Violence, Masculinity, and Upward Mobility in the Dominican Diaspora: Junot Díaz, the Media, and *Drown*

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An interviewer asked Junot Díaz whether it matters "to you at all where they shelve your book in the library or in the bookstore, meaning in what section, whether it's called writers of color, recent fiction, Latino writers, or anything else?" Díaz responded: "I've been fortunate enough to be considered literary fiction. They're so happy to claim me as literature because it makes them all look better. They don't want to relegate me to areas of ethnic studies." Books by minority authors are often seized upon to project a certain image of multicultural America. In this instance, Díaz claims that he has been welcomed into the literary mainstream as a gambit to make "the mainstream, the publishers, everybody" look better. With Díaz on their team, "they" can deflect accusations of being exclusionary, of being uninterested in the plight of Dominican immigrants and its implicit critique of the U.S. status quo.

The question remains, however, whether such a celebratory popular and critical reception manages to preserve the challenging moral and artistic vision of the author of immigrant or minority literature. My analysis of Díaz's text calls for an attention to the disjuncture between what the author and his reviewers insist is the book's key site of violence and tension, namely the intersection of English and Spanish, and the alternative sites that *Drown* itself forces upon the reader.

Published in 1996, *Drown* brought critical and popular acclaim to Junot Díaz. The geography of this short story collection ranges from the capital and countryside of the Dominican Republic to New York City and its New Jersey periphery. The book loosely organizes itself

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around the consciousness of Yunior, from his childhood in a poor neighborhood of Santo Domingo through to an adolescence of under-achievement and petty crime in north-central Jersey.

With its epigraph from a poem of Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Drown announces the problematic role of English in telling these stories: "The fact that I am writing to you in English/already falsifies what I/wanted to tell you./My subject: how to explain to you that I/don't belong to English/though I belong nowhere else." The reader may recognize, then, her imminent encounter with a double-falsification. Not only will she be reading fictional narratives, but falsified fictional narratives, narratives diverted from what the author "wanted to tell you" (as if she ever had transparent access to what the author wanted to tell her). Nor does the reader have the comfort of treating this book like a translation from another language: "I don't belong to English/though I belong nowhere else." Instead, the reader is asked to imagine an unsettled linguistic space, an uneasy co-habitation with the English language.

Drown demands a double linguistic consciousness. Unmarked, unglossed Spanish words and phrases are common throughout the book. On the one hand, Diaz attributes this feature of the book to his place in a literary tradition: "I learned to write not from old Dominican texts, but from Cristina Garcia, Sandra Cisneros, Oscar Hijuelos."³ Latino literary texts by these authors frequently reflect the bilingual world they write from; Drown follows the model of its literary forbears and inscribes itself into this tradition. However, Diaz claims that there is another motive at work, as well:

When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I've tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English.⁴

Diaz seems heavily invested in the violence of his code-switching. Violence is a theme that recurs in his interviews and appears to have been decisive for his career and journalists covering it. Bill Buford, author of Among the Thugs, a first-hand account of life among English soccer hooligans, tapped Junot Diaz for the New Yorker and gets an acknowledgement in the final pages of Drown. Ed Morales reports that while playing phone tag with Diaz for a Village Voice piece, Diaz left "a
joke message about needing to be bailed out of the slammer: ‘Yo, Ed, they got me man. You gotta get me outta here!’"5 Richard Eder begins his Los Angeles Times review of Drown: “The empire always strikes back," and proceeds to discuss Cromwell’s subjugation of Ireland, the French colonization of Algeria, and the African slave trade before locating Díaz in the violent history of U.S. imperial encounters with Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic.6

All things considered, perhaps violence does represent the most apt rubric for discussing the state of multicultural America. Díaz, for example, speaks of his militant campus activism at Rutgers University in support of expanding the Latino studies curriculum. At the Cornell MFA program, when people would ask him if he was a writer, he would respond, “No, I’m a Dominican writer.”7 From Díaz’s perspective, immigrant and/or minority identity formation in the United States, like language acquisition, is a violent process:

You come to the United States and the United States begins immediately, systematically, to erase you in every way, to suppress those things which it considers not digestible. You spend a lot of time being colonized. Then, if you’ve got the opportunity and the breathing space and the guidance, you immediately—when you realize it—begin to decolonize yourself. And in that process, you relearn names for yourself that you had forgotten.8

Richard Eder, among others, reiterates this outlook on the violent state of U.S. diversity; Díaz, he writes:

depict[s] his fellow Dominicans in their struggling transit between island poverty and a laborious, denaturing effort to make their way here[...]Our society has become so stratified, so internally isolated by class, color, culture, language and crime, or the fear of it, that today the only news from across the barriers comes from younger Latino, Asian and black novelists and street poets.9

Díaz and Eder’s statements may accurately reflect a “systematically” “denaturing” U.S. society, but strangely, they do not accurately reflect the world of Drown.

Drown does not rehearse the conventional immigrant narrative of
assimilation and its attendant anxieties. The boundaries of the Dominican community in the U.S. appear more fluid than, say, the Brooklyn Jewish ghetto of Call It Sleep or the Chicago Lithuanian community of The Jungle. Of course, Drown does depict thoroughly Dominican spaces:

Everything in Washington Heights is Dominican. You can’t go a block without passing a Quisqueya Bakery or a Quisqueya Supermercado or a Hotel Quisqueya. If I were to park the truck and get out nobody would take me for a deliveryman; I could be the guy who’s on the street corner selling Dominican flags. I could be on my way home to my girl. Everybody’s on the streets and the merengue’s falling out of windows like TVs.¹⁰

In the world of Drown, though, people are not confined to their particular national, ethnic or racial spaces. The very title of “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie” makes clear the lived diversity represented in the book. “Edison, New Jersey” hilariously navigates New Jersey’s class geography, from unpresuming working-and middle-class towns to the rich suburbs of northern New Jersey. The narrator is a pool table deliveryman and assembler. He remarks of his wealthy clientele:

Sometimes the customer has to jet to the store for cat food or a newspaper while we’re in the middle of a job. I’m sure you’ll be all right, they say. They never sound too sure. Of course, I say. Just show us where the silver’s at. The customers ha-ha and we ha-ha and then they agonize over leaving, linger by the front door, trying to memorize everything they own, as if they don’t know where to find us, who we work for. (122-123)

This passage suggests that we may not live so closed off from one another as Richard Eder would have us believe. There are still interactions, even if they are mediated by economic hierarchies and shot through with class resentment, tension and anxiety. So while “crime, or the fear of it” may erect all sorts of physical and psychological barriers, Drown suggests that as long as rich people still need their pool tables delivered and houses cleaned, individuals will witness and circulate “news from across the barriers.”
The openness of class and race barriers in *Drown*, although by no means utopian, does offer a counterpoint to the outright violence with which Diaz colors his outlook on U.S. society in his interviews. The same could be said of the use of language in the book. As discussed above, Diaz repeatedly highlights the violence of the encounter between Spanish and English, both in his life and in his book. Nonetheless, in an essay about translation, he draws attention to another aspect of his use of language:

My English isn’t very transparent. There’s plenty of “urban” language, youth language, hiphop language, and a lot of “intellectual” language. To be able to juggle them all at once and get the valence of all of them as a translator is difficult. I found my interventions to be the most useful on the boundaries between all these areas.\(^{11}\)

It’s clear that Diaz considers this Bakhtinian play of multiple social languages central to the craft of his writing. Following his lead, we may align this heteroglossia with his self-location in numerous creative traditions:

I have multiple traditions, like anyone else. I’m part of the mainstream of “American” literary tradition. I’m part of the Latino literary tradition. I’m a part of the African Diaspora literary tradition as well as the Dominican literary tradition. But there’s also the oral tradition and the rhythmic tradition of the music I grew up with which deeply influence how I write a sentence and how my work sounds.\(^{12}\)

The overlapping and intersecting of all these traditions in *Drown* certainly contributes to its voice, and perhaps to its celebrity too. It certainly makes it more interesting for literary critics. What’s remarkable, though, is how easily (and frequently) Diaz inscribes himself in all these traditions without mention of friction or tension between them. It appears the only site of friction and tension that he identifies in his book is along the English-Spanish axis.

Well-versed readers of Latino literature, not to mention people who regularly ride public transportation in major metropolitan areas of the United States, may be surprised by the emphasis on the “English-Spanish tension and violence” purportedly so central to the book. For
example, in a study of Puerto Rican-American language usage (i.e., code-switching or "Spanglish"), Juan Flores presents a different vision of the co-habitation of English and Spanish. He reports:

Sentences that used both Spanish and English were found to be grammatical in both languages; switching occurs only where the structures of Spanish and English are congruent. We found that balanced bilinguals engaged in more intimate, intricate kinds of switching, while those with fluency in one language avoided syntactic risks by switching between sentences or switching only independent particles and exclamations. Rather than compensating for monolingual deficiency, code-switching often signals an expansion of communicative and expressive potential.¹³

Rather than violence and tension between English and Spanish, Flores describes balance, intimacy, intimacy and "an expansion of communicative and expressive potential." This is not to suggest that social fractures along linguistic lines in the United States are not marked by violence. Nor that Díaz would deny that code-switching enhances the "communicative and expressive" elements of his prose. Quite the opposite, Drown employs code-switching to expressively enhance its whole emotional range. This is why it is remarkable, and puzzling, that Díaz and others have so singularly focused on the violence of the English-Spanish relationship.

What if this unequivocal, repeated identification of the source of tension and violence in Drown were a sign of resistance, in the psychoanalytic sense? What if, more specifically, it constituted a form of displacement, diverting the reader’s attention away from more perilous sites of tension and violence in the book, sites that Díaz or his reviewers may not be so comfortable discussing in print? As we discussed earlier, Díaz values how the book interweaves social languages and participates in numerous narrative traditions. Furthermore, the social landscape of Drown depicts all sorts of mixing of color and class. Perhaps it is somewhere in this context, treated so unproblematically outside the book, that we can locate what is problematic inside the book. If we are suspicious of locating and containing the violence and tension of the book in the neat opposition between Spanish and English, perhaps we should look to these messy sites of intermingling to discover where Drown, in spite of its author and reviewers, pinpoints
the troubled experience of multicultural America.

In the story "Boyfriend," the young male narrator becomes interested in the life of his downstairs neighbor, "the two of us separated by a floor, wires and some pipes" (112). His neighbor (Girlfriend) is in the midst of a protracted break-up (with Boyfriend), and he himself is in the process of recovery from a break-up. The narrator has seen Boyfriend out before: "He was one of those dark-skinned, smooth-faced brothers that women kill for, and I knew for a fact, having seen his ass in action at the local spots, that he liked to get over on the white-girls" (114). This interracial play, though, does not surprise the narrator anymore:

I used to think those were the barrio rules, Latinos and blacks in, whites out—a place we down cats weren't supposed to go. But love teaches you. Clears your head of any rules. Loretta's new boy was Italian. Worked on Wall Street. When she told me about him we were still going out. We were on the Promenade and she said to me, I like him. He's a hard worker.

No amount of heart-leather could stop something like that from hurting (114).

On its face, it appears that the narrator does not suffer from the fact that Loretta's new boyfriend is Italian, i.e., white in the U.S. racial schema. Instead, it is her admiration for his hard work, as opposed to the narrator's own underachieving, that really stings. However, the response of the narrator's friends as they try to console him reveals a complicated relationship between race and economics: "It was easy for them to say, Forget her seliout ass. That's not the sort of woman you need. Look how light you are—no doubt she was already shopping for the lightest" (115). It is unclear whether the narrator's friends brand Loretta a seliout for dating a Wall Street broker, or for choosing someone lighter-skinned. Perhaps this ambivalence points to the fact that whiteness often implies, especially to the economically subordinate non-white, high economic status and a committed work-ethic.14 Conversely, the economically subordinate non-white will often become abject about his/her own subordinate economic status and perceived inferiority.15

The retreat to a discourse of race (or pigment) loyalty and betrayal serves the purposes of consolation, though, not genuine indictment.
In fact, the narrator’s conscience refuses to condemn interracial dating if it involves some sort of upward mobility. The two working-class male characters of “Edison, New Jersey” never denigrate the recently arrived, 20-year-old Dominican maid for her relationship with Pruitt, her wealthy employer. Their dialogue suggests quite the opposite:

[Wayne:] Pretty predictable. She’s probably in love with the guy. You know how it is.
[Narrator:] I sure do. (139)

The two characters voice no suspicion of the young woman’s possible mercenary motives. They empathize with her instead, recognizing that love often keeps people bound to situations they would do best to get out of. Despite his own desire for the young woman, the Dominican narrator refuses to accuse her of race betrayal. This refusal is consistent with the “Boyfriend” narrator’s refusal to accuse his ex of race betrayal when she begins dating her Wall Street Italian. Once again, that she admires his “hard work” hurts the narrator more than anything else, touching as it does upon his abject attitude toward his own racial worth and economic status.

The narrators throughout the stories of Drown have a fraught relationship with the idea of financial success. “Fiesta, 1980” takes place after Yonior, his brother Rafa, and their mother have joined their father in the United States. The family will be attending a party in Washington Heights to welcome a recently arrived Dominican uncle to the United States:

None of us spoke until we were inside Papi’s Volkswagen van. Brand-new, lime-green and bought to impress. Oh, we were impressed, but me, every time I was in that VW and Papi went above twenty miles an hour, I vomited. I’d never had trouble with cars before—that van was like my curse. (27)

The VW van, emblem of Papi’s financial success, and perhaps the family’s imminent upward mobility, provokes a nascent neurotic condition in Yonior.

“Fiesta, 1980” aligns the lime-green VW van with another aspect of Papi’s lifestyle, his cheating: “I met the Puerto Rican woman right after Papi had gotten the van. He was taking me on short trips, trying
to cure me of my vomiting" (34-35). Papi saddles both his sons with the knowledge of his affair, even taking them over to eat dinner at the Puerto Rican woman’s house. Yunior comments: “[W]e still acted like nothing was out of the ordinary[...]The affair was like a hole in our living room floor, one we’d gotten so used to circumnavigating that we sometimes forgot it was there” (39-40). Yunior and his family waited five years in Santo Domingo for Papi to send for them. During this time (as recounted in the book’s final story, “Negocios”) in addition to getting on firm financial footing, Papi started another family with another Dominican woman in the United States. Papi’s efforts to make it in the U.S. seem to consistently intersect in the text with his betrayal of Yunior’s mother.

Yunior’s neurotic condition, his compulsive vomiting, then, seems to be entangled in this nexus of upward mobility and masculinity. The book’s title story extends this entanglement. Set years after “Fiesta, 1980,” Yunior, now a small-time drug dealer, and his mother, now separated from her husband, live in a small New Jersey apartment. The story begins with the announcement that his old friend Beto has come home from college. With his college education, Beto represents Brown’s only figure of upward mobility other than Yunior’s father. The latter is marked by infidelity, the former by homosexuality.

Yunior’s frustration, his lack of upward mobility, structures the neurotic circularity of the story “Down.” All of Yunior’s activities in this story repeat themselves, compulsively: his three-mile run, his trips to the mall, his checking the windows to see if they are locked. Haunted by the compromised masculinities of his upwardly mobile models, Yunior remains stuck in a textually neurotic pattern of repetition. A perpetual adolescent, Yunior cannot find a way, in the words of Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, “to gain authority, to emerge, as it were, into maturity and maleness.”16 Cruz-Malavé approaches this same predicament in three foundational Nuyorican texts: Piri Thomas’s Down These Mean Streets, Miguel Piñero’s Short Eyes, and Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings, all of which are admitted influences on Junot Díaz.17 Cruz-Malavé writes:

[H]omosexual practices [in these texts] occupy that zone of reversibility where the Nuyorican author’s struggle to emerge from the spectral state of abjection to which he is subjected by “internal colonialism,” by “the System,” “the Man,” always
inevitably falls back on contested territory. In them, one could say, the "queen," the "faggot" are not so much the antithesis of their "macho" characters and poetic personae as that "proximate other" in whose likeness the latter see reflected the catastrophic condition of their own manhood.¹⁸

Yunior's "spectral state of abjection" lies in his lumpenproletariat status, outside the lines of social mobility, with apparent recourse only to drug-dealing and military service. Beto's homosexual practices (he once gave Yunior a handjob and another time a blowjob) "occupy that zone of reversibility" in which Yunior too could ascend the class hierarchy, but only by risking his own heterosexual masculinity.

Yunior, it seems, wants to navigate a passage "into maturity and maleness" that bypasses two "proximate others," the hyper-masculinized philandering father and the insufficiently masculinized homosexual (ex-)friend. Cruz-Malavé writes: "To validate masculinity with its ruin, to submit to sodomy, to 'bugger' in order to construct a male national identity, there is the paradoxical foundational project that Nuyorican texts set for themselves."¹⁹ *Drown*, on the other hand, seems to want to construct an upwardly mobile Dominican male subject, not on the ruins of masculinity, but seemingly on a monogamous heterosexual masculinity. The book posits this project, but leaves it unfulfilled, compulsively repeating a frustrated, lumpen adolescence.

Like the foundational Nuyorican texts, Diaz and his reviewers denounce U.S. "internal colonialism"—evinced most clearly in the conflict between Spanish and English—as the constitutive site of violence and tension for the minority subject. However, our readings of *Drown* suggest that this extra-textual critique may simply attempt to displace the reader's analytic gaze. The stories in the book offer upward mobility to their Dominican male characters. Their underachievement is not attributed to "the System" or "the Man" but to a crisis of masculinity. Yunior refuses the upwardly mobile models of his adulterous and homosexual "proximate others," but fails to achieve an alternative.

Maybe that's why it is safe to celebrate minority fictions that are perceived to critique the oppressive socio-economic conditions in the United States. That critique, whether expressed in academic journals or in the mainstream press, frames and preserves the idea of minority identity as necessarily grounded in socio-economic subordination. Yet the stories of *Drown* suggest that it is not oppressive socio-economic
conditions that constitute the direct obstacle to upward mobility for the diasporic Dominican male subject. Instead, it is that subject’s own crisis of masculinity that seem to produce the neurotic conditions that interrupt his upwardly mobile trajectory.

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 905.
7. Céspedes and Saillant, p. 896.
8. Ibid., p. 896.
12. Céspedes and Saillant, p. 904.
15. In Drown, this sense of inferiority appears, for example, in “How to Date a Brown girl, Black girl, White girl, or Halfie” when the narrator comments: “Run a hand through your hair like the whiteboys do even though the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa. She will look good. The white ones are the ones you want the most, aren’t they, but usually the out-of-towners are black, blackgirls who grew up with ballet and Girl Scouts, who have three cars in their drive-ways” (145). Likewise, while looking up with a white girl at another moment of this story, the narrator states: “Tell her that you love her hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because, in truth, you love them more than you love your own” (147).
17. Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, p. 900.
18. Cruz-Malavé, pp. 139-140.
19. Ibid., p. 140

Works Cited

Céspedes, Diógenes and Silvio Torres-Saillant, “Fiction Is the Poor Man’s Cinema'.


