La Isla de
Las Brujas

by NORA D. SCHREIBER

THE ENGLISH PLAYWRIGHT George Bernard Shaw, once said, “If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.” I tried my best to dance but my size-nine feet only seemed capable of stomping heavily on everything in their path.

I gave up dancing and tried cooking. My rice turned to mush, and my beans never evenly cooked. My Spanish was even worse due to the fact everyone spoke English to improve it. “Hija no eres ni bruja ni salvaje!” my aunt would exclaim, seeing my attempts and failures. I thought about those words and how I would answer, but the right response never came until later.

I am without a doubt, the supreme oddity of the family: the dancing skeleton. I did not grow up chasing fish, collecting rocks, and counting colorful birds as my mother and aunt, true brujas who thrived in absolute paradise, did. I didn’t watch the afternoon sun showers under the jungle canopy. Perhaps I did see some colorful birds in my lifetime, and maybe I managed to feel some fish slip between my fingers. This did not change the fact, however, that I did not own and love the same ocean and land as the women before me did.

Puerto Rico fed their bruja; the waters strengthened their spirits. They learned to dance and let the music take over their bodies. They learned to cook, eat, grow, and enjoy their food. That island magic lit
the iron hot *bruja* in the hearts of these three ladies with my grandmother holding the undying flames. Unfortunately, this passion could not be given to me when I was born. The special magic of my ancestry lives in the experiences of an islander and not a German-Puerto Rican living in New York City.

My struggle to identify with my culture is similar to that of Oscar’s plight in Junot Díaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Diaz describes Oscar as having “none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male” (19). Oscar’s Dominican culture expected him to be successful with women just as my family expected me to act like an island *bruja*. Both Oscar and I lacked the training, however, to reach such destinies without first discovering ourselves.

Pressure from family and culture can be surprisingly infectious. Even Oscar’s sister Lola (who in the novel represents breaking conformity) feeds into this instilled cultural value that Oscar should have relations with a woman. “I know you Dominican men,” she says after Oscar spent part of the night with a female friend (40). The idea that Oscar is “supposed to have Atomic Level G” in the department of dating women is believed by every member of his family just as the idea that the women in my family are natural born *brujas* is taught in mine (24).

The failure to meet cultural expectation is painful and in response to this pain Oscar and I both developed insecurities within our personalities. Oscar blamed his cultural disconnect on his weight and physical flaws. His appearance was contrary to the ideal Dominican male image of being handsome and seductive. Not fitting in with this idea caused Oscar to become deeply unmotivated and pessimistic as the novel progressed. Oscar became so desensitized by his own failure he described himself as being “allergic to diligence” and even tried committing suicide (25).

I also felt a certain amount of anguish in being unable to fulfill my *bruja* role. I could not distinguish myself as having a Puerto Rican heritage because I did not have *bruja* stories to share with my family. In reaction to this, I would attempt to become a *bruja* either by trying to teach myself or by ignoring the role completely. Both Oscar and I felt like outcasts and were transformed negatively at first by our individual cultural experiences.

Family and culture will always influence the thoughts and feelings of human beings. The relationships forged between people and cultural values can bring people of similar experiences together or isolate those who are different. Oscar
eventually established a relationship with a woman at the end of the novel after overcoming his cultural obstacles. He found a person to share the intimacies he never thought he would experience and happily proclaimed his long search for affection as accomplished.

As I compare myself to Oscar and his ordeal, I realize that if I crave a connection with my family’s past I should not just listen to my brujas but should also ask them to show me. The dancing skeleton in the closet no longer troubles me now. It once represented my lack of experience in Puerto Rico, but I know now that it is the brujita inside me that dances now. With a little practice she will learn to cook, speak proper Spanish, and maybe even visit the island of brujas when it rains. For now, I can respond to my aunt’s exclamation and tell her truthfully, “I am a savage learning to be a brujita.”