DESENMASCARANDO A YSRAEL: THE DISFIGURED FACE AS SYMBOL OF IDENTITY IN THREE LATINO TEXTS

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There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face
(Macbeth, I. iv)

With its features and expressions that are impossible to duplicate artificially, the face can be construed as a sort of large-scale fingerprint. Unlike animals, who use their sense of smell to recognize each other, we humans identify one another primarily by our faces, and the immense variety in this distinguishing feature is certainly enough to inspire awe. Such was the attraction during the 18th and 19th centuries, for example, that physiognomy, the science of reading a person's psychological traits and character type through the study of the structure of the face, came into vogue (Hollington 6). Although this discipline was later discredited with the growth of modern anatomical knowledge, we still tend to think of the face as the sign of humanity par excellence.

Perhaps due to the power behind this sign, the importance of the face as literary symbol has been underlined in three works by authors of Latinamerican descent living in the United States. Junot Díaz, Dominican-American, paints the picture of a boy with a disfigured face in two of his short stories in the collection *Drown* (1996). More than ten years earlier, Cecile Pineda, Chicana playwright and novelist, wrote her first novel, *Face* (1985). This work narrates the experience of a very poor Brazilian man who must reconstruct his face after it has been completely destroyed in an accident. And even more recently, Cristina García, of Cuban-American descent, includes two characters

who suffer through a "change of face" in her novel *The Agüero Sisters* (1997). In spite of the cultural differences between these three authors, for all of them the face symbolizes, in one way or another, the identity of their characters. In this study I will first analyze the ways in which the writers construct their characters' identity through the representation of the deformed face, and then we'll explore some possible reasons such constructions appeal in particular to the experience of the Latinos in the United States.

In *Drown*, we find many indications that the two short stories about a boy with a disfigured face are essential toward an understanding of the collection as a whole. The first, entitled "Ysrael," stands out due to its privileged position as the first story in the book. The second, "No face," is conspicuous in the collection as the only story narrated completely in third person. Moreover, "No Face" distinguishes itself from the others because Yunior, the protagonist and narrator of the collection, does not appear in this story.

The plot of "Ysrael" is deceptively simple. Two brothers, Rafa and Yunior, are forced to leave the city to live with their aunt and uncle when their mother is unable to take care of them due to economic hardship. Bored with country life and anxious for adventure, when the siblings hear about the mysterious boy in a nearby town who must wear a mask because his face was eaten away by pigs, they set off on a journey to see the legendary monstrosity with their own eyes. From the beginning of the story, the plot foreshadows the important themes in the rest of *Drown*. The displacement from the city to the countryside in order to improve their economic situation prefigures the children's posterior move to the United States. Also, on the bus trip, a man fondles Yunior without the boy's consent, which sirves as a prelude to Yunior's first homosexual encounter that occurs later in the story "Drown." These previews of major events in the narrator's life underline the importance of "Ysrael" in relation to the rest of the short story collection. When the boys finally meet Ysrael, instead of the image of complete marginalization that they had expected, they are confronted with the fact that the disfigured boy's family is evidently better off economically than they are: "Ysrael's sandals were stiff leather and his

clothes were Northamerican." Furthermore, Yunior even notices the similarity between his own situation and Ysrael's:

> ...the kite was no handmade local job. It had been manufactured abroad.
> Where did you get that? I asked.
> Nueva York, he said. From my father.
> No shit! Our father's there too! I shouted.
> I looked at Rafa, who, for an instant, frowned. Our father only sent us letters and an occasional shirt or pair of jeans at Christmas. (16)

Rafa is already bothered by any indication of Ysrael's humanity, but the discovery that this boy, whose condition should emblematize complete alienation, receives more attention from his father than the brothers themselves do, proves to be totally unbearable. The similarities between the children don't stop there ∫ a close reading of the text reveals an intimate identification between Yunior and Ysrael. To begin with, before they set off on their quest to find Ysrael, Rafa utilizes Yunior's face as a model for his imagination of what the other boy's face would look like:

> My brother kept pinching my face during the night, like I was a mango. The cheeks, he said. And the chin. But the forehead would be a lot harder. The skin's tight.
> All right, I said. Ya. (9)

In addition, Ysrael isn't the only one who had suffered insults due to his abnormal countenance. In the city, Yunior was used to being the victim of his brother's taunting:

> Back in the Capital he rarely said anything to me except, Shut up, pendejo.
> Unless, of course, he was mad and then he had about five hundred routines he liked to lay on me. Most of them had to

> do with my complexion, my hair, the size of my lips. It's the Haitian, he'd say to his buddies. Hey Señor Haitian, Mami found you on the border and only took you in because she felt sorry for you. (5)

The color of his skin and his African features situated Yunior as the "Other," much like Ysrael, though to a lesser degree. Besides, Rafa not only abused his younger brother verbally but also "pounded the hell" (5) out of him, which ends up being exactly what he does to Ysrael. The tragic aspect of this assault on Ysrael is heightened by the fact that just moments before, Yunior seems to make an authentic connection with Ysrael: "The mask twitched. I realized he was smiling, and then my brother brought his arm around and smashed the bottle on top of his head" (18). Another key identification between Yunior and Ysrael occurs in "No face," which constitutes a sort of complementary story to "Ysrael," since this time the narrative presents the action from the point of view of the boy without a face. Although the name of the protagonist is never mentioned, there can be little doubt that he is Ysrael, since his face had been eaten by pigs and his day transpires between the preparations of going North to receive the long-awaited operation, and the constant fleeing from boys who want to beat him up. In this story, Ysrael lives in a completely solitary world. He sleeps not in his parent's house, but rather in a shack behind it, as if he were an animal. The accident with the pigs has erased his own identity as member of the family. When his mother sees him playing with his brother without his mask on, she immediately brings him the cloth to cover his face and warns him that he should leave before his father sees him. The abuse and or complete rejection from his father is left implicit: "Go, she says. Before your father comes out. / He knows what happens when his father comes out" (160).

The only positive moment of physical contact for the boy occurs during his monthly check-up: "The doctor smiles and makes him remove his mask and then massages his face with his thumbs" (158). Interestingly enough, this scene bears a striking resemblance to one of Yunior's fantasies, in which he envisions his father's reaction when he

sees his youngest son for the first time after years of absence in the United States: "Squatting down so that his pale yellow dress socks showed, he'd trace the scars on my arm and on my head. Yunior, he'd finally say, his stubbled face in front of mine, his thumb tracing a circle on my cheek" (88).

Yunior's scars, besides representing the pain that the young boy carries inside due to his longing for his absent father, and for human contact in general, establish without a doubt the identification between himself and Ysrael. It is important to note that both Yunior and Ysrael hold on to the hope that the solution to all of their problems lies in the North. While Ysrael hopes to receive miraculous plastic surgery there, Yunior has faith that one day his father will send for his family and they will all move to the country of "endless opportunities." Another indicator of the connection between these two characters lies in the graphic similarity in the spelling of their names: the fact that both boys' names start with a Y stands out on the written page, since both Yunior and Ysrael are orthographic adaptations of two names traditionally spelled differently: Junior and Israel. The more traditional orthography reveals that the symbolic importance of the names goes beyond linking the two characters. "Junior" graphically and orally is similar to the first name of the author, "Junot." And Díaz has certainly never hidden his identification with the protagonist of his short story collection, as the autobiographical character of the work has been emphasized by reviewers such as Samuel Freedman: "Mr. Díaz's characters live, as his actual family did, in a low-income apartment complex surrounded by the malls, cineplexes and municipal pools of the middle class" (2.1).

As we have already established the close, symbolic bond between Yunior and Ysrael, and later the relation between Junior and Junot, the next obvious step is the study of the identification between Junot and Ysrael. However, Israel also alludes to the country of the Israelites and we should first explore the significance of the Biblical name of the disfigured boy. The kingdom of Israel was overthrown in 722 BC by the Assyrians and consequently, the twelve Israelite tribes were either destroyed or scattered. With only this information, we can read the

story "Ysrael" as an allegory of the suffering of an entire people due to their face, or racial or ethnic identity. However, an analysis of "Ysrael" in relation to the modern country which bears the same name proves to be even more revealing. Founded in 1948 as country of refuge for the Jews after the holocaust, Israel's history has been dramatically turbulent. As the holy land for both Jews, Christians, and Muslims, this relatively small territory symbolizes not only a confluence of cultures but also the site of religious and cultural battles that continue today. Consequently, the character Ysrael not only refers to Junior/Junot but also to the experience of the exiled whose hope of refuge ends up being as problematic as his previous reality. Ysrael's monstruous face expresses the experience of being a minority, of not fitting in a given culture, and even worse, of suffering complete rejection by the dominant culture. As a face without recognizable characteristics, Ysrael's countenance can be understood as representing the identity of someone displaced from his roots; or simply, the lack of a fixed identity due to the circumstances of being an immigrant. It is certainly plausible, then, to relate the author's situation with that of his character Ysrael. In fact, the difficult state of not belonging completely to any culture is expressed in the opening lines of *Drown*, in the epigraph, a quote from a poem by Gustavo Pérez Firmat:

> The fact that I
> am writing to you
> in English
> already falsefies what I
> wanted to tell you.
> My subject:
> how to explain to you that I
> don't belong to English
> though I belong nowhere else.

In order to survive his own displacement, Ysrael creates a fantasy universe, in which he combats injustice throughout the world and is able to escape the difficult reality he confronts day to day. In "No

Face", for example, the powers of "FLIGHT," "STRENGTH," and "INVISIBILITY," all written in capital letters, refer to the vocabulary of the superheroes in his comic books, and they help him survive the attacks from the other boys. Similarly, the creative act of literary expression, and in particular the writing of *Drown*, can be seen as an escape valve for Yunior/Junot.

The difficulty of not "belonging" anywhere is also explored in detail in the novel *Face*. The protagonist, Helio Cara, whose name indicates that he is more of an emblematic character than an individual one, falls off a cliff and his face is left unrecognizable. So extreme is his deformity that Helio seems to have lost much more than his normal features. For example, after asking Helio to take off his mask so that he can inspect the scars, his boss' reaction is a typical expression of rejection: "He watches the boss' eyes narrow, sees them falter, hears the low whistle escape him. / 'God!' The boss turns away. 'It's not…'" (53).

Although David E. Johnson has pointed out that the ellipsis at the end of this exclamation allows for multiple possibilities of ending the sentence, the most probable word would be "human" (81). Without the financial means to afford plastic surgery, Helio becomes a social outcast, since his lack of face denies him of his humanity. And since society treats him like a monster, he begins to act accordingly. For example, when his girlfriend says to him, "I'm afraid to look at you. […] I can't make love to a monster," he loses control, rapes her, and pulverizes her face:

> His hands become separated from the rest of him. He watches them hit her face, her neck, smashing at her cheekbones, whipping her head from this side to that. The bones crunch under his blows. Again and again. He feels nothing as the small white teeth shatter against his knuckles. (77)

After leaving in tears, he reproaches himself, asking why he had hit her when it was his boss who really deserved it: "Had he hit her like that because he wanted someone to share in his ugliness? Because the monster he had become wanted company?" (79). This act of violence

without any real provocation allows us to re-examine the assault Rafa and Yunior committed against Ysrael. While they obviously don't have to provoke Ysrael's disfigurement, it is likely that, precisely because of his disfigurement, the boys identify with him. Since they had lost their own identity when their father abandoned them (especially Yunior, whose name points to the fact that his identity is a continuation of his father's), they see themselves reflected in Ysrael, the boy without identity by definition. Attacking Ysrael, then, implies a self-loathing, much like that manifested in the character of Helio Cara.

However, Helio doesn't let hate consume him completely. With only the help of a book on plastic surgery and some novocaine, he undertakes the arduous work of reconstructing his face. I believe that Juan Bruce-Novoa (76) is correct in pointing out the metafictional character of the novel at this juncture. Pineda herself indicates the connection between written and facial expression in the novel's epigraph:

> Like a novel, the face is a web of living meanings, an inter-human event, in which the thing and its expression are inextricably joined.
>
> — Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenologie de la Perceptión*

The reconstruction of the face as an artistic feat becomes an act parallel to Pineda's own work, for in writing she constructs another face: that is, *Face* the text. Bruce-Novoa summarizes this process: "What the novelist really creates, finally, is herself as novelist" (77). In my view, however, the writing of *Face* goes beyond the production of a novelist. Pineda's personal identification with the theme of losing face, or identity, comes to light in a commentary from her essay, "Deracinated: The Writer Re-Invents Her Sources":

> When *Face* was published, my editor [. . .] burbled at me brightly: I think it's wonderful how writers – meaning me, I suppose – are beginning to write about things they don't know.

> Her remark implied I knew nothing about the loss of face, the disenfranchisement that comes of marginalization. Perhaps she thought I had not confronted loss. Or that writers are not capable of transfiguring the quotidian, unequal to the metaphoric transmutations required by art. (64)

Given this information, it seems quite clear that Helio Cara's struggle to reconstruct his face serves as metaphor for the suffering of those marginalized by society. However, the same figure indicates the possibilities of liberation through one's own creativity. As Pineda identifies herself as Chicana, we can infer that her own experience as a minority in the U.S. served as a source to create this allegory of loss of identity in *Face*. In this way, the writing of *Face* can imply not only the creation of a novelist but also an attempt to express metaphorically the experience of being the "Other."

Some, however, have been bothered by the fact that Pineda doesn't deal directly with Chicano themes and that her ethnicity was not mentioned in the first edition of *Face*. They even accuse her of having assimilated the dominant culture as her own. For example, Johnson proposes that the way in which *Face* was published denotes a calculated rejection of the Chicano community: "We would argue that Viking Penguin publishes *Face* within the traditionally 'white' category, 'American Fiction', precisely in order to homogenize its face, to defuse beforehand questions of ethnicity and, therefore, to create for it a potentially larger market" (74). Similarly, in his reading of the text, Johnson perceives Helio's efforts not as a creative act in order to recover his identity, but rather as an act of assimilation:

> *Face* posits that society constitutes itself of the faceless, not the literally faceless but the culturally faceless: it demands the normativity of the average face. Society reaches for the homogeneity of the unremarkable. Thus, *Face*'s paradox: in order to be human one must have a face, but the face is a cultural construct, therefore, one must have an acceptable

face. Which means, because society requires uniformity, one must be faceless, indistinguishable, unremarkable. (80)

This reading may appear quite suggestive, especially when Johnson reminds us of Helio's reaction after finishing a series of surgeries and observing what he wanted to achieve in the mirror: "It is a face: it is not particularly striking, certainly not attractive or handsome. It evokes neither origins nor class. It is unremarkable like anyone else's" (191-92). Johnson goes on to relate Helio's conformity with Pineda's identity as author: "*Face* as such displaces Pineda's Chicanicity. As we noted above, nowhere does *Face* announce that it is Chicano writing. Thus it is a thoroughly assimilated unremarkable - *Face*" (88).

However, in my opinion, this reading ignores the fact that Helio's actions place him, above all, as a rebel against the society he lives in. First of all, he rejects the mask the government issues him. This mask *does* emblematize all of the negative aspects associated with assimilation. As Johnson rightly points out: "[The mask] manifests the technologization and standardization of the face: it is rubber; 'it is neither brown nor orange, but the clinical color of ice bags, of hot water bottles' " (82). Helio doesn't use the mask they have assigned him for many reasons. First of all, the material does not let his skin breath. And secondly, the mask eliminates his individuality, making it impossible for his friends and acquaintances to recognize him. But when he goes to the clinic to receive "rehabilitation" from the government, the clerk admonishes him for having fabricated his own mask out of cotton, explaining:

> It's not supposed to make you feel comfortable. It's designed to give people seeing it immediate recognition that the wearer is ... (he lowers his voice) ... *facially impaired*. [. . .] The program already spent millions educating the public. Now it wouldn't do, would it, if everyone wore what he liked? (70)

It's quite evident that Helio is not seeking to blindly assimilate what the government has determined to be "correct." We can also observe his rebellion against the system in the very act of operating on himself. Before undergoing this formidable task, he must commit small acts of vandalism against the government, such as robbing a plastic surgery manual from the public library. In addition, there can be no doubt that Helio, through his do-it-yourself approach to surgery, defies the entire medical system (whose omnipotent power is manifest in the double reference to god found in the plastic surgeon's name, Teofilho Godoy). But above all, it seems to me that the creative act of reconstructing one's face constitutes a powerful image in regards to our ability to formulate our own identities. Let's return to the quote Johnson uses to demonstrate that Helio, in spite of everything, is a conformist: "It is a face: it is not particularly striking, certainly not attractive or handsome. It evokes neither origins nor class. It is unremarkable – like anyone else's." What is missing from this quote are the following sentences: "But no. Not like anyone. It is his, his alone. He has built it, alone, sewn it stitch by stitch, with the very thin needle and the thread of gossamer. It has not been given casually by birth, but made by him, by the wearer of it" (192). Contrary to the textual manipulation offered by Johnson, here we are presented with an image of pure originality. Ultimately, Johnson, by refusing to accept literary diversity in Latino writing, pigeonholes Pineda as an assimilationist.

The face as symbol of identity also presents itself in *The Agüero Sisters* by Cristina García. Both Reina and Constancia go through a metamorphosis, an about-face, if you will, which modifies the direction of their lives. However, the changes in the faces of the two sisters point toward opposite directions.

Reina, after having been struck by lightning, miraculously receives a number of skin grafts from a wide variety of people, both dead and alive. This change seems to point towards the future, as some of her body parts are completely rejuvenated after the operation: "Most of Reina's nutmeg color is gone, replaced by a confusion of shades and textures. A few patches of her skin are so pink and elastic, so perfectly

hairless, they look like a newborn pig's" (66). With her new skin, Reina turns her back on her past in Cuba and decides to move to Florida and live with her sister Constancia. The reasons for this sudden decision are never explicitly revealed. Reina, who seems to be the perfect revolutionary before the accident, doesn't even think twice about her determination to abandon her native country. What is apparent is the stark contrast between her new skin and her surroundings. The apartment that she had inherited from her father (or stepfather, as we later discover), consisted of the well-known ornithologist's old office, and it was full of objects and books of time past. The new Reina simply no longer belongs to this environment. Her change of skin reflects her change of self:

> Reina doesn't particularly mind her skin, mismatched and itchy as it is, but she cannot tolerate its stench. No one else seems to notice, but to her it reeks of dry blood and sour milk. She recalls hearing of animals in the wild spurning their own kind when touched by an unknown odor. Now Reina understands why. (66)

So dramatic is her change of identity that not even her distinctive scent remains. Instead of waiting for it to return, she decides to adopt a life that will reflect her new being, and moves to the United States.

Constancia, on the other hand, had already adapted completely to the culture of the United States, where whatever is "new" is valued over everything else, and she had even created her own line of beauty products. One night, however, she dreams she is undergoing plastic surgery: "The surgeon severs roots and useless nerves, reinvents the architecture of her face" (104). When Constancia wakes up from this nightmare, it is as if she has become the protagonist of a fantastic short story:

> She switches on her vanity mirror, and finds her face in disarray, moving all at once like a primitive creature. Her neck and temples itch furiously, erupting with bumps each time she attempts to scratch.

> [. . .] Then she checks the mirror again. Her face has settled down, but it appears different to her, younger, as if it truly had been rearranged in the night. She rubs her eyes, pinches her cheeks. Her eyes seem rounder, a more deliberate green. Then it hits her with the force of a slap. This is her mother's face. (104-5)

In contrast with Reina's experience, Constancia's change of face points toward the past. The fact that her mother's face has unexpectedly usurped her own, seems to indicate the need for Constancia to return to her roots in order to find out the truth about her origins, which up until then she had ignored. Here the face symbolizes an important aspect of identity: physical inheritance. When a child is born, it is this aspect of the face which we first try to decipher: Who does he or she most resemble? Similarly, physical inheritance has the mysterious capacity to reveal to us the presence of our ancestors without our knowing they exist. For example, Reina's daughter, Dulce, who had never met her father, has no difficulty recognizing him in a photo at the museum: "The odd thing was that he seemed very familiar to me, even though I'd never seen him before. Then I realized it was because I'd inherited his face" (53). The features that point out her origin cannot be erased. In a similar vein, Constancia, who was physically rejected by her mother, has to face the maternal image every time she looks at herself in the mirror. Curiously, although sometimes she wants to scratch her face and return to her original features, Constancia also "finds the soft stretch of Mamá's face over hers oddly sustaining, as if she were buoyed by a warm tidal power" (130). In spite of the fact that her mother refused to take care of her daughter while she was living, her physical presence in Constancia's features helps to calm the daughter, as it constitutes a permanent indication of her roots. This connection, which Constancia had previously denied, obliges her to return to Cuba, unearth her father's diaries, and in this way discover, although only partially, her own origins.

Unlike the characters in *Face* and *Drown*, the changes experienced by Reina and Constancia constitute *re*figurations of the face instead of *dis*figurations. For these women, their physical appearance serves to

indicate the next necessary step in their lives – toward the future or the past – in order to adjust to their new identity. What *The Agüero Sisters* shares with the other texts studied is the importance of physical heredity through the use of the face as symbol. When Reina loses the features of her genetic inheritance, she can finally abandon the majority of her father's relics, which she had preserved so religiously in the past. On the other hand, Constancia sets off on a search for her own origins after recovering the features of her dead mother. Similarly, Helio is only able to remember the details of his father's assasination after he has successfully reconstructed his own face. On the other hand, the brothers in *Drown* are able to identify with Ysrael precisely because their father abandoned them and they find themselves "faceless."

To conclude, we have seen that the face, linked to physical heredity, functions as a powerful symbol of identity for three Latino writers. In *Drown* and *Face*, we note that disfigurement emblematizes the experience of being marginalized in society. The mask in both texts has a definite negative connotation. While Helio's mask doesn't allow him to breath, Ysrael's is described as being infested with fleas. The mask, then, may represent a false identity, or the identity imposed by an outside force; in other words, by the dominant society. In both texts, the only way to rise above the condition of having a deformed face is through artistic refiguration, or creativity. The use of the face in *The Agüero Sisters* adds the genealogical aspect of identity to this construction. The identity represented in our faces has in part been inherited, and therefore serves as a physical reminder of our past. In spite of the cultural differences between these three authors, for all of them, the face constitutes a very suggestive symbol of identity. This sign of humanity allows them to explore their own marginalization as "Latinos" in the U.S. and at the same time (or as a consequence) offers a symbolic way of expressing the constant process of re-construction of identity, a process which arises when one does not belong completely anywhere.

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