridity is thus the resulting process that accommodates the two influencing cultures.

To talk about about hybridity in regards to human interaction and cultural production, generally evokes the idea of a heterogeneous mixture. The problem with this idea is the assumption that the product is an impure mixture resulting from pure sources. In this regard, Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk remind us that “critics of essentialism point out that simply investigating the diasporic, historically mixed, culturally diverse origins of even the most ‘Aryan’ assertions of origins will reveal hybridity in all cases” (89). The history of humanity has been one of multiple invasions and migrations resulting in constant re-labeling and regrouping of people. We can think of this as the result of the creation of new borders (eg. South Sudan in 2011, India and Pakistan in 1947), colonialism (British and other European Empires around the globe), migration (Mexican immigrants in the US), “invasions” (the Moors in what is now Spain), etc. In cultural studies, hybridity is a critical category often used to represent the process in cultural productions where elements from the “home-land” and the “host-country” are re-mixed and re-formulated¹. Hybridity helps explain this “newness²”, as Homi Bhabha would call it, that results from the growth and development of national diasporas³ across the world. While theorizations of diaspora have been very contested, I use the term diaspora to refer to those communities living outside of the “homeland” and where belonging “is never a simple question of affiliation to a singular idea of ethnicity or nationalism, but rather about the multivocality of belongings” (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 29).

¹ See Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.

² See Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*.

³ Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman traces the first use of diaspora in academia to the 1960s coming through “the work of African studies scholars ... and this is specifically in relation to the Jewish and African experiences [in reference to the mass movement of Africans via slavery to the Americas]” (qtd. in Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 10). The term is now used to describe the scattering of people away from their “mother land” due to exile, economic burdens, etc. See *Diaspora and Hybridity*.

However, illusions of purity in nationalist discourses are still prevalent and inform rationalizations of division, especially of racism. When asked (in an interview) about hybridity Paul Gilroy, cultural studies and Black Atlantic diasporic culture scholar, answers, “who the fuck wants purity? ... The idea of hybridity, of intermixture, presupposes two anterior purities ... there isn’t any purity... there isn’t any anterior purity...that’s why I try not to use the word hybrid ... Cultural production is not like mixing cocktails” (qtd. in Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 72). While I agree that there is not any anterior purity, I believe that thinking about hybrids is still productive insofar as we detach the pre-existing condition of purity from its definition. In other words, we should consider a hybrid as always-already the product of combining “impurities”, combining hybrids. The category that forms the hybrid here is the nation⁴. The idealization of the nation formed either within the nation-state or from within the diaspora is the nonexistent purity that Gilroy talks about; it is the inexistent original, to use Butler’s words. So why use the term hybrid? I would like to turn to queer theory for the answer.

Queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam challenge essentialist views of gender. This theoretical framework is helpful to destabilize falsely essentialist ideas of the nation. In theories of gender and sexuality, especially those put forward by Judith Butler, the concept of gender is based on performance. For Butler “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (581). This first tells us that gender is socially constructed (instead of natural), not determined by biology, and second that it is performative. Thus gender is enacted and through

⁴ Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities* “No longer united by religious faith, or by loyalty to a monarch a commonality arises principally through the products of print-and televisual capitalism and through the ability to consume (versions of) the same information” (qtd. in Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 31). Anderson explores this new model of the nation departing from the “primordialist view which proposes that essential verities like race, kinship, blood ties and land bind people” (31).

repetition the gendered identity is constituted. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in “Mapping the Margins,”⁵ an article about the identity politics regarding women of color in cases of rape and domestic violence, demonstrates that categories such as race and gender “have a meaning and consequence... the particular values attached to them foster and create social hierarchies” (298). Thus, this notion of gender that imitates a nonexistent original nonetheless has actual repercussions in the “real world” and should remind us of the use of hybridity as a category that indicates a heterogeneous mixture of elements that were not ever truly pure.

Therefore, even though the nation does not really exist outside of global political discourses⁶, its idealization creates notions of pure identity; that is to say that it creates an idealized version of what it is to be a citizen of that nation, for instance a Dominican or an Indian. Furthermore if we agree that these identities are constructed we can ask: is there a relationship between the construction of national identity and gender identity? The texts I will explore next demonstrate that, indeed, there is a strong relationship between the two.

In the following pages I will look at the 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Dominican-American author Junot Díaz and at two Bollywood⁷ films: Nikhil Advani’s 2003 film *Kal Ho Naa Ho (Tomorrow May or May Not Be)*⁸ and Tarun Mansukhani’s 2008 *Dostana (Friendship)*. These three texts, all set in the United States and all of whose protagonists are living in diaspora, explore the idea of gender performativity, namely masculinity. My aim

⁵ See Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color”.

⁶ Vijay Mishra’s discussion of Salecl’s idea of the homeland as “ ‘[a] fantasy structure, [a] scenario, through which society perceives itself as a homogenous entity’ ” resonates with this notion of the imaginary nation (Mishra 16).

⁷ Hindi-language film industry centered in Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay.

⁸ Hereafter *Oscar Wao* and *KHNH*.

here is to look at the formations of masculinity in the diaspora as coded through the gender frameworks coming from the homeland. Looking at masculinity reveals that the protagonists of these texts curiously do not correspond to hegemonic heteronormativity. It is not until the end of the films and the novel when there is a predictable return to heteronormativity either by the death of the protagonist or the failed attempt at “getting the girl”. Most critical readings of these texts have thus far focused on this ultimate return and, because of it, do not consider them progressive in this aspect. But, following the work of queer theorists Gayatri Gopinath and Meg Wesling, I propose to read these texts subversively. Instead of looking at the category of queer and queerness as merely a synonym for homosexual, I use it to discuss alternatives to heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality coming from “home”. I use Gopinath’s view on queerness as an “alternative hermeneutic, the particular interpretative strategies that are available to those who are deemed “impossible”⁹ within hegemonic nationalist and diasporic discourses.

To pay attention to these deviations from hegemonic conventions that expose the heroes as queer and hybrid, allows us to see how this destabilizes the heteropatriarchal idea of the nation. The heroes that these texts present demonstrate that queerness can originate in the nation (even though they are “outed” in the diaspora) and that these figures can come to represent national values even though they are not heteronormative. Thus these characters challenge the heteropatriarchal ideal of the nation that constitutes the nonexistent purity that the diaspora is compared against.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* Yunion narrates the story of his friend Oscar, who he met while attending Rutgers. Oscar, a “ghettonerd”, irremediably drawn to Sci-Fi and

⁹ Gopinath draws from José Rabasa’s analysis of the Zapatista rebellion. For Gopinath “the impossible” in relation to her readings of queer South Asian diaspora “suggest the range of oppositional practices, subjectivities, and alternative visions of collectivity ... and dares to envision other possibilities of existence exterior to dominant systems of logic” (20).

Fantasy who also had zero looks, struggles throughout his life to be authenticated as a “dominicano”. His never-ceasing exploits searching for love drive the novel forward while being interrupted by narrations alternating between New Jersey and the Dominican Republic. Yunior serves in the novel not only as narrator; he is also Oscar’s best friend and mentor who tries to bring him back to the path of “Dominican-ness”.

In *Kal Ho Naa Ho* the character of Aman (Shahrukh Khan), the film’s hero, arrives in New York from India and solves all the problems that have befallen the Kapur family as a result of their lost Indian-ness caused by living in the diaspora. The film opens with a failing restaurant, a disjointed family, failed attempts at romance, and Naina (Preity Zinta), a twenty-three-year-old heroine who has forgotten how to smile. Everything seems fine after Aman has reconnected the diasporic characters with their Hindustani essence except that a love triangle has emerged; Naina has fallen for Aman. But while he actually loves her as well, he pushes her best friend and MBA classmate Rohit (Saif Ali Khan) to court her because he (Aman) suffers from a terminal heart condition.

The love triangle, a rather complicated one, also emerges in the film *Dostana*. Two straight, young, Indian men, Kunal (John Abraham) and Sameer (Abhishek Bachchan) pretend to be gay in order to share a high-class apartment in Miami with a very attractive, young, also Indian woman, Neha (Priyanka Chopra). In the tradition of romantic comedies Kunal and Sameer fall in love with Neha. The triangle is complicated with the appearance of a new rival, Neha’s boss, Abhi Singh (Bobby Deol). Abhi soon becomes the real adversary since Neha is actually attracted to him. Not only do Kunal and Sameer compete against each other, and Abhi, as they try to woo Neha they must do so while striving to convince her, and everybody else (including an immigration officer and Sameer’s traditional mother) that they are gay. In the film

the traditional understanding of heterosexual masculinity is set against the cosmopolitan version of the “gay” transnational subject.

Family, Tradition and the Nation

In the structure of these texts we can find a commonality: the romantic triangle. In *Oscar Wao* we see the triangle with Yunior, Oscar and Oscar’s sister Lola. In *KHNH* the apex of this triangle is Naina and in *Dostana* it is Neha. The triangle shows the characters competing for the affections of the heroine, on the other hand this also facilitates a homosocial relationship between the men who are in competition¹⁰. The homosocial relationships are replaced in the end by the conventional heterosexual couple or family. Roderick Ferguson exposes this in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. He says that “African Americans’ fitness for citizenship was measured in terms of how much their sexual, familial and gender relations deviated from a bourgeois nuclear [heterosexual] family model historically embodied by whites” (20). Similarly Gayatri Gopinath, following Anne McClintock, Deniz Kandiyoti and Benedict Anderson, argues “nation is construed in terms of familial and domestic metaphors, where ‘the woman’ is enshrined as both the symbolic center and boundary marker of the nation as ‘home’ and ‘family’” (263). Thus the (disrupted) family is the microcosmic representative of the (disrupted) nation. These texts are based on the structure where the family comes to be representative of the nation¹¹.

It is not a coincidence that at the end of these three texts we are left with the image of a family; note though that this happens at the expense of displacing the heroes Oscar, Aman,

¹⁰ Luce Irigaray expands on this notion. In “Women on the Market” Irigaray notes “reigning everywhere, although prohibited, hom(m)o-sexuality is played out through the bodies of women, matter, or sign and hetero-sexuality has been up to now just an alibi for the smooth workings of man’s relations with himself, of relations among men” (172).

¹¹ See Doris Sommer’s *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*.

Kunal and Sameer. In *Oscar Wao*, the very first words of the novel identify Oscar as “our hero” and moments prior to his death Oscar gives a romantic speech about righteousness, love and dreams worthy of a hero. Just before he is executed, Oscar

told them that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world... He told them about Ybón and the way he loved her and how much they had risked...[and that] on the other side [...] he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he'd be a hero, an avenger. (Díaz 230)

This scene solidifies the character of Oscar as the romantic hero of the novel. The characters of Aman, Sam and Kunal also correspond to the traditional romantic hero of Bollywood. The hero in these films is “a man of action [that] can extend himself in myriad ways to transform and transcend his social conditions of existence and reconcile the irreconcilable” (Chakravarty 87).

In *KHNNH* and *Dostana* the goal of these heroes is to ensure the pairing of the heroine to the most worthy man, thus perpetuating the heteropatriarchal family.

The three texts end with images of the family and the family man. Yuniór describes in the last chapter, “The End of the Story,” that as for him he has “a wife [he] adore[s] and who adores [him], a negrita from Salcedo whom [he] do[es] not deserve, and sometimes [they] even make vague noises about having children” (Díaz 233). The last scene of *KHNNH* shows Naina and Rohit, now married, walking towards their house together after being called inside by their daughter Priya. A peculiar parallel between these two texts shows not only the family and the patriarch, but also that the heroes Oscar and Aman, are both dead by the end of the novel and the film. While *Dostana*'s containment of the heroes is subtler it is still nonetheless important to identify that at the end of this film it is the family man Abhi whom Neha chooses. By the end, Kunal and Sameer reunite Neha with Abhi, and his son, thus the primacy of the family is

restored. While Kunal and Sameer do not die in the end, in contrast to *Oscar Wao* and *KHNH*, they step back allowing the normative heteropatriarchal family to be preserved as the symbol for the nation.

Furthermore, it is not coincidental those rewarded by the narrative's conclusion are those who comply with the model of neoliberalist providers of the family. Film theorist Purnima Mankekar identifies that in Hindi cinema "NRIs (non-resident Indians) with capital to invest are hailed as saviors of the nation's economy" (756). This can help explain why, even though Aman embodies the essence of Hindustani-ness and works as the savior "who magically arrives from India just in time to teach the hapless diasporic characters about life, love and pride in their Indian heritage" he does not "get the girl" by the end of the film (Gopinath 198). Aman's masculinity based on his potentiality as a "breadwinner" is not evident, which is curious in a film that closely relates work to Indian-ness. Even though his wealth is not interrogated in the film, Aman appears to be middle class. His class status is only established by his ability to travel to America and his living arrangement with his relative in Queens instead of a posh hotel or apartment in Manhattan. Aman's wealth is not codified in any way whereas the rest of the characters' profession or source of income is clearly marked in the film. Rohit's family's wealth is based on their success selling Gujarati food clearly shown by the name of the company. Rohit is first introduced in the film sitting in his office with Naina's voice narrating that he is "son of Karsanbhai & Sarlabhen Patel. Karsanbhai was one of the richest Gujaratis in America. His food chain was quite popular in the whole country. The name of the company: Dial a Dhokla¹²". Similarly, Aman saves Jenny's (Naina's mother) failing American restaurant when he reconnects her to her Indian-ness exemplified by transforming the restaurant from Café New York to Café

¹² A dohkla is a rice and chickpeas based vegetarian food item that originates from Gujarat.

New Delhi, which now proudly serves Indian food. Even the minor character of Frankie, the boyfriend of Naina's friend, Sweetu, has a job. The only thing we know about him besides his name is his profession: DJ at Club Nirvana. Following this model of masculinity it is not surprising that Rohit, who has been Naina's secondary love interest but who is marked as the clear example of the wealthy provider, is the one who keeps the girl.

In *Dostana's* Abhi we find the perfect embodiment of this hegemonic model of masculinity. Not only does he have a solid source of income as the editor of Verve magazine (that signifies him as a potential capital investor in his motherland, India) but he is also a father. The union of Neha and Abhi follow the model of a "natural" union that would finish the incomplete picture of the Indian family and thus the family/nation would be returned to normal. That he has a son shows the reproductive capacity¹³ of this kind of masculinity. This model is also rewarded in the end of *Oscar Wao*. Yunior, who has been the embodiment of the Dominican macho, hyper-masculine and hypersexual, finally settles down by the end of the novel. He narrates in the last chapter:

These days I live in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, teach composition and creative writing at Middlesex Community College, and even own a house at the top of Elm Street, not far from the steel mill. [...] I don't run around after girls anymore. Not much, anyway. When I'm not teaching or coaching baseball or going to the gym or hanging out with the wifey I'm at home, writing. [...] I'm a new man, you see, a new man, a new man. (233)

Yunior embodies the capitalist, breadwinner, head of the family type of masculinity. The hyper virility that marked Yunior during his youth, becomes secondary in adulthood. He calls himself a "new man" who has the ability to settle down and then become the head of a family. While he

¹³ See Deepti Misri's "Queer resolutions: 9/11 and Muslim masculinities in *New York*" for more on reproducibility.

has not completely forgotten his earlier days of “chasing girls” that authenticated him as a dominicano, what validates him as a man *now* are not his sexual conquests but his steady job, his wife and the other aspects of suburban American life. Daynalí Flores- Rodríguez argues that for Oscar “the only way for him to declare his cultural identity as a Dominican is through sex” (101). This analysis is also applicable to Yuniór. After all Oscar looks up to Yuniór as his model of Dominican-ness. However, by the end of the novel Yuniór embodies the American model of the Self-Made Man. For sociologist Michael Kimmel¹⁴ this model of masculinity is the hegemonic model that has defined the American man since the birth of the nation (17). This model for manhood derives identity “entirely from a man’s activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, by geographic and social mobility” (17). This model is useful to identify the motivations behind Yuniór calling himself “a new man” but it is of course not the only way that masculinities are tested. As expressed throughout the book other anxieties such as homosexuality and feminization clearly pose challenges to a notion of masculinity. Nonetheless it is an important ideal also recognized by Frances Beale. In her essay “Double Jeopardy” she writes, “an individual who has a good job, makes a lot of money, and drives a Cadillac is a real ‘man,’ and conversely, an individual who is lacking these ‘qualities’ is less of a man” (qtd. in Ferguson 116).

Yuniór, Rohit, and Abhi are thus the embodiment of upwardly mobile, hetero-patriarchs. The happy ending given to these characters can lead us to conclude that they are the figures the texts celebrate as the “real men”. Therefore these male characters appear to be the embodiment of the successful (read: acceptable) national male figure living in the diaspora. However, these characters are, albeit heteronormative, examples of hybridity. We can consider these characters

¹⁴ Author of *Manhood in America* and *The Politics of Manhood*.

as hybrids as long as we are “prepared to give up the illusion that cultural and ethnic purity has ever existed” (Gilroy qtd in Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 130). They are hybrids because they contest the discourse that homogenizes the nation-state. Vijay Mishra exposes that diasporas “remind settler nation-states in particular, about their traumatic moments, about their memories, their own repressed pain and wounds, about their own prior and prioritized enjoyment of the nation” (20). Furthermore, even if we do not agree with this idea of the always-already hybrid, these characters are hybrid because they depart from the pure “traditional” model of masculinity.

Departing from the norm: Hybridity and Queerness

Yunior, who once embodied the hypersexual type of Dominican masculinity, by the end of the novel settles down and changes. He gives up authenticating himself through (hetero)sexual encounters since he does not chase girls as much. The characters in *Dostana* and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* are different from diasporic heroes of earlier decades who, when faced with Western values, completely rejected them. They now represent a compromise between tradition and modernity; nationalism and cosmopolitanism. In this regard Mankekar concludes, “mobility does not entail a disavowal of Indianness” (747). In her essay “Brides who travel” she notices the shift where “earlier the Indian who lived abroad was described primarily in terms of betrayal, abdication of responsibility to the motherland, and “brain drain,” [now] in postliberalization India [... being mobile] involves [...] a redefinition of belonging and loyalty to the homeland” (748). Thus, although these characters, as examples of cultural hybridity, already partly challenge the idea of nationhood by embodying its values outside of the territory of the nation, they provide little room to challenge the construction of gender. The conclusion of these texts would suggest that nothing really has changed and the imaginary of the nation remains stable. The endings of these texts leave “intact the heteronormativity of the home space of the nation” (Gopinath 191). This is

specially underlined by the fact that the queer representations occur in the diaspora, not in the homeland; also by associating queerness with foreignness. In *Oscar Wao* the constant taunting Oscar suffered based on his failure to “metérselo” to a woman or “comer toto”¹⁵ labeled him as “nada de dominicano” (zero Dominican). To this, Oscar could only defend himself by saying: “I am Dominican. I am”, but as Yuniór reminds us, “it didn’t matter what he said. Who the hell, I ask you, had ever met a Domo like him? (Díaz 127).

In *KHNNH* a queer male subject who cannot fulfill all the duties of the Hindustani man, such as marrying and having a family, is then thought as someone alien to the homeland. This is clearly shown in a scene at a strip club. The club is clearly marked as someplace foreign (from India’s perspective) since all the dancers are white. The true Indian-ness of Rohit shows with his rejection of his father’s encouragement to “Enjoy, enjoy” which his father says in English. Setting this reunion in a strip club is an attempt of Rohit’s father to encourage him to engage in heteronormative behaviors. Rohit’s father is concerned about Rohit’s future, especially in regards to how he will have children, since he has heard from Kanta Ben, Rohit’s housekeeper, that he engages in homosexual behaviors. Rohit declares, not yet realizing the misunderstanding, that it is possible to have children. To this his father answers, “Yes, that’s true. This is America. Anything’s possible”. As soon as Rohit understands the confusion he goes on to repetitively clarify his heterosexuality: “I’m in love with a girl, with Naina, it’s normal, normal”. This scene codifies “deviance” in sexuality as something foreign, something that could only be possible and accepted in a place like the United States. Robert Irwin Mckee points out that “national culture can claim a sort of moral superiority by labeling homosexuality foreign” (192).

KHNNH provides another, almost too evident example of this construction with the

¹⁵ Dominican slang for penetration and performing oral sex on a woman.

inclusion of the character of the flamboyant French interior designer. This character makes a brief appearance in the film serving only to underline the foreignness of overt homosexuality. The flamboyant designer speaks his only line, in French, and is characterized by his effeminacy, his slim and fragile physique. He jumps up and down in celebration when Rohit and Aman briefly dance together in front of him, only to be pushed by Kanta Ben towards Rohit's father who shrugs him off. The decorator is a clear stereotype of the flamboyant man in a non-manly profession. He is marked as Other by his over the top behavior and his clear association to an even further place; his stereotypical beret marks his French-ness.

Dostana also uses Europe as the foreign territory where queerness can freely occur. During their first meeting Neha asks Kunal and Sameer where they met. Sameer tells an elaborate narrative set in Venice. Rajinder Dudrah suggests that Venice "adds to the film's location in the wider West without a direction, conservative or problematic link to the homeland [...] Europe is presented as open and free" (52). Also, the film's setting in Miami already suggests "foreignness." Located in Miami instead of the typical London or New York seen in many other Bollywood films set in the diaspora, separates these characters from already well established Indian communities in the US, isolating queerness not only to the diaspora but to isolated individuals who do not live in significant Indian communities.

Critics like Gopinath conclude that, especially in Hindi popular cinema, queerness in the diaspora,

function[s] to simultaneously acknowledge, contain and disavow, the threat that queer male desire- definitely annexed to the diaspora- pose to a nationalist framing of home. By locating queer male desire firmly within the diaspora rather than in India, the film keeps intact the heteronormativity of the home space of the nation. (191)

However, while the conclusion of these texts definitely conveys the message that Gopinath underlines in this quote, the body of the text proves to have more moments of hybridity and queerness that have a much stronger importance than the conclusion. If we look at the way that these characters are queered textually and sub-textually we find that Gopinath's reading is incomplete. It is not insignificant that the real heroes embody queer alternatives to the heteronormative space of the nation. If we pay more attention to the body of the texts we notice that showcasing and enjoying these alternatives is what has made these characters so interesting and so much more appealing. The real realm of possibilities is not closed off with the ending, but rather outed in the body of the films and the novel.

Queer, hybrid heroes: The Incredible Oscar Wao

I will begin by looking at the (physical) body as the first ground where masculinity is constructed and contested. It is helpful to think of the body not as the natural but as the foundation where embodied experiences construct gender. In "Dress to Kill, Fight to Win" transgender activist Dean Spades says

there is no naturalized gendered body. All of our bodies are modified with regard to gender, whether we seek out surgery or take hormones or not. All of us engage in or have engaged in processes of gender body modification (diets, shaving, exercise regimes, clothing choices, vitamins, birth control. etc).

To think about the body in this manner rejects ideas of the natural and validates attention to the body inasmuch as we understand it as socially codified.

The texts organically suggest attention to the body. In *Oscar Wao*, it is through changes in the body that the characters are authenticated as Dominican men and women. Both male and female characters' rites of passage from infancy to adulthood are marked by changes of the body.

The female characters in the novel provide particularly good examples of the authentication of Dominican women once their “secondary sex characteristics” develop. It is worth noticing that this transition happens almost instantaneously, skipping all the awkward years of development. Both Oscar’s sister and mother, Lola and Belicia (even also Jackie, Belicia’s sister who she never met) become women almost overnight. Lola begins to adopt behaviors different to those corresponding her age because of the maturity of her body. Lola herself describes that “even though I was fourteen I looked twenty-five” (50). This change allows her to gain independence. Her body signifying (physical) maturity motivates her to challenge the norms in her house and to find her own place. In Belicia’s case, it is also clear that the development of her body grants her new “super-powers”. Yuniór narrates: “telling Beli not to flaunt those curves would have been like asking the persecuted fat kid not to use his recently discovered mutant abilities” and he adds “our girl ran into the future that her new body represented and never ever looked back” (Díaz 73). For Beli and Lola, their mature bodies allow them to find independence and self-worth¹⁶.

However, Oscar had “no looks” and this was the characteristic “most damning of all” (Díaz 22). Later in the novel Yuniór offers his own body as an example of an authentic Dominican, especially in comparison to Oscar’s body. He notes “I was a *weight-lifter*, picked up bigger fucking piles than him every day” (Díaz 121). If in the novel Yuniór’s athletic body of a weight-lifter and his hypersexuality model a real Dominican then Oscar utterly fails to comply with these standards. Oscar thus is a different kind of hero, a queer hero. The novel quickly points this out by deconstructing Oscar’s character to show his failure to embody dominican masculinity immediatly after calling him “our hero”. From the beginning we that Oscar is not a traditional hero,

¹⁶ This is complicated and somewhat ironic because the development of their body was significant precisely because it marked them as sexually available to men.

not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock... never had much luck with the females (how *very* un- Dominican of him) (Díaz 17, emphasis original).

These first lines that describe Oscar make evident that the characters are heavily invested in fixed categories that delimit identity. A Dominican male thus has to be either athletic, a prominent dancer, hypersexual and heterosexual, or all of the above.

The reader is quickly reminded of these monolithic characteristics of this hegemonic convention. Only five pages after the first given description, Yunior reiterates that Oscar 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 semikink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses—his “anti-pussy devices,” (Díaz 22).

These two detailed descriptions serve to clearly state, beyond any doubt, the characteristics of hegemonic Dominican masculinity and to affirm that Oscar does not fit that model. Oscar, for the majority of the novel, wasn't acknowledged as a man. To be recognized as a man is not solely related to biology. It is not the mere distinction between male or female that is brought into consideration when we speak of “man” and “masculinity”. A man is, for example, distinguished from a boy, even though they are both male. Male homosexuals have been

historically though as “less of a man” merely because of their sexuality¹⁷.

Oscar’s deviation from this normative idea of masculinity, his un-masculinity, marginalizes him as a “palomo”¹⁸ or a “parigüayo”. These queer labels are used in a pejorative way to mark him as outside of the norm; especially the word parigüayo, which one of the footnotes in the novel explains is a neologism of the English word “party watcher” (286). The term, Yunion explains, “describes anybody who stands outside and watches while other people scoop up the girls” (Díaz 286). A parigüayo is someone literally at the periphery, one that is distinguished for not acting in accordance to the norm, because after all “Who goes to a party to *watch*?” (263, emphasis original).

But when I refer to Oscar’s queerness, I refer to how he embodies an alternative kind of male identity different from the hegemonic Dominican attributes marked in the novel. Oscar’s queer masculinity is directly opposed to the qualities that define Dominican masculinity that include charisma and attitude. However the most important characteristics are the ones that relate to the physicality of the body either by dancing, playing sports or hyper [hetero] sexuality.

Physical appearance, the body itself, is an important signifier of masculinity. These

¹⁷ Conversely, men of color have also not considered as part of the hegemonic idea of men. African American men during slavery were referred to as boys, beasts, animals or simply recognized as bodies. At the same time the image of the African American male ranges from being perceived as examples of dangerous hypermasculinity and hypersexuality or as feminized. Roderick Ferguson quotes Robert Park’s *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921) where the African American is “so to speak, the *lady* among races” (58, emphasis original). Feminization of men of color is also common among Asian Americans. Rosalind Chou in *Asian-American Sexual Politics* describes “Whites do not stereotype Asian American men as naturally hypersexual; instead they are stereotyped as hypo-sexual or asexual... even in gay porn, Asian bodies are symbolically castrated where camera angles never show their penises and they are consistently portrayed as bottoms” (122).

¹⁸ De Moya identifies “palomo” as a term associated with “men who are at the bottom of subordinate heterosexual categories of masculinity” (qtd. in Machado Sáez “Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora” 86).

characteristics such as the “anti-pussy devices” show once again the direct correlation between his appearance and his access to the body of women. Above all these qualities, the one that haunts Oscar for years and is target for much mockery is his weight. His obesity “at a whopping 245 (260, when he was depressed)” signifies more than just his “unattractiveness”; it also marks Oscar’s body as immature (Díaz 120). Oscar doesn’t have, until the end of the book, a moment of maturity in which he goes from childhood to manhood. In his case he only grows, namely he gets bigger (in size). Contrary to the development that Lola and Belicia experience with puberty, Oscar’s body remains infantilized and underdeveloped as the cause and effect of being overweight. Even in college Oscar remains a boy “obsessed with his *fanboy* madness” (Díaz 121, emphasis mine).

Furthermore, becoming a Dominican man means to be authenticated through a woman. It is not until he penetrates a woman that he can fulfill the rite of passage into becoming a man. Until then Oscar is not cured of the disease that Yuniór identifies as “no-toto-itits”. Oscar’s queerness is equated to a pathology that can be cured, that can be fixed. His uncle Rodolfo tries to fix Oscar by giving him the advice: “grab a muchacha, y méteselo. That will take care of *everything*. Start with a fea. Coje that fea y méteselo” (Díaz 25, emphasis original)¹⁹. Uncle Rodolfo sees the loss of virginity as the rite of passage that distinguishes the Dominican boy from the Dominican man. In addition it separates them from the palomos and the maricones. Oscar’s anxiety over losing his virginity originates from the anxiety of not being a genuine dominicano. One night Oscar asks Yuniór if any “Dominican male has ever died a virgin” to which Yuniór responds: “O, it’s against the laws of nature for a dominicano to die without fucking at least once” (Díaz 124). Being a virgin doesn’t only disavow Oscar from his

¹⁹Grab a young girl, and put it in her. That will take care of everything. Start with an ugly girl. Take that ugly girl and put it in her. (Translation my own)

masculinity and his Dominican-ness but also renders him as unnatural.

Aware of this, Yunior describes Oscar's case as "the worst case of "no-toto-itis" (Díaz 123) he had ever seen. He also took it upon himself to re-master and authenticate Oscar; to restore him to his true identity as a Dominican man through "Project Oscar". This training consisted in re-shaping his habits: "swear off the walking up to strange girls with his I-love-you craziness...start watching his diet, and to stop talking crazy negative" and the "biggest *coup* of all...[Yunior] got the dude to exercise... to fucking *run*" (Díaz 124, emphasis original). Throughout the novel Yunior constantly notices Oscar's weight and the changes in his appearance in direct correlation to his development as a man. Meeting Ybón, the woman to whom Oscar loses his virginity, is his first real step on the passage to manhood. Yunior describes Ybón as the "Higher Power's last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude"(Díaz 195). After Ybón's kiss Oscar was a changed man. His subsequent weight loss resonates with the violent changes that accompany the maturity of puberty. Oscar's physical body went through a transformation. Yunior observes that Oscar was "so thin, had lost all that weight" (Díaz 212). In a redemptive letter at the very end of the novel Yunior lets the reader know that after all Ybón "actually kissed him. Guess what else? Ybón actually fucked him" and his long-awaited masculinity was restored (Díaz 227). Several critics have questioned the legitimacy of this letter reclaiming Oscar to the side of heteronormativity. Machado Sáez who argues that in "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, the true romance, the one that cannot be explicitly narrated, is between Yunior and Oscar", identifies the letter as the means by which Yunior marks Oscar as heterosexual (546). For Machado Sáez "Yunior's narrating of Oscar's honorable devirginization and death is an attempt to imagine closure to the sexual tension haunting Yunior" (549). The inclusion of this letter suggests an attempt by Yunior to redeem

Oscar, thus the hero, into heteronormativity. But even if we do disagree with Machado Sáez' premise of Yuniór's ulterior motives, we can still see how the letter appears as an attempt into fixing Oscar's queerness and an attempt of reinscribing his story as nonetheless the story of heteronormativity where the grand narrative of "no dominicanos die as virgins" is perpetuated. Oscar's deviance from the traditional Dominican model of masculinity is further complicated by his hybridity, which doesn't merely come from being a mobilized subject; that is Dominican-born and living in the US. Oscar's intense passion for Sci-Fi and comic books shows what Mishra would call a "diasporic sensibility that is already remarkably cosmopolitan" (194). After all Oscar reads, admires and gorges "himself on a steady stream of Lovecraft, Wells, Burroughs, Howard, Alexander, Herbert, Asimov, Bova, and Heinlein" (Díaz 22). Oscar wants to become the next "Dominican-Tolkien, King or Joyce" instead of the next, say, Dominican-Vargas Llosa or García Marquez. It is relevant that these are Anglo writers instead of Latin American but also what is more prominent is the idea of a mixture of the two. That he desires to be the next Dominican-King, not merely the next Stephen King, validates his Dominican identity and the influence in his writing.

Not only did these authors influence his craft but they also shaped his identity. Even when flirting Oscar can only express himself through his geeky knowledge instead of his "real" Dominican self. Yuniór describes, "Oscar's idea of G was to talk about role-playing games! How fucking crazy is that? (my favorite was the day on the E bus when he informed some hot morena, If you were in my game I would give you an eighteen Charisma!)" (Díaz 128). Even Oscar's death as imagined by Yuniór corresponds to the fantastical ending of a romantic hero. Garland Machler characterizes the death that Yuniór writes for Oscar as a "courageous martyrdom in which he risks his life for love"(129). In this fashion Yuniór transforms Oscar de León into the

incredible hero “Oscar Wao” (129). The comic-book hyper-muscular male super heroes who Oscar admires are a constant reminder of the man he is not. His obesity (and therefore his lack of muscularity) is evidently, as previously discussed, a threat to the idea of Dominican masculinity and also incongruent with the masculine models that he voraciously consumes from the comic books that he loves.

Queer, hybrid heroes: Bollywood superstars

The super muscular body of the actors playing the new kind of heroes in Hindi popular cinema starting in the nineties echoes the mega strong physique illustrated in comic books²⁰. This extremely fit body is the result of the gradual homoeroticization of the male hero on screen starting with actor Dev Anand in the 1960s and eventually reaching the popularization of “bare waxed chest, or [...] pelvic movements with which the hero of the eighties and nineties frontally assaults the spectator” (Kavi 309)²¹. Critics such as Ashok Row Kavi and Thomas Waugh have identified the growing evolution of the homoerotic male gaze upon the male actor’s body. Waugh identifies that many Bollywood films (especially buddy films from the nineties) “while adhering to heterosexual romance at the level of plot, ‘winked’ at queer spectators in the domains of visual image, choreography and song lyrics. As a result many Bollywood films “encourage” subtextually “resistant spectatorial practices- whereby queer audiences pick out the subtext of queer images, reading against the manifest narrative of the film” (Misri 7).

Let us return to the aforementioned structure of the love triangles that are common in these three texts. Thus far we have discussed them in terms that are symbolic of the structure that allows the national romance to develop, where the heroine is torn between two lovers and the

²⁰ See Figure 1

²¹ For more of the evolution and eroticization of the male hero in Bollywood see Ashok Row Kavi’s “The Changing Image of the Hero in Hindi Films”.

one she chooses symbolizes the right union that perpetuates national ideals represented by the return to a heteropatriarchal family, specially evident in the Bollywood films. However, the heterosexual love triangle can also be interpreted as an excuse where homo-social male bonds are forged. The woman here becomes an excuse for the interaction between men. Shohini Ghosh, identifies that “Bombay cinema rarely represents romance through sexual explicitness. Therefore, the cinematic devices used to represent love are similar, even identical, to those depicting friendship” (qtd. in Misri 7). This is already telling of how queerness filters into popular Hindi cinema. *KHNNH* follows the tradition of subtle remarks and yet overtly exposes the queer traditions of buddy films (Gopinath 190). Queerness is “outed” in the film in the scenes when Rohit’s housekeeper, Kanta Ben, walks in on him and Aman during ambiguous homoerotic moments such as waking up in the same bed and horse playing²². Previous critiques of *KHNNH* on the subject of queerness have concentrated in the (mis)readings of Kanta Ben and their use for comedic relief as this device is used in other films²³.

However queerness in this film goes beyond the moments clearly outing homosexuality. Aman’s character is built on transgressions. His first transgression is his presence in the kitchen. The home kitchen, in contrast to the commercial kitchen, is normatively a female space. It is the woman who is expected to cook (Hindustani food) for the family. The ability to cook is one of the traits that every Hindustani woman must have in order to be a good wife and mother. At the beginning of the film, Lajjo-ji, also known in the film as Dadi (grandmother), taunts her daughter-in-law Jenny for not being able to cook a decent Indian meal. Later on in the film, after Aman invites himself to dinner at the Kapurs, he is the cook rather than the dinner guest. Naina

²² See Figure 2

²³ See Gopinath’s “Queering Bollywood” and Brian Hun’s “Bollywood Dreaming”

comes home from the market to find Aman preparing the meal and teaching Jenny how to cook. Two other times Aman and his mother are shown giving Jenny cooking lessons. While I am not suggesting that cooking naturally feminizes the character of Aman, I want to call into attention that what he is doing is not something that male characters normally do.

His second intrusion into a normatively female space is at Naina's preparation for her wedding. The song number "Kal Ho Naa Ho (Sad Version)" starts by showing Naina surrounded by friends and family, all female, as her mother and grandmother apply oil to her skin. The privacy of this moment is underlined by the rupture of the cinematic "fourth wall" when Naina and those that surround her look straight at the camera and, without words, ask the person filming to go away. This shot with a hand-held camera gives the impression that the capture of this moment is a home movie, but this technique doesn't happen in any other moment in the film. What can be concluded from this technique is that the moment and the environment are so private that not everyone can partake in this celebration. Subsequently the camera shifts and shows Shiv, Naina's brother, peeking into the scene to which Aman instructs him not to look. This moment further reinforces this idea of privacy. However immediately after, Aman is shown dancing into the room where this ritual is taking place, invited in by one of Naina's friends. Aman is the only man in this space. The presence of men in traditionally female places is also a topic in *Dostana*. After Sameer informs that he is a nurse, his interlocutors immediately after ask: "Do you have to wear a short skirt?" The already non-heteronormative line of work in which we find our hero and his defense of his profession is indicative of a progressive movement challenging gender roles and gendered spaces.

In *Dostana* and *KHNH* we can find a very critical awareness of both the representation and the reception of representations of queerness. But also there is a very critical consciousness

of homophobia. The film as a romantic comedy centers its humor around the mishaps of the heroes pretending to be gay. *Dostana*'s use of queer characterizations that border on cartoonish and stereotypical demand the question of whether this film is in reality progressive. Therefore, Shoshini Ghosh asks here in reference to the Kanta Ben's reactions in *KHNNH*, "are we laughing at homosexuality or homophobia?" (17) We can see that there is If we read these performances as intended hyperboles we can conclude that these representations expose the performativity of gender and the modernization of the diasporic subject (that is compared to the conservative, nonetheless diasporic, character.

Kanta Ben projects traditional, perhaps "Old World", reactions to homosexuality. Kanta Ben is used as a figure to contrast the modernity and cosmopolitanism of these mobile characters against the conservative, old-fashioned aspects of the nation. A similar movement occurs in *Dostana*, a film that brings to the forefront queerness. Soon after Sam's mother "discovers" that her son is gay, in the song sequence "Maa Da Laadla" (Ma's Beloved Son) we see the imaginings of Sam's mother about the future of her son, interposed with shots where she disapproves of the union (ironically reading heterosexual exchanges between the two as homosexual ones). During the song sequence the figure of the old-fashioned and traditional mother in an effort to fix this ailment she is seen conducting black magic while her son sleeps. This image resonates with that of Kanta Ben praying to "fix" Rohit²⁴. "Maa Da Laadla" is what Gehlawat describes as camp. Gehlawat understands this trope in *Dostana* "through Judith Butler's (1990) notion of 'gender parody' and 'impersonation'" (Dudrah, 45). Dudrah defines camp as the term that "refers to the in-betweenness and slippage in the performance of gender and sexual identities, drawing attention to the ambivalences and problematics in the performance of

²⁴ See Figure 3

gender and sexual identities as not quite coherent or whole” (46). Thus when Sameer’s mom reads heterosexual acts such as lifting weights together and horse play while playing football as queer ones, the film is calling attention to ambivalence and constructability (and the need of a reader) of gender and sexual identities. This resonates with Jack Halberstam’s concept of gender as a fiction. In his conclusion of “F2M: The making of Female Masculinity” he states: “creating gender as fiction demands that we learn how to read” (226). Thus Kanta Ben and Sameer’s mother’s (mis)readings show the ambivalence of these “harmless” acts. That these acts pass as heterosexual to the knowing audience and as homosexual at the level of diegesis by these characters demonstrates that there is nothing intrinsic that marks sexuality and the need of an audience “for the multiple performances of gender we witness everyday” (Halberstam, 226).

Camp, Farce and Performativity

The over-the-top character of this song makes us aware of the performative aspect of gender but also the creative potential of the hybrid via the juxtaposition of different elements within the song. The song juxtaposes cheerful male and female dancers in Bhangra²⁵ outfits and Sameer’s mother gesturing disappointment and a broken heart while upbeat music plays. The music itself is a hybrid that combines the “north Indian *dohl* beat that mimics Bhangra sounds and dancing associated with wedding celebration” with the lyrics “your son rides the bride’s palanquin” in a modern autotuned voice (Dudrah 54, emphasis original). The song combines the traditional Punjabi music with the remix version of club music exposing the creative potential of hybridity²⁶.

²⁵ Bhangra is a folk dance and music genre of the region of Punjab.

²⁶ The importance of the music here is not secondary; the influence of music in the mixing of the two cultures is rather explored in the club scenes in London and studied by Gopinath and Dudrah.

Readings of hyperbole, farce and camp helps us illuminate the creative aspect of hybridity present in the diaspora. The hybrid form of the song “Maa Da Laadla” resonates with the hybrid form of the song and use of flags in *KHNH* and the form of the novel itself in *Oscar Wao*²⁷. The perfect moment of hybridity is shown in the song number: “Pretty Woman”. *KHNH*’s “Pretty Woman” adapts Roy Orbison 1964 hit. All the lyrics except the phrase “pretty woman” have been changed and there is virtually no reference to the 1990 homonymous film, which used the song as its theme song.²⁸ This song number, the first in the film, is set outside of Naina’s house in the middle of a street in a neighborhood in Queens. Soon after the song begins Aman is shown in front of an American flag as background. To the cue of “Hit it”, the Indian sound of the drums roar and a multiracial crowd gathers in the streets to dance and accompany Aman’s song. The song number is over the top and considered by critics as “camp”. Bollywood song picturizations are not known for being very realistic but film theorists and audiences have been critical of how over the top this appears. The multiracial community coming together is one of the elements that seem highly unrealistic of the song number. Brian Hun notes that without a camp reading of this sequence “for a diasporic audience, it is easy to read this scene as India’s corny utopian vision of what it’s like to be an NRI, complete with multiracial spectacle and a celebration of ‘India’s new

²⁷ See Figure 4

²⁸ In a reading of the song Kai-Ti Kao and Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario, argue that the song also keeps in the filming of the song number of “New York fairytale, however strangely and problematically grounded that fairytale is, with its underlying discourses on sexual exploitation and, indeed, the commodification of sex and sexual attraction” (322). The position of this article poses Naina as “problematized as a symbol of economic and marital exchange” (322). This representation is achieved by the juxtaposing scenes showing Naina reading her MBA books that signify her involvement in the economy, especially considering the financial crisis of her family, against previous scenes that show her grandmother “actively engaged in the marriage market on Naina’s unwilling behalf” (322). This presentation of Naina according to Cullity and Younger “is a challenge to the discourses of purity, patrilineality, and authenticity that characterize older nationalist constructions of the “home”” (qtd. in Kao and Do Rozario 322). This juxtaposition of old/ traditional vs. modern/diasporic ideas is carried throughout the film.

aristocrats' fulfillment of the American dream" (8). While I agree that this appears as a fantastic view of what life would be like in the US, I disagree with the view that this would be reflective of a corny *Indian* utopian vision. This idealization is common in the American discourse that perpetuates the myth of "the [USA] is best country in the world", ideals of the "melting pot" and "the land of opportunity". Thus the utopic image of the country is harshly contrasted with the reality of prevalent racism. While this number could be dislodged or criticized for being too camp, too idealistic, Hun, Kao and Do Rozario provide readings that "explain" that this is an intended over the top-ness. Reading the camp as hyperbole or hypertext underlines the way that things are *not* instead of what they are or are imagined to be. With this reading, Kao and Do Rozario argue "the number seems like 'kitsch' – bubbles in the air, people dancing in the streets, fluttering American flags, Indian drums, gospel choirs – but the kitschy pastiche is meant to be artificial... the audience can revel in the mass art while not being forced to identify with it"(323). What is important to take out of this song is that it is the perfect coalition of the American and the Indian, it is a repackaging of an American cultural product but remastered to Indian-ness. A camp reading is also helpful to see the meaning behind the extensive use of American flags. Besides the huge American flag hoisted at the beginning of the song, there are many more glances of flags throughout the number. While it might appear to be a moment of acculturation and Aman's all-American-ness, it is in fact not. While surrounded by American rhetoric and the symbolism represented by the copious flags and the all-integral multiracial community, this song number is neither a process of whitening, nor of entering the host culture disavowing the homeland. First, the song is in Hindi. While it is a rehash of an American song the Indian identity has been superimposed with Hindi lyrics. The song is a good example of the process of hybridity because of the fusion of the American and the Indian with Aman breaking "into the

recognizable Orbison melody, which asserts itself through the number as a diasporic mantra, complete with Hindi translation and typical Bollywood choreography, while also incorporating rap and other musical styles” (Kao and Do Rozario 323). This very famous song sequence shows the re-territorialization that Néstor García Canclini theorizes. The streets of Queens are being retaken by the many diasporic communities not to simply recreate the cultural products from home, but to present a new product from both cultures while not belonging exclusively to neither. The song doesn’t fully belong to Western pop, neither to Indian traditional music as juxtaposed against Lajjo’s song to the goddess. “Pretty Woman” is the combination of rap, gospel choirs, Punjabi drums and pop departing from Orbison’s melody.

As shown in the song sequence the combination of the two cultures is significant of not one culture over the other per se, but of a third space the two co-inhabit. In the movement of the re-invention of the café New York to Café New Delhi, the American flag is ceremoniously taken down by Naina alone and replaced by the Indian tri-color hung together by Rohit and Naina. While this gesture might suggest that Indian culture ranks higher than American culture, not a minute earlier Rohit is seen wearing a stars and stripes bandana while the rebranding is taking place. This leads us to conclude that even in moments where one culture is being favored over the other, one is never truly disavowed. Something similar happens in Rohit’s office during his introduction. Just before he leaves to meet Naina to go together to their MBA class he is seen having a brief interaction with his receptionist, an American flag is seen in the corner of the desk. While this might seem irrelevant the placement of the flag is intentional. The flag is located in the office, presumably headquarters of the Dial a Dokhla office, that we must not forget sells Indian food all throughout the US. The coalition of an American flag in an Indian workspace is another example of the overlapping presence of the two cultures. Furthermore it is an

exemplification of the American dream, and the diasporic subject dream of succeeding in business while not forgetting one's Hindustani essence.

This re-territorialization resonates with the same movement happening in different parts of New Jersey and New York, but with an Indian community. Gopinath identifies the locations in the film: "East 25th Street, [...] Queens, New Jersey and Staten Island, [trace] the rather unglamorous trajectory of South Asian settlement in the New York area" (188). I want to call attention to these locations because they are not only evident of re-territorialization but because they are specifically targeted to the diaspora audiences. Gopinath says in the epilogue of her book *Impossible Desires* that while watching the movie in India with her mother she could identify a glimpse of their "old neighborhood". The film setting is for the most part domestic and suburban; albeit there are some romanticized scenes that show the Brooklyn Bridge and the New York City skyline. This is important because as Gopinath witnessed, the clear attention to the diaspora audience is hugely relevant. The film even though largely directed to audiences in India it is also very aware of its distribution in the US. This act of re-territorialization in *KHNNH* resembles the one echoed between the pages of *Oscar Wao*.

This kind of re-territorialization is evident by the claiming of the physical space of Washington Heights. For example Yunior situates the only time Oscar acted as a typical Dominican "in those long ago seventies days, before Washington Heights was Washington Heights, before the Bergenline became a straight shot of Spanish for almost a hundred blocks" (Díaz 17). The description shows the completed re-territorialization since Yunior talks about the neighborhood without offering many details about the location. For Yunior it goes without saying that Washington Heights is now recognized as the New York neighborhood known for its Dominican community and that Bergenline refers to the avenue famous for its commercial

Hispanic community. Furthermore later in the novel Yunion describes the kind of women recognizable in Paterson, but that are not exclusive to this area:

Paterson, however, was girls the way NYC was girls, Paterson was girls the way Santo Domingo was girls. Paterson had mad girls, and if that wasn't guapas enough for you, well, motherfucker, then roll south and there'd be Newark, Elizabeth, Jersey City, the Oranges, Union City, West New York, Weehawken, Perth Amboy—an urban swath known to niggers everywhere as Negropolis One. So in effect he saw girls—Hispanophone Caribbean girls—everywhere. (Díaz 20)

The space is no longer unmarked or merely American, rather it has been retaken by Hispanophone, Caribbean communities. There are girls everywhere, but not just any kind of girls, girls like “back home” girls.

Furthermore the novel itself is an example of hybridity. Canclini explains the act of re-territorialization and “descoleccionar” when a certain object is taken out of its original context. This movement creates a renewed value around the object. Díaz' use of different genres in the construction of his narrative, from the journal entries of Lola to the footnotes that add an air of historicity/historiography and veracity, exemplify this concept. The novel strikes the reader as a piece of literature somewhere between fiction and non-fiction. The book is a hybrid that narrates a fiction through the disguise of reality that needs supportive evidence as illustrated by the historical details in the footnotes included for the reader's sake. At the same time, not everything that is relegated to the footnotes is “actual” history since it also contains disclaimers, and further explanations coming from the realm of fantasy and science fiction. Thus the footnotes walk the line between conversational commentary between narrator and reader to serious objective fact checking. By bringing fiction and non-fiction together in the footnotes the novel becomes a

hybrid that re-territorializes the knowledge from sci-fi and fantasy and elevates it; equates it to the value of historical facts. This is also of course not only segregated in the footnotes but also appears in the body of the text. The novel thus becomes illustrative of the double life of the characters that are neither entirely Dominican nor American, but a combination of both that some would reference better described by the hyphen Dominican-American. The hyphen, like the novel and the song numbers discussed illustrate the process of hybridity.

Reading against the grain

Looking at these texts in a queer hybrid reading exposes the depth of resistance that they offer against the perpetuation of unchallenged heteronormativity. While the conclusion of the films and the novel do leave the audience and the reader with an image of the conventional heteropatriarchal family, it is important not to dismiss that the narratives explore and celebrate queer and hybrid embodied alternatives. Queer readings of these texts also problematize the “normal” model of masculinity that these texts perpetuate. To question the masculinity that gets to reproduce reveals that the kind of masculinity celebrated is more complicated than just heterosexual males. Yunion, Abhi and Rohit are all three middle to upper middle class, upwardly mobile subjects whose wealth implies their potentiality as providers and head of the family. Taking the family as the representative of the nation, this kind of “bread-winning” masculinity is celebrated for the capacity of these diasporic subjects to positively impact the economy of the nation, both the homeland and the host country.

Furthermore, the examination of the queer masculinities that these texts portray is further problematized when the term queer is applied to refer to more than just homosexuality. By scrutinizing the way the heroes deviate from the hegemonic model of masculinity we can question the complexity of having queer hybrid heroes. While on the one hand they are displaced

by an upwardly mobile heterosexual masculinity, it is important to stop and consider that these characters have embodied other national values and are portrayed as very sympathetic.

The happy ending of the secondary characters remains unsatisfactory because the audiences know that this happened only as the result of the sacrifice of the beloved heroes. Queer viewing practices and readings “against the grain” may allow audiences to see the new realms of possibilities that these heroes are bringing to the forefront but that have yet to be rewarded. While the conservative ending of these texts cannot be denied or taken for granted, there is much to be recognized by the work that these texts are doing in representing non-hegemonic masculinities, and representing them in the body of actors and unforgettable characters that audiences cherish. These queer hybrid heroes represent the realm of possibilities for diasporic subjects who are being constituted by two different cultures.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Heroes exhibiting super muscular masculine bodies. Left: Cyclops and Wolverine from X-MEN. Right: Kunal (John Abraham) in Dostana.



Figure 2. Kanta Ben's misreadings. Top: Aman (Shahrukh Khan) and Rohit (Saif Ali Khan) Sleeping together after a night of drinking. Bottom: Aman and Rohit arguing over a phone.



Figure 3. Fixing homosexuality. Top: Kanta Ben praying to cure Rohit. Bottom: Sameer's mother using black magic to change Sameer.



Figure 4. Over the top song picturization. Top: Sameer's mother and imagined smiley Bhangra dancers during the song number "Maa da laadla". Bottom: Aman in front of the American flag singing "Pretty Woman".

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