
Junot Díaz's *Drown*: Revisiting "Those Mean Streets"

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JUNOT DÍAZ was born in 1968 in a poor section of the city of Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, and moved to the United States as a child of seven. In the United States Díaz's family moved to a Latino neighborhood in New Jersey where he attended Kean College in Union before transferring to Rutgers University in New Brunswick. Rutgers' offerings in Latino and African-American history and literature opened new possibilities for creativity and political awareness, and Díaz came "to see himself—and assert himself—as a Dominican, an American, and a writer."¹ After his graduation from Rutgers, Díaz enrolled in the graduate writing program at Cornell University, from which he received a master's degree in Fine Arts. In 1996 he published a collection of short stories, *Drown*, which has made him one of the most promising members of the younger generation of Latino authors.

ANALYSIS OF THEMES AND FORMS

Since the publication in 1996 of his first collection of short stories, *Drown*, Dominican-born author Junot Díaz has been acclaimed by critics as "one of the most original, vibrant and engrossing voices to come along in many years."² Chosen by *Newsweek* as one of their "new faces of '96"—"A Deserving Dark Horse"—the young writer quickly became "the most highly trumpeted talent of the season."³

Díaz's memories of his home island, of both urban and rural spaces,

are faint, "like the fixed image of photographs . . . [t]here is a snapshot of his childhood house, or a kung fu movie he once saw dubbed in Spanish, or a visit to Haiti,"⁴ but they reverberate in his autobiographical stories as sparse but eloquent elements of a landscape of memory and experience.

Díaz's narrative space, however, is dominated not by nostalgic recreations of idealized childhood landscapes, but by the bleak, barren, and decayed margins of New Jersey's inner cities. Díaz, whom critics have praised for his acute powers of observation, has a sharp eye for the social and human blight that has resulted from urban neglect. The trajectory of his characters' lives mirrors Díaz's own observations and experiences in this setting. The New Jersey he writes about, as he told one interviewer, "is the one he knows: a place of blue-collar towns of Latino immigrants, of tostones (mashed fried plantains) and malls and roads where 'beer bottles grow out of the weeds like squashes.'"⁵ His own family was not immune to the destructive aspects of this new environment—his father, somewhat of a womanizer, abandoned the family for another woman when Díaz was an adolescent, and his mother, with her insufficient knowledge of English, could find only substandard employment.

Díaz learned early to escape his unpromising circumstances through writing. He began to write in earnest as a high school sophomore when his older brother, Rafael, was diagnosed with leukemia and was hospitalized. Díaz "spent his days scribbling long letters to Rafa."⁶ He found another avenue of escape through education by attending Kean College and later transferring to Rutgers University in New Brunswick. After graduation from Rutgers, Díaz enrolled in the graduate writing program at Cornell University.

The marketing of Díaz's stories reads like a cautionary tale about the commodification of Latino literature, its literary merit notwithstanding. He erupted into the public notice quite dramatically with a blitz of publicity following the announcement of his having received "gobs of money" for his first collection of short stories and a novel he had not yet started. The story of the feeding frenzy that led to his receiving "six figures" from Riverhead Books has the fascination of the proverbial train wreck. If the tale of his discovery by Rosenthal recalls that of Lana Turner's own discovery at Schwab's Drugstore in its serendipity and improbability, that of the reading at the KGB Bar in the East Village to an audience packed with talent scouts arranged by Rosenthal, and the subsequent summoning of eight publishing houses to wrestle for the rights to publish the book, speak of the fury to bring selected Latino voices to a market avid for marketable minority voices. The publication of his short stories in venues as prestigious as the *New Yorker* and the *Paris Review* soon attracted even more notice, placing Díaz in an almost

untenable situation of having to meet the highest and most overblown expectations. His inclusion in two consecutive collections of *The Best American Short Stories* ("Ysrael" in 1996 and "Fiesta, 1980" in 1997) attests to the profound impact he has made on the American literary scene since the publication of *Drown*.

Like Toni Morrison, whose novels chronicle the black American experience, focusing on how characters struggle to find themselves and assert their cultural identity against an unjust society, Díaz is interested in narrating the great human loss of marginalization and closed options. Unlike Morrison, however, whose use of fantasy and highly poetic style lifts her characters toward the symbolic and mythic, Díaz is more concerned with depicting the petty humiliations and everyday deprivations of inner-city life. He is closer in outlook and style to two writers to whom he is frequently compared: Puerto Rican author Piri Thomas and Langston Hughes, both of whom are known for their eloquent portrayal of ghetto youth struggling against the conditions of life for urban black and Hispanic youth.

Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), in particular, comes to mind when linking *Drown* to a literary tradition. In many ways *Drown* is a sort of throwback to the Nuyorican literature of the 1950s and 1960s. Thomas' classic of Latino anguish and despair was the first in a tradition of heart-wrenching memoirs depicting the destruction of the Puerto Rican soul in the American ghetto. The text dissected in harsh detail the drug-peddling culture, the devastation caused by heroin addiction, the brutality of prison life, the loss of the saving power of faith and family, and the constant struggle against the diminishing value of life that were part of the 1960s as lived by the young Puerto Rican community of Spanish Harlem. Díaz's *Drown*, though removed in time and space from Thomas' barrio, nonetheless revisits many of its themes and motifs, updating for a new audience, in a trimmed-down, more detached style, the vicissitudes of young immigrant life in the inner city. *Drown* chronicles the human cost of an immigrant people's displacement in an environment of cultural and racial discrimination and economic exploitation.

The trait that separates Díaz's work from this earlier tradition is the absence of a clear political intention, which is most obvious in the passionate, denunciatory style of Piri Thomas' work as compared to Díaz's cool, detached, minimalist prose. If *Down These Mean Streets* was a book of searing accusation against those forces in American society that condemned some ethnic minorities to alienation, discrimination, and disillusionment, it was also a book that assumed that these conditions could be altered through political action and consciousness-raising. There is no such faith in concerted community action in *Drown*; there is, as a matter of fact, little semblance of a community—in the sense of groups living lives of multileveled communication with each other. There are friends

and neighbors who come across each other from time to time in these tales, but they merge and separate, like the proverbial ships that pass in the night, leaving little in their wake. James Woods, in his review for the *New Republic*, accurately points to the stories "skillfully" catching Díaz's characters "in their own glue of confusion, unable or unwilling to change anything."⁷

Drown opens with an epigraph from Cuban writer Gustavo Pérez Firmat—"The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you"—a poignant statement affirming the centrality of language to a writer's understanding and articulation of experience. The epigraph, which bemoans Pérez Firmat's sense of loss of his "natural" [Spanish] language, announces Díaz's subject to be that of explaining that he does not "belong to English though I belong nowhere else." Its use in *Drown* sets up a curious paradox for Díaz's work, which does not dwell with particular pathos on his various immigrant characters' yearning for a lost home or language or on their removal from their place of origin.

In fact, Spanish has little impact on the stories in *Drown*; the texts may be peppered with unexplained and untranslated Spanish words, many of which are misspelled or are used in grammatically incorrect variations. They are not brought into the text to enrich the English language with new expressive possibilities, but as a re-creation of the easy slang of the minority community about which he writes.⁸ This community's alienation and exile come from its marginalization from mainstream, middle-class American society, from a disempowerment that is endemic to national and immigrant minorities in the United States, and does not necessarily stem from a forced disconnection from the native language and environment. The characters in *Drown* belong quite comfortably in an English vernacular wrought out of the Latino community's experiences in the three decades that have elapsed since Thomas' work was initially published.

The element that sets *Drown* apart from other texts about immigrant life in the American inner city is a pointed and succinct, almost minimalist, style that is purged of any tendency to rhetorical flights of fancy, despite occasional lapses into questionable metaphors in describing the gritty landscape in which the various characters wait out their lives. On the whole, however, reviewers and readers agree that the collection's true originality lies in having created "a non-literary vernacular, compounded of African American slang, loosened Spanish and standard American storytelling" for his "cool and grimy" portrayals of contemporary urban America.⁹

In discussions of Díaz's spare language and style in *Drown*, much attention has been given to the impact of the lack of quotation marks or

italics to identify dialogue or his use of four-letter words as part of his appeal "as an authentic voice of his community."¹⁰ There is in this merging of voices, in this lack of distinction between narration and dialogue in Díaz's spare sentences, a brittleness that mirrors the bleakness and misery of the lives portrayed. Díaz claims to write "for the people he grew up with," in the language of immigrant adolescents with no desire to learn from or about the world. He claims for his book an authenticity of observation untainted by a desire to explain his world to outsiders: "I took extreme pains for my book to not be a native informant. Not: 'This is Dominican food. This is a Spanish word.' I trust my readers, even non-Spanish ones."¹¹ The reader unfamiliar with the milieu depicted in *Drown* must enter this world without a guide since neither narrator nor characters will explain or justify themselves.

There is in this first collection of stories, as there is in every first work, the stamp of a craft in the making, which, in the case of *Drown*, surfaces as the still-too-clear mark of professional writing programs like the one Díaz attended at Cornell. We can glimpse it in the only partly successful experiment with the imperative voice in "How to Date . . ." in a distrust of third-person narrative even when, as is "Edison, New Jersey," it could serve the narrative better; and in the too-faithful adherence to closely examined models. The best of these stories, nonetheless, surmount what James Wood has described as "the contemporary idea of the short story, as processed by writing programs, that it must present itself as a victim of its own confusion, as a bewilderment, a fragment,"¹² and point to Díaz's exceptional promise as a writer.

All of the stories in *Drown*, with the exception of "No Face," are narrated in the first person, which attests to their autobiographical nature. *Drown*, although not autobiography per se, is clearly an autobiographical book; the stories have their basis in Díaz's own experiences growing up in the Dominican Republic and, after age seven, in a tough Latino neighborhood in Perth Amboy. Five of the stories in *Drown* share the same narrator, the author's alter ego, Ramón de las Casas, known as Yuniór, a young boy whose narratives of a somewhat blighted Dominican childhood become the tales of a rather traumatized inner-city New Jersey adolescent. In the New Jersey-based stories, the narrators, all of whom may or may not be Yuniór, share Yuniór's sensibility: the suspicious watchfulness and defensive stance, the blighted relationship with the father figure, and the uneasiness in relationships with women, which move from tenderness to violence.

Thematically, the stories in *Drown* center on the deprivation and tedium of life in the Dominican countryside and New Jersey: young children torture a deformed child in "Ysrael"; petty drug dealers languidly look for clients seeking to score in "Aurora"; days are spent searching

for bargains in the mall in "Drown"; children vomit in cars while traveling to the Bronx to visit relatives in "Fiesta, 1980." Herein lies the strength—and occasionally the limitations—of these tales.

In "Ysrael," the story that opens the book, Yunior and his brother Rafa, exiled by their mother to the Dominican countryside during their summer vacation, look at the verdant landscape surrounding them, "at the mists that gathered like water, at the brucal trees that blazed like fires on the mountains," and declare it to be "shit"—"worse than shit."¹³ This blank assertion sets the tone for the story of their dogged pursuit of a young deformed boy whose mask they want to remove to see the extent of his deformity. This, one of the most successful tales in the collection, works around two sets of failed connections—Yunior and Rafa/Yunior and Ysrael—and two failed quests—Rafa's search for sexual fulfillment and the search for the meaning behind Ysrael's horrible mutilation. Both quests are empty from the start—"worse than shit." Their pursuit of Ysrael—cruel and meaningless to begin with—is eroticized by its juxtaposition against Rafa's pursuit of girls on which to exercise his manhood; cruelty to the deformed Ysrael is another way to prove his incipient manhood.

Erotic themes dominate "Ysrael" and "No Face," the second story in the collection, which centers on the country boy disfigured by a hog, providing an interesting angle from which to read both stories in conjunction. Rafa's pursuit of the disfigured, tormented boy mirrors his pursuit of sexual pleasure from naïve young country girls. Yunior's reluctance to join in both pursuits leaves him open to charges of being a *pato*, a homosexual—just as Ysrael's mutilation is linked to images of castration. Ysrael's efforts to overcome the memory of the attack that led to his disfiguration—which focus on his efforts to act "like a man"—are coupled to a second attack by boys threatening to "make him a girl." The interweavings of multiple erotic strands in the two stories create a series of motifs which Díaz returns to in all the stories narrated by Yunior; they pair Yunior and Ysrael as mirror images of a sort, as Ysrael carries in the flesh the emotional mutilations Yunior has suffered during his fatherless childhood, which, although not visible to the eyes, remain just as profound. They prepare the ground for the themes Díaz will pursue in the stories centered on his womanizing, all-too-manly father: "Fiesta, 1980," "Aguantando," and "Negocios."

Similar themes are skillfully woven into "Fiesta, 1980," where Yunior returns to narrate another tale of sexual pursuit and betrayal. The tale, centered on Yunior's inability to travel in the family car without throwing up, links the vomiting to the bitter knowledge of his father's unfaithfulness with a Puerto Rican woman. Yunior, by now partly Americanized, sneers at his relatives' apartment in the Bronx as "furnished in Contemporary Dominica Tacky." But the tale, despite rueful

details that hint at his assimilation, is not about the pains of immigration, but about the various ways in which Rafa is becoming like his father—toward the relentless pursuit of women and sex—while Yunior's identification with and sympathy for his mother leave him open to accusations of being a *pato*. Food deprivation—coupled here with Yunior's penchant for vomiting when not deprived—is mirrored in the text by the many secrets, the many silences Yunior must keep, and which threaten to burst out, destroying the false harmony of the family, just as his vomiting destroys their forced rapport as they travel together in the car.

Of the stories centered around Yunior's ambivalent yearning for a true father figure, "Aguantando" is the least successful. At most it is a well-written autobiographical piece that lacks the tension and nuanced insight evident in "Ysrael," "No Face," and "Negocios." "Negocios" offers a beautifully rendered portrait, deeply colored with poignant detail, of Yunior's father—a hard-working, flawed man, tyrannical and self-centered, weak and negligent of his family. The story also works well as a dual portrait in its finely etched rendition of Yunior's own anger, yearning, and ultimately love. This is the only story in the collection in which the immigrant experience takes center stage. Díaz depicts, with "calibrated restraint" (according to Gates), the father's dependence on his native language for strength and complexity of expression (and his concomitant loss when living in the English-speaking United States) and the cost to his son Yunior of his own half-assimilation. If Spanish and the possibility of a return to the Dominican Republic can offer refuge to his father, Yunior is fated to remain behind, with English and New Jersey looming as "the language and landscape of emotional deprivation." These themes are framed, quite successfully, by two scenes of abandonment: that of the father's leaving the family for the United States and that of his leaving his mistress many years later to return to the Dominican Republic. They are connected by the voice of Yunior, as he searches for a true picture of his father through which he can resolve the many ambivalences of their relationship, and by a return to the theme of betrayal—so skillfully used in "Fiesta, 1980"—where he must revisit his father's mistress' house to gather the last bits of information necessary to complete his portrait. Although the story follows, in its details of the father's life, a well-trodden path, it is saved from cliché and repetition by Díaz's tightly controlled, delicate touch.

The "New Jersey stories"—"Aurora," "Drown," "Boyfriend," "Edison, New Jersey," and "How to Date a Browngirl"—can be read as variations on the theme of masking and unmasking offered first in "Ysrael" and then developed in "No Face." Whether they have an older Yunior as a narrator, or not, they share a quality of stasis that stems from the character's paralysis of affect; damaged and under siege, they seek security

in poses, in cordoning off their inner lives, in blankness. The narrative often emphasizes the masks these characters must assume and maintain, to the point that maintaining the mask assumes the centrality of life and experience—a protection against life and living.

In perhaps the best in this group, "Drown," the narrator, seduced by a male friend as they watch a porn video, seems intent on avoiding the friend when he returns from college on his summer holiday. The narrative never delves into the crisis or the loss of friendship it implies, but rather depends for its effect on the reader's willingness to read glimpses of real emotion behind the mask of coolness. These glimpses come, as they often do in Díaz's stories, through skillfully placed pairings. In the case of "Drown," the pain of loss is conveyed through both the recollections of the friendship between the two young men offered by the narrator and through the seemingly unrelated descriptions of the mother's yearning for the father who has left her despite knowing the relationship could bring her nothing but pain. Both tales, etched with betrayal, lure the narrator and his mother nonetheless with recollections of the true feeling that had existed between the two "couples" before betrayal wrenched them apart. Díaz uses video watching to good effect by pairing two scenes of video screenings—one leading to Beto's seduction of the narrator as they watch a porno film, the other an attempt at catharsis as the narrator and his mother seek solace for the anger of betrayal that consumes them while watching a dubbed version of the film *Bonny and Clyde*.

Díaz, in stories of emotional emptiness such as "Boyfriend," manages to convey a blankness of possibilities, a stunting of affect, that is not necessarily linked to the plight of immigration but to the loss of inner life—of characters who cannot bring themselves to shed the mask of detachment and risk further pain. The pain itself is often trivialized in these stories, as if the characters had mistaken frivolous emotion for the deepest-held passion, like the lovelorn dope smoker in "Boyfriend," who idles his time wallowing in his pain and eavesdropping on the beautiful and heartbroken neighbor downstairs but cannot reach out to her in companionship or sympathy. Like the narrators of "How to Date a Brown girl, Black girl, White girl, or Halfie" and "Edison, New Jersey," the narrator of "Boyfriend" cannot "grow" in the story, cannot move beyond his stasis, because he is trapped in the slang of "coolness," devoid of the emotional and linguistic range through which to produce and convey emotion. Caught in their protective psychological masks, they remain imprisoned, "drowned." Even Díaz's most consistent attempt at portraying love and connection, "Aurora," the story of a small-town drug dealer whose passion for an elusive young addict deteriorates into violence, works only partially. It is marred by repetitive imagery and somewhat stultifying crudeness.

When the elements that inform Díaz's style—the bleak transparency of language, the delicate handling of detail, the stinging acuteness of a seemingly unimportant detail, the quiet pathos of lives reduced to bleak everydayness, the hint of anger, the intimation of complexity of emotion—come together almost seamlessly, as they do in "Edison, New Jersey," "Drown," "Negocios," and "Fiesta, 1980," the collection justifies the unprecedented hoopla that accompanied its publication. In Díaz, the Latino literary world has a burgeoning talent.

TEACHING THE WORK

1. In a number of interviews following his discovery as a writer, Díaz has claimed his public persona as that of a cool, down-home sort of guy whose themes and language span social classes and linguistic registers, a New York–New Jersey based Latino voice whose work is nurtured by a close connection to the working-class people to whom he belongs. In "Making It Work: More Orchard Beach Than Elaine's," an interview with Somini Sengupta of the *New York Times*, Díaz speaks of his "living on pennies, say, checking out a free jam session at Orchard Beach, being broke like his friends, as a "nourishing" existence which he has brought into his stories.¹⁴ Direct students to identify specific examples of the use of language in the works that reflect this attitude. Discuss their significance.

2. Another important consideration in any discussion of *Drown* is that of genre. Although the texts collected in *Drown* belong to the genre of the short story, they do not fit traditional definitions of that genre. Close readings of these stories in the light of genre theory can yield interesting insights into the changing nature of literary genres. Analyze the texts in *Drown* as examples of current American conceptions of the short story and examine how Díaz's works link and differ from the writing traditions of the Dominican Republic and American ethnic literature. Good working definitions of the genre can be found in the many available dictionaries of literary terms and literary analysis guides.

3. Examine the many links between the stories narrated by the same character (Yunior) and their significance: the father-son/mother-son relationships and how they are used in the various texts to articulate the narrator's ambivalence about migration and cultural loss. Discuss the various dualities or pairings (Yunior/Rafa, Yunior/Israel, Yunior/Beto) through which Díaz seeks to give shape to various possibilities open to the narrator or to project emotional and psychological aspects of the narrator's dilemma: the intergenerational conflicts that Díaz uses to illustrate the difference between his narrator's response to migration and his parents.

4. Trace the impact of this intergenerational separation by exploring

the links between language and alienation in the stories. This exploration can follow two distinct paths: the loss of Spanish, thematically as well as technically, and Díaz's minimalist style. Both of these accentuate his character's deeply set alienation and hopelessness. Relate the text's numerous allusions to notions of manhood and sexuality to gender and sexual identities as defined by ethnicity.

NOTES

1. Barbara Stewart, "In Person: Outsider with a Voice." *New York Times* (8 December 1996): 13NJ.
2. Roberto Santiago, review of *Drown*, by Junot Díaz, *American Visions* 11, no. 5 (October-November 1996): 28.
3. Adam Mazmanian, "Best American Short Stories." Review. *Library Journal* 121 (1 October 1996): 129. See also "New Faces of 1996." *Newsweek* (15 January 1996): 63.
4. Somini Sengupta, "Making It Work: More Orchard Beach Than Elaine's." *New York Times*, 15 September 1996, 13:3.
5. Stewart, 13NJ.
6. Sengupta, "Making It Work," 13:3.
7. James Wood, review of *Drown*, by Junot Díaz, *New Republic*, 16 December 1996, 39.
8. Subsequent printings of *Drown* have corrected some of these spelling and grammar problems, but their appearance and, in some cases, reappearance in the corrected version points to a loss of connection to their original place and meaning.
9. Wood, review, 39.
10. David Stanton, "Junot Díaz: On Home Ground." *Poets & Writers* 26, no. 4 (1998): 26-37.
11. Sengupta, "Making It Work," 13:3.
12. Wood, review, 39.
13. Junot Díaz, *Drown* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996). All subsequent references will be to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.
14. Sengupta, "Making It Work," 13:3. Díaz has spoken repeatedly in interviews of the burden placed on him by his newly found fame. Speaking to David Stanton, in an interview for *Poets & Writers*, he bemoaned the trials of instant celebrity as having the negative effects of distancing him from the urban streets that inspired his stories.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Interviews and Criticism

Given the short time that has elapsed since the publication of *Drown*, little background information is available on the work and its author. Most of the available material comes from interviews given by Díaz in connection to the publication and publicizing of the book. Alexandria Lange's "Speaking Latin"

can be found in *New York* magazine (29:36, 16 September 1996: 40). Somini Sengupta's "Making It Work: More Orchard Beach Than Elaine's" appeared in the *New York Times* (15 September 1996, 13:3). Barbara Stewart's "In Person: Outsider with a Voice" was published in the *New York Times* (8 December 1996: 13NJ).

In 1996 Díaz sat for a radio interview with fellow author Mark Winegardner, host of "Authors, a Radio Talk Show," in which the two young writers discussed their own work and that of the writers who served as their models (Grace Paley, Raymond Carver, Toni Morrison, and Pearl S. Buck). The interview is available as a recording under the title of "Junot Díaz with Mark Winegardner" (Macon, Georgia: Hyena Productions, 1996).

Two of Díaz's short stories have appeared in prestigious collections: "Ysrael" (*Best American Short Stories*, ed. John Edgar Wideman and Katrina Kenison, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996) and "Fiesta, 1980" (*Best American Short Stories*, ed. Annie Proulx and Katrina Kenison, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). "How to Date a Brown Girl" is available in a compact disc recording, read by the author (see *The New Yorker Out Loud*. Vol. 2. New York: Mouth Almighty Records, 1998).

Since the publication of *Drown*, and as he continues to work on his forthcoming novel, Díaz has published pieces in several magazines, in particular "Otra Vida, Otra Vez" and "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," both of which appeared in the *New Yorker* (28 June 1999 and 2 February 1998, respectively). In addition, *Drown* has been translated into several languages. The *New York Times* listed the book in the "Bear in Mind" section of their "Best Sellers List" for October 13, 1996, and in their "Notable Books of 1996."

Other Sources

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