

**JUNOT DÍAZ'S "DROWN" : A SUBVERTED TELEMACHEIA FOR THE LATE
20TH CENTURY DIASPORIC MASCULINITY**

JORGE MARIO ALARCÓN RODRÍGUEZ

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Directed by: TIMOTHY ANDERSON KEPPEL

**UNIVERSIDAD DEL VALLE
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Introduction

Just as *Hamlet* reminds readers of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, as both are the tales of monarchical sons avenging their fathers, Yunior's development in *Drown* can be read like a twentieth century "Telemacheia" as both coming-of-age stories of sons who have their development stunted while they await for their fathers to come from a long journey. The latter was stated by the author himself in a 2013 interview for the *New Yorker* where he said that his "first book was intentionally organized around a reverse *Odyssey*...getting the story from Telemachus, the son."¹

In addition, when asked about his writing and what makes it so relatable, Diaz answered that "part of what makes anything universal is its utter specificity."² Therefore, it is not difficult to conclude that, although full of unique experiences, Yunior's journey towards maturity feels timeless regardless of his ethnic, linguistic and cultural background. This essay will explain how the narrative structure and scenarios of the first and final chapters of the *Odyssey*, or the Telemacheia, are a model for Diaz's first work in ways less obvious than just the absence of a father in the household (albeit important) and his journey. The thematic

¹ The New Yorker (2013, November the 7th) Junot Diaz and Karen Russell on writing short stories - The New Yorker Festival. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqb7bcSZcDo&t=270s>

² Idem.

emphasis of this monograph is not, however, on narrative techniques but on how the same journey towards male maturity leads very similar characters to two different destinations as the reflections of two very different contexts: one character is led to glory and recognition as rewards for his adherence to the male-performances expected from him and the other to trauma and stagnation as punishments for his questioning of his own environment and the expectations placed on him.

This essay will be divided into three chapters. The first will present an overview of the two characters as they are presented in each work, along with a thorough description of what the concept of male maturity is in the different contexts: Homeric society according to the *Odyssey* and Dominican-American society according to *Drown*. The second chapter will explain the scenarios, rites of passage, and narrative elements both characters share in their journeys and through which they will try to develop a sense of masculinity fitting for each of their environments. The third chapter will show how the same scenarios do not lead to the same destinations since the unique circumstances both characters face are very different from each other. Each will go through their rites of passage imposed by society or their surrounding contexts and circumstances in different ways and it will be clear that one is favored and the other neglected, finally giving form to the men they will be. To conclude, a synthesis regarding how one work complements the other will be presented with all the elements of the analysis which will inform the subversions of the classic role of the young epic hero chosen by Díaz for his own narrative intentions.

Life and Work of the Author: Junot Díaz and the “Category Anxiety”

Díaz was born in 1968 in Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic. His father; whom he describes in a 2009 interview for an article on The Independent³ as a “fascist that supported Trujillo (dictator of the island at the time)” and “a trigamist who supported three families at the same time”, leaving him and his household in a condition in which they were “never not poor”; left to work in the U.S. shortly afterwards and the family was eventually reunited in New Jersey when Díaz, his mother and four siblings, emigrated in 1974. On that experience, Díaz comments that “Migration was hard for [him] and felt [he] had lost so many worlds”, as he expressed in the aforementioned piece.

Growing up, he traveled through many worlds, like the Spanish speaking one he inhabited at home, the black/Puerto Rican one of broken/streetwise English he experienced outside in his neighborhood, the Anglo-saxon oriented one he was educated in at school, and finally, as a young adult, the academic one he first experienced at Rutgers, studying English while supporting himself as a waiter, and later finishing his MFA in Cornell in 1995. In 1996 he

³ The Independent. Jaggi, Maya. In the digital issue of February 29th, 2009. *Junot Díaz: a truly all-American Writer*. Retrieved from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/junot-diaz-a-truly-all-american-writer-789382.html>

published “Drown”, a short story collection, and subject of this monograph, which debuted as a work worthy of prizes and both critical and commercial success. Díaz describes his first book as an attempt to recapture those lost worlds during his childhood: Dominican Republic, New Jersey, the barrio and the ghetto. His work drew a lot of attention due to his skilful way of sliding Spanish or “Spanglish” words into the dialogues. The latter made critics label him as a Latino, but he disagrees with the umbrella term. This author describes himself as an “African diasporic, migrant, Dominican, Jersey boy”, claiming also that an “American” writer should encompass a whole hemisphere. This idea is supported by his style, in which “opaqueness is the point; confusion is part of the game”, part of the “category anxiety” he described in a 2012 interview for The Guardian⁴.

The aforementioned category anxiety goes beyond diaspora and location, it moves across culture and identity. In 2008, Díaz published “The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao”, a novel describing a fat and very “unDominican” young man in college that is cursed by “fukú” and threatens the sexual identity common to men of the island by being infatuated with science fiction and an idea of relationships based on love and not abuse and borderline rape, as it is accustomed. This unDominican man’s trial and tribulations are narrated by Yunior, the main character in Díaz’s earlier work. This novel won him the Pulitzer prize and deeper insight into identity issues. The author explains that the curse or “Fuku Americanus” in Oscar Wao is a “time tested technique for connecting individual fates with the larger fate of nations and races.” Such technique is also used in “Drown” as the stories are connected and follow the Homeric structure of predetermined outcomes of the Odyssey, point that will be later developed in this essay. Díaz states that the Americas bear a fate and that such fate is yet to be determined as glorious or tragic, and that his inspiration to address such issue in

⁴ The Guardian. Wroe, Nicholas. In the digital issue of August the 31st, 2012. *Junot Díaz: a life in books*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/31/life-in-books-junot-diaz>

such manner comes from authors like Toni Morrison, Faulkner and Edwidge Danticat (Haitian-American author dealing with similar themes in her works).

Among the authors that Díaz values the most are Toni Morrison, whom he had the honor to interview once and praises for her approach to the diasporic feeling Black Americans feel in their own motherland due to racism and her unique descriptions of womanhood; and Edwidge Danticat, writer from his same island, though not same country, who inspired him and he honored by reading some of her short stories for the New Yorker podcast. From them, Díaz took lessons on prose and how to address feeling displaced in your own house with extreme and vivid realism. However, Díaz is also inspired by other forms of media other than books: Comic books. Díaz describes the social phenomena closer to him like the dictatorship in his island, or migration, or the very undiscussed three hundred years of slavery and genocide on the Caribbean as “historical extremes in the Americas that are difficult for the mind to grasp”, said the author in the forementioned interview for the Independent, they are treated as “studied silences”, he adds. However, “in the genres, in comic books, it's all expressed. It doesn't get discussed on a rational, coherent level but in the underworld of our imagination.” Díaz seems to have used the inspiration John updiike mentioned as an advice to young writers which is to: “read what excites you, even if you don't imitate it you will learn from it. All those mystery novels I read, I think, did give me a lesson about keeping a plot moving, trying to move forward, make the reader feel a kind of tension is being achieved, a string is being pulled.” Although the author does not write science fiction and left the fantasy as a liking of his characters, Díaz took this type of fiction as symbolic energy, that of making extremes believable. Most writers take everyday life and make it oniric and fantastic in their prose, Díaz took trauma and horror and made it quotidian. Such nuance makes Yunion a complex character.

Yunior, character present in all of the short stories, with a couple of exceptions (like “Aurora”), is his alter ego. Using himself as primary source material has always leaned critics to think there is autobiographical content in his works. In addition, Díaz says he “furnish[es] Yunior with a lot of [his] own stuff.” Yunior embodies the intersection of language, race, immigration and class. But he is still a work of fiction. “I do not go to Yunior’s extremes of cruelty nor do I have his Byronesque sensibilities”, says the author. Some parallels do exist, like the portrait of the father and the disappearance of his brother in the short story “Drown”, which he later explains is due to cancer. In his last work of fiction and short story collection “This is How You Lose Her”, the brother dies of cancer, which did not happen in real life. Díaz seems to think of the most poignant outcomes for his stories and thought that an “early master class in mortality”, as he puts it, for Yunior was deeper than his brother surviving the cancer as it happened in real life.

His last short story collection, published in 2012 and also commercially successful, is about “the rise and fall of a cheater”, says that author, and features an adult Yunior. About his works, he expresses that they come from a fascination with the masks and performances of manhood that are imposed on children within the communities he lived in. “I modelled Yunior’s struggle on my earlier self in that it wasn’t until my late twenties that I began to realize ‘this shit doesn’t work’”, says Díaz, and adds, “I always pictured this image of Yunior having this terrible metal mask that he is trying to tear off his face, all the while not sure whether he still has a face underneath it.” The fascist father he suffered during infancy becomes the character Yunior plays in adulthood, like the son following the footsteps of an infamous father.

So Dominican, African, American, Spanish speaking, English speaking, fascist, left-wing, streetwise, nerd, comicbook lover academic, macho, cheater, romantic, cursed, free,

father-like, unlike his father, doubtful. All of those categories and much more that plague his works enrich Díaz writing and are fueled by his own life experiences and observations. It is this “category anxiety” that made his books so universal even coming from such unique spaces and being written in such a particular language.

Up to this day, Díaz is a Professor of Creative Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, fiction editor of the Boston Review and was the Co-founder of “Voices of Our Nation Workshop” for aspiring writers of minority cultures in U.S.

Theoretical Framework: The Close Reading and The Sociological Critique

Approaching Díaz can be done in as many ways as the number of cultures and voices that are intertwined in his works. Nonetheless, most of the studies on this author start by an interpretation or assumption which then is justified by the context of Díaz's work and/or Díaz's life. On the comments he receives about the biographical nature of his work, he comments that "when fiction is done at a certain level there is scepticism as to whether it is really fictions."⁵ Nonetheless, he states that his work is still art and all of his works have a symbolic nature that is represented by its internal game of semantics or how things make sense within the text. So as valid as those studies are, in this work, the starting method chosen was a close reading. Close reading, which was widely spread within the school of New Criticism, insists on working out the internal semantics of a piece of literature, instead of preconceived ideas biased by biographical notions or time/space relations (context). "A text can thereby act as its own context, developing internal norms apart from the rules or conventions of everyday usage", states David Schur(1998).

This type of study focuses on the creative particularities of the work, such as key words and images evoked, rhetorical figures, tone of the story and possible switches of it, attitude, phrasing, connections/relations between elements, scenes, arrangement, order, patterns or lack of them, deviation, uniformity, repetition, variation, contrast, oppositions, emphasis,

⁵ The Guardian. Wroe, Nicholas. In the digital issue of August the 31st, 2012. *Junot Díaz: a life in books*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/31/life-in-books-junot-diaz>

playfulness, contradiction, condensation, compression , expansion, digression, coherence or intentional lack of it. Schur (1998)⁶ comments that the processes of close readings “usually boil down to something like, "a careful look reveals X," where X is a surprising or unexpected thesis.” Such attention to detail, having the general body of work as a point of reference, will reveal a thematic focus. Schur describes the body of a tightly organized essay as “a chain of interlinked claims supported by specific textual evidence.” Moreover, he suggest a way to proceed, which is: “claim > quotation > description > conclusion > transition > claim > quotation > description > conclusion..., and so on”, until the thematic focus has been revealed and argued for with specific information.

Following this method, “Drown’s” particularities, i.e.: nuances in tones, narrative oxymorons often used like traumatic events followed by silences or nonchalant attitudes instead of confrontation, word choice and phrasing, intentional interjection of Spanish, choice of register, time lapses within a same story, obvious omissions of information, foil characters stuck together or drawn to each other without the option of tolerance or peace, vivid imagery and metaphors sustained throughout the stories, and many more details were first singled out to get a sense of Díaz’s particular style and how said style addresses a structure and how said structure reveals a thematic focus.

Close reading provided a structure that leaned towards the themes of diaspora, abandonment, a legacy of power over women encouraged to be emulated before reaching maturity and the reconstruction or recreation of a male role model. However, it was Díaz’s forementioned interview in 2013 what provided a narrative thread that stretches across all of them and brings coherence: The Telemacheia. “Drown”, commented the author “was intentionally organized around a reverse *Odyssey*...getting the story from Telemachus, the son.” With that being said,

⁶ Schur, 1998. An Introduction to Close Reading. Harvard University. Retrieved from : http://chs119.chs.harvard.edu/EdRes/archive/fall2010_fas_dce/texts_fall10/SchurCloseReading99.pdf

the second stage of the study addressed both similarities and transgressions of the first and last chapters of the *Odyssey* which describe the absence of Ulysses in Telemachus' life and later the return of the father to the life of his son.

In this sense, the first chapter compares both stories and how both characters share the same motifs and seek them, or are encouraged to seek them in this case, in the same manner. This part of the analysis is structure oriented, drawing parallels between characters and moments, a general picture. The second chapter relies more on how Díaz used his personal experiences, observations and style to nuance his own stories to the point of blurring out the similarities between them and address how the construction of a masculine persona for a diasporic boy in the late 20th century would be far away from the Homeric glory that serves as its architecture. Having highlighted those elements, an interpretation that links them together renders itself easy to reach. The frameworks of social philosophers such as Pierre Bourdieu, who in the 20th century spoke of Male Domination as a linguistic mechanism that prevents women from aiming at the same privileges men enjoy and in turn preserve men's role as a master of society; Donna Haraway who addressed the late 20th century as a time of "cyborgs" or chimeric categories that should help both men and women be freed of their pre-established roles both in the economic, political and sexual spheres; and Judith Butler who commented on the role of Otherness in any quest for social identity; are ones that based its aims on the usage of language as building blocks of the status quo. For that reason, this study took them into account to better place the particularities in Yuniors' speech into those attempts of subversion to the role that the island, the streets of New Jersey and the Barrio tried to impose on him. Furthermore, more literary based studies such as Smith's analysis of Telemachus' maturation and Felix and Guattari's essay on "Minor Literature" and several other

monographs on Díaz that point out the historical background which Díaz used as stage for his stories were taken into account.

Therefore, based on New Criticism as method of analysis and dissection of the text; along with Social Criticism and Gender-based Criticism for interpretations, this study followed the structure: quotation > description > claim > conclusion > quotation... The quotation or work in itself was the start; then the chosen passages were analyzed linguistically, stylistically and compared to the the Telemacheia; later a claim was made about the reason for the subversion of the original structure and episodes, meaning conveyed and achieved effect on the reader; finally a conclusion was given taking all the previous elements into account. This process was carried out with each passage and each relevant story until overall coherence and a sense of unison, based on the work itself, was found and revealed.

Chapter 1

Telemachus: Overview and Presentation of Homeric Male Maturity

The *Odyssey*, the story of Odysseus, does not start with its main character, but with his son, which can seem puzzling at first. The first four chapters focus on his heir, Telemachus, the living memory of a father he does not know; he is often told he is just as handsome and physically strong as his father. Telemachus is considered a unique character in the epic for being the only character we “witness mature from an unmotivated, helpless daydreamer into a young man who has spoken in assembly, traveled to foreign courts, and battled the suitors and their kin”⁷, while he is already in his early twenties. The rest of the characters have an already established reputation and have acquired necessary merits to have a royal position or a name in the history books, especially his father. Telemachus endures a difficult situation being pressured to follow in the footsteps of a father who left him when he was very young.

The pressure starts with the name itself. “The name Telemachus follows the patterns typical of many Homeric names. The name means he who fights from afar.”⁸ The latter is the skill of his father, Odysseus, who wins the contest and ownership of his household once more with his bow and arrow. The skill itself becomes an expectation for him to fulfill, or how Smith (2010,13), puts it: “Giving children names that reflect desired qualities and characteristics valued in fathers with established reputations places great pressure on them to succeed.”⁹ Therefore, “Telemachus” is a classical way of saying “Junior”, namely Odysseus’.

⁷ Smith, 2010. No longer “Vipios”: The Maturation of Telemachos in Homer’s *Odyssey-Master’s Thesis*. Tufts University. 5

⁸ Idem. 12

⁹ Smith, 2010. The Maturation of Telemachos in Homer’s *Odyssey-Master’s Thesis*. Tufts University. 13

By the time Telemachus reaches adulthood, he is not only expected to be a worthy son of Odysseus, but to be like Odysseus himself, skills and feats included.

Another trait that makes Telemachus a special character is the fact that he feels compelled to admit he is still immature. When he finds himself unable to make the suitors and guests treat the disguised Odysseus with proper respect, he says that “before [that moment he] was still *Vipios*.” ‘*Vipios*’, by context can be defined as “immature”, “unprepared” or “young.” “In addition to the meaning “young” (as opposed to “adult”), some scholars have made the argument that *λήπηνο* more specifically refers to an infant” (Smith 2010,14)¹⁰. He achieves his adulthood in the climax of the story, after Athena herself leads him to meet foreign courts to find out who his father is and be encouraged to mimic his character and courage, to be a man like him.

Being a man in Homeric times is briefly stated in two phrases by which a man should behave: Being a “speaker of words and a doer of deeds.”¹¹ One of two actions are the minimum required to be considered a man in Homeric society: Public speaking (speaker of words) and glory in battle through honorable death or victory (doer of deeds). When the Odyssey starts, there is not a clear enemy Telemachus can contest, so the only option left is to take his father’s place in the congress and speak to the elders of Ithaka about the rudeness of the suitors. He does address this issue publicly, before starting his journey to learn about his father through the word of others, but the point of being a “speaker of words” is to stir emotions or provoke an action; since nothing happens, his action is invalid and he is considered a child until the end of the story, after the return of his father. Briefly, Telemachus is pressured and fears not being the man he is expected to be in the society in which he lives.

¹⁰ Idem, 14

¹¹ Idem, 21

Ramon “Yunior” de las Casas: Overview and Presentation of Dominican-American Male Maturity

Yunior, like Telemachus, is an “infant”. Nevertheless, calling him an infant is not just a derogatory term to signify lack of maturity – as in the case of Telemachus’ – since he is only nine in the first story, “Ysrael”. However, more obvious than for Telemachus, “Yunior” is strongly expected to follow Ramon Senior’s footsteps. He is the second son in a poor and many times broken family and it is often pointed out how much of a disappointment or how far from being like his father he is. Physically, he has traits that could be mocked; his brother would insult him about “[his] complexion, [his] hair, the size of [his] lips”. “It’s the Haitian”, is the way his older brother, “Rafa” introduces him to his friends. “Mami found you on the border and only brought you in because she felt sorry for you”, he would say to belittle him. In contrast, Rafa is “handsome and spoke out of the corner of his mouth”¹², which is the impression Yunior has of his brother, a very positive one linked to a sort of role model while his father is in the United States.

Yunior is described in the book as a sort of dispassionate narrator of his own misfortunes. The narrations are perceived as ones with a “succinct, almost minimalist, style that is purged of any tendency to rhetorical flights of fancy”¹³, as Paravisini-Gebert(2000,166) puts it. Yunior tells, with a sort of detachment, how he is perceived by others; for example, he does not comment much on how he feels after being asked if “[he is] always going to be a pussy”¹⁴

¹² Díaz, 1996. *Drown*. Riverhead Books. New York 5-6

¹³ Paravisini-Gebert, 2000. Revisiting ‘Those Mean Streets’: Junot Díaz’s *Drown*. In *U.S. Latino Literatures: A Critical Guide for Students and Teachers*. 166

¹⁴ Díaz, 1996. *Drown*. 14

by his own brother when he starts crying, nor tells his brother the reason he was crying was because he was being molested on the bus moments earlier, as illustrated in “Ysrael”.

Although much younger than Telemachus, Yuniór is also pressured to become a man, or reach maturity as fast as it is possible. Still a child, and already in the U.S., Yuniór is offered a drink by one of his uncles; his mother intervenes, saying he is too young to drink, but the uncle replies that “back in Santo Domingo he would be getting laid by now.”¹⁵ Yuniór, in the eyes of the other Dominican men, seems behind in the race of sexuality. His brother, on the other hand, displays an “overt, boastful sexuality”, which Riofrío (2008, 27) characterizes as a “tangible cure for the humiliation of poverty and his only means of establishing the virility he craves both personally, for himself, and externally in the desire for his absent father.”¹⁶ Rafa is becoming the man he thinks his father is while Ramón is away from the island, and then reinforces this ideal when his father is back and almost openly cheats on his mom. The Homeric “doer of deeds” is depicted as a womanizer and the “speaker of words” as a bragger in this context; which Rafa illustrates when he says: “When I get home, I’m going to chinga all my girls and then chinga everyone else’s”¹⁷ while he is only twelve.

Meanwhile Yuniór, throughout the entire book, does not overpower anybody; rather, he is the one abused. Yuniór’s bigger obstacle to becoming a man in the sense Dominican-American culture demands is his empathy, a sensitivity and vulnerability that represents his biggest fear. Though not reaching the status of “man” is bad enough, Dominican-American culture presents one that is worse: going through puberty, Yuniór

¹⁵ Díaz, 1996. *Drown*. 31

¹⁶ Riofrío, 2008. SITUATING LATIN AMERICAN MASCULINITY: IMMIGRATION, EMPATHY AND EMASCULATION IN JUNOT DÍAZ’S *DROWN*. In *ATENEA* Vol. XXVIII Num. 1 • junio 2008. 27.

¹⁷ Díaz, 1996. *Drown*. 4

admits he is “terrified [he] would end up abnormal, a fucking pato.”¹⁸ In other words, a homosexual.

Unlike his father physically, unlike his brother psychologically, sexually inexperienced, troubled and mostly silent, that is Yunion de las Casas. For most of the story, he resembles neither the “doer” nor the “speaker”. He is often the silent observer of those around him, like Telemachus while the suitors stayed in his palace, a child who needs affection but seldom admits it since that is viewed as unmanly, a boy looking for a father : “I was always in trouble with my dad...[but] I still wanted him to love me,”¹⁹ he is able to say, even after his father tries to prevent him from vomiting in the car during a trip by twisting his ear until he was on the floor in pain; as narrated in “Fiesta, 1980”.

¹⁸ Díaz, 1996. Drown. 104

¹⁹ Díaz, 1996. Drown. 26-27

Chapter 2

The Shared Journey Towards Male Maturity

The characters share more than just the dismissal by their peers and the questioning of their manhood. They share similar rites of passage and the reasons that lead them there. Since *The Odyssey* is the older work, it is natural to use it as the guideline in this comparison. There are five major elements that are shared as growing experiences for both characters:

The first is the starting point and absence of a father. “Telemachus lacks confidence and motivation when the Odyssey begins. He is a daydreamer who envisions his father coming home and solving the problem of the suitors for him,” Smith(2010, 25) points out.²⁰ Due to the Trojan War, Telemachus is left without a father to teach him what actions to follow or how to behave in society. In the same manner, the longing for his father is also present in the first chronological story in Yuniór’s life, which is “Aguantando”. Koy(2012, 79) also supports the idea that Yuniór’s “impoverished youth, without the presence of a father or a loving mother, appears as a direct consequence of the April, 1965, American invasion of the Dominican Republic”²¹. This is a statement Riofrío(2008, 26) agrees with when he says that the “poverty which plagues the island has created a situation in which survival depends upon fathers leaving the island to try and carve out a better life for themselves and their families.”²² His absent father and his poverty are the first two things Yuniór describes when he

²⁰ The Maturation of Telemachos in Homer’s *Odyssey*-Master’s Thesis. Tufts University. 25

²¹ Koy, 2012. Junot Díaz’s “Aurora” and “Aguantando” as Minor Literature. In *Ostrava Journal of English Philology*. 4:2. 2012 71-81. 79

²² Riofrío, 2008. SITUATING LATIN AMERICAN MASCULINITY: IMMIGRATION, EMPATHY AND EMASCULATION IN JUNOT DÍAZ’S DROWN. In *ATENEA* Vol. XXVIII Num. 1 • junio 2008. 26.

characterizes his life at the beginning of “Aguantando” and which has in common with Telemachus:

“I lived without a father for the first nine years of my life. He was in the States, working, and the only way I knew him was through the photographs my moms kept in a plastic sandwich bag under her bed. Since our zinc roof leaked, almost everything we owned was water stained...”²³

Although Telemachus’ “poverty” is more educational and emotional, both characters have the same starting point: Being in a place that once was his father’s without him, because of a war, and being too young and unprepared to face that situation. Moreover, both characters wait for their fathers and fantasize about their return and how that will make things better. Telemachus does so when he considers himself unable to confront the suitors and daydreams in a soliloquy where he says that “if only they were to see him coming back to Ithaka, they would all pray to be lighter of foot.”²⁴ Yuniior also dreams about his long gone father by the end of “Aguantando,” thinking he will be received like some kind of hero and “the whole barrio would come out to greet him.”²⁵

The second shared element is the substitute father figure who serves as a tutor. Regardless of how much Telemachus physically resembles his father, he will not mature unless he is pushed by another that could make his process go faster. Smith (2010, 25), quoting Belmont (1969), calls this agent a “catalyst.”²⁶ The catalyst agent for Telemachus is no one less than the goddess Athena, who tasks herself with making of the orphan Telemachus a man as great as his father by stirring courage in him, motivating him to speak publicly and travel to foreign

²³ Diaz (1996). Drown, 69.

²⁴ Smith, 2010. The Maturation of Telemachos in Homer’s *Odyssey*-Master’s Thesis. Tufts University. 18.

²⁵ Diaz (1996). Drown, 87.

²⁶ Belmont (1969) —Athena and Telemachus. The Classical Journal. vol. 65. no. 3. (December 1969). pp. 109-116. In Smith (2010). No longer “Vipios”: The Maturation of Telemachos in Homer’s *Odyssey*. 25

courts to hear news about his father and his reputation. She announces this to Zeus in the following manner:

“I, however, shall go to Ithaka, so that I may rouse his son and so that I may place courage in his heart so that he can seek news of his dear father, if he could hear something, and so that he can have a good reputation among men (Od. Episode 1. lines 88-95).

Clearly, it is Athena who proposes a certain “deed” and a certain “word” so that young Telemachus can become a man while he waits for his father to return home. All this while she is disguised like a wise mature man who seems willing to guide him. To further inspire the young hero, Athena presents a similar example, Orestes. Orestes also lost his father and closest role model while he was very young. Nevertheless, he was brave enough to avenge his father. So she not only encourages him but shows him that it has been done before.

In Yunior’s case, while waiting for his father to return from the U.S., his closest role model and guide is Rafa, who has already been described as a hyperbole of sexuality and masculinity, even when he is only twelve. While sent away to the countryside during the summer by his hard-working-and progressively distant mother, Yunior feels closer to his older brother, who is usually rather neglecting, insulting and abusive:

“Rafa and I fought so much that our neighbors took to smashing broomsticks over our heads to break it up,” explains Yunior after a detailed description of how marginalized he felt around his brother when they were in public. However, in the solitude of the countryside, having no other peers around him, Rafa seems friendlier. “But in the campo it wasn’t like that. In the campo we were friends.”²⁷

At first, Rafa seems unwilling to guide or even be with his younger brother. It is actually Yunior who seeks guidance and company, admitting he “always followed Rafa, trying to

²⁷ Díaz (1996). Drown. 5.

convince him to let [him] tag along.”²⁸ But Rafa would refuse, as his pursuit of sexual conquests seemed to leave no place for his little brother and Yuniór would be left behind. However, Rafa would come back only to tell him what he had done and Yuniór would “hear about tetas and chochas and leche and he’d talk without looking over at [him].”²⁹ Yuniór would take this act of bragging as a sort of lecture, acknowledging that he “was too young to understand most of what he said, but [he] listened to him anyway, in case these things might be useful in the future.”³⁰ The quest that Rafa decides is fitting for Yuniór and a positive rite of passage for him is described in the story “Ysraél”, which involves the search for the uncovered face of a boy stranger and taller than both of them.

Paravisini-Gebert (2000, 168) praises this story as “one of the most successful tales in the collection,” because it “works around two sets of failed connections: Yuniór and Rafa/Yuniór and Ysraél,” as well as “two failed quests: Rafa’s search for sexual fulfillment and the search for the meaning behind Ysraél’s horrible mutilation.”³¹ Just like Athena, Rafa proposes for the young character a journey: “We should pay that kid a visit,”³² he says. Yuniór is excited to be invited, to be allowed to go somewhere with his brother, knowing little about his brother’s intention.

Regardless of differences, which will be pointed out later, the second element in the Telemacheia is shared: a guide who will propose – or impose – a quest as a means for the young characters to prove themselves.

²⁸ Idem. 6.

²⁹ Díaz (1996). Drown. 6.

³⁰ Idem. 6.

³¹ Paravisini-Gebert, 2000. Revisiting ‘Those Mean Streets’: Junot Díaz’s Drown. In U.S. Latino Literatures: A Critical Guide for Students and Teachers. 168

³² Díaz (1996). Drown. 3.

The third element is a public space where the characters are called on to denounce what they feel wrong in their lives in order to show their maturity. Prodded by Athena, Telemachus has the confidence to call for an assembly to demonstrate his rhetoric skills and speak out about what troubles him: the intruders in his house abusing his hospitality and attempting to take his father's place while his mother is a passive agent in this entire ordeal. Yunior has less trouble with the suitors interested in his mother, although the men that Yunior's mother knew and walked her home from work "were young and some of them were unmarried" and "were drawn to her"; she would "bar the door with her arm while she said good-bye, just to show them nobody was getting in."³³ However, Yunior faces a different situation he would need to address regarding his familial life: the "Puerto Rican woman [his father] was seeing."³⁴

Like Odysseus' Calypso, this woman is presented as the agent which might break the family. While Telemachus is urged by Athena to address the issue of the suitors publicly, Yunior, in the story "Fiesta, 1980," is also invited to recount what is happening to his family, to share the secret of the mistress he knows so well. But the point in common for these characters is that they both fail. Telemachos delivers a convincing speech combined with the tears provoked by the emotion of the moment, yet "although Telemachos' tears do not render his speech entirely ineffective, he fails to rally the people against the suitors" (Smith 2010, 33).³⁵ Yunior fails by his own silence.

Yunior is taken to a family party proposed by his father, in the same manner of an assembly, to celebrate the arrival of a new family member to the U.S., aunt "Yrma". After being humiliated in public and prevented from eating by his father because of the nausea he

³³ Díaz(1996). Drown. 73.

³⁴ Idem. 23.

³⁵ Smith (2010).The Maturation of Telemachos in Homer's *Odyssey*-Master's Thesis. Tufts University. 33.

feels during each car ride, his recently arrived aunt pities him and takes him outside to hand him some “pastelitos.”

She casually starts smoking while he eats but suddenly asks him, “How it is at home Yuniór?” When Yuniór hesitates, she continues. “How’s it going in the apartment? Are you kids OK?” Yuniór affirms he “knew an interrogation when [he] heard one, no matter how sugar coated it was.”³⁶ So it is clear Yuniór understands the opportunity to denounce whatever he feels wrong about his household but he refuses it, explaining:

“I didn’t say anything. Don’t get me wrong, I loved my tía, but something told me to keep my mouth shut. Maybe it was family loyalty, maybe I just wanted to protect Mami or I was afraid that Papi would find out – it could have been anything really.”³⁷

It is clear that either a protective feeling towards his mother, similar to that of Telemachus when one of the suitors claims their behavior is encouraged by Penelope and the young hero says, “Antinoos, I cannot drive my unwilling mother from our home, who bore me and raised me” (Od. 2.130-1), or a sense of loyalty or sheer fear prevents him from discussing his situation. But as in the *Odyssey*, failure becomes a positive force as the young heroes must confront their situations with an action, a journey: Telemachus to Nestor’s and Menelao’s and Yuniór to the home of Nilda, who would become his father’s second wife, to confront the past and the uncertainty about the father.

The fourth situation both characters go through is the acquaintance of another young, and more relatable, role model. Once Telemachus fails to stir the audience against his suitors, he travels to Pylos to hear about his father from Nestor. Nestor traveled with his father to Troy and knew him well. In the *Odyssey*, this trip is proposed by Athena so the young hero has the experience of travelling abroad and learning how to behave and speak in front of a foreign

³⁶ Diaz(1996). Drown. 39.

³⁷ Idem. 39.

court. During this trip he meets another young hero, Peisistratos, his host's son. "Unlike Telemachos, Peisistratos has Nestor, an expert on manners in Homeric society, to guide him on his path to adulthood. For this reason, his maturity level and worldliness are well beyond Telemachus's."³⁸ This young hero is told by his father to accompany Telemachus on his journey to Menelaus's house. And when Peisistratos is guiding Telemachus, Athena feels she no longer needs to hold his hand in this rite of passage. Peisistratos is described being Telemachus's age and still unmarried, a perfect peer who shows himself wiser and better prepared to face the world. This man is characterized by his ability to speak well in public, much to like his father. Even Menelaus praises him during the first dinner by saying, "Dear friend, since you have said as much as a thoughtful man could say and do, even one who is your elder; for you speak thoughtfully—the sort of things your father would say (Od.4.204-6)." During this episode of the *Odyssey* it is shown how Telemachus slowly starts to learn more about speech, actions and Homeric society from his young tutor than the court he is visiting.

The same happens to Yuniór. In "Drown" (the short story), many inexplicit changes set the stage for the young character. The most important ones are that Rafa is no longer mentioned, and that Beto, a young but more literate and ambitious Latino is playing the part of male role model, much like Peisistratos takes the role Athena once had. Beto is described being one year older than Yuniór, going to college and "delirious from the thought of it," since "he hated everything about the neighborhood."³⁹ This contrasts with Yuniór, who describes himself as someone with "no promises elsewhere."⁴⁰

³⁸ Smith (2010). The Maturation of Telemachos in Homer's *Odyssey*-Master's Thesis. Tufts University. 51.

³⁹ Díaz(1996). "Drown". 91.

⁴⁰ Idem. 92.

This story, “Drown,” goes back and forth from a teenager to an adult Yuniór and how his relationship with Beto developed and ended. In his teenage years, Beto mentored Yuniór in street manners such as vandalizing property and shoplifting in malls. He and Beto “used to steal like mad from [those] places, two, three hundred dollars of shit in an outing.”⁴¹ They would also go to the public pool with all the other local teenagers and get together to watch movies at Beto’s place. It is in this context that Yuniór gets a glance of another father-son relationship. Beto, in the most casual manner, spends his afternoons watching adult films with his father. Beto tells Yuniór that his father “was a nut for these tapes,” and how he “would watch them in the middle of the day,” ignoring the presence of Beto’s mother, silent “except to laugh when someone caught it in the eye or the face.”⁴² In this way, while Nestor helps his son become a man instructing him in rhetoric, Beto’s father helps him instructing him in sexuality; a passion Beto adopts and later shares with Yuniór. Both characters are presented an example of the relationship they long for and are given a new guides in their journey towards male maturity: Peisistratos and Beto.

There is a final context or situation both characters go through on their own to find their identities as males: retracing their father’s figure from the words of people who knew him. Telemachus travels to foreign countries and collects splendid and encouraging anecdotes regarding Odysseus’ exploits and character. From Nestor, he learns his father was “a brilliant tactician: —noble Odysseus outdid them all by far in all tricks.”⁴³ In addition, when Telemachus expresses himself, Nestor compliments him by saying he does so like his father would. When Menelaus speaks of Odysseus, he says, even without knowing his son is present, that “none of the Achaeans toiled as much as Odysseus toiled and achieved... (Od.

⁴¹ Idem. 97.

⁴² Idem. 104.

⁴³ No Longer Νήπιος: The Maturation of Telemachos in Homer’s *Odyssey* 61

4.104-7).” Both speeches, added to Athena’s view of Telemachus’ father and the views of his mother and the servants who knew Odysseus, leave Telemachus with a great impression of who his father was.

Yunior also travels to learn of the story of Ramón Senior from Nilda, his father’s second wife in the U.S. in the story “Negocios”. His mother had given him the address and he “had taken three trains to reach her, walked blocks with her address written on [his] palm.”⁴⁴ Although far from being friends or have fought in an actual war, Nilda’s relationship with Yunior and his family feels similar. Yunior says it feels like “two strangers reliving an event – whirlwind, a comet, a war – we’d both seem from different faraway angles.”⁴⁵ Both shared the love and longing for someone who was constantly moving from one place to another and they cannot help but sympathize with each other.

These five situations or elements are shared in the attempts of Telemachus and Yunior to reach maturity and find male approval: the starting point, which is the feeling of having no father figure to look up to; the substitute father figure who serves as a role model and “catalyst”; the occasions when they are encouraged to denounce what they feel is wrong about their lives as a sign of maturity; the portrayal of another father-son relationship and the acquaintance of another role model; and the construction of their father figures from the accounts of people who knew them.

These shared elements reveal the Homeric structure in Díaz’s work and contribute to its familiarity and universality. However, a Homeric structure does not necessarily lead to a Homeric ending or development in each of its stories. In the following section, the particularities or realities that Yunior experiences will show the disjunctive elements between

⁴⁴ Díaz(1996). “Drown”. 206.

⁴⁵ Idem. 207.

his experiences and those of Telemachus, and how he is led to a different place regarding his construction of a male identity.

Chapter 3

Díaz's Approach to the Telemachian Experience: The Subversion

After presenting the fundamental Homeric structure in Yunior's coming of age story, this chapter will show the divergent path Yunior follows in his quest of manhood.

The first element of contrast is the effect the absent father's image has on both characters. As mentioned, young Latinos without a father have to idealize his figure, or, in the words of Riofrío(2008:27), they "must create, out of the romanticized vestiges of their imaginations, their own vision of masculinity, a hyper-masculinity hopelessly disconnected to reality and selfish in the way that only adolescent machismo allows."⁴⁶ This situation proves to be dangerous, according to this author, because it is both discriminating and unreal, a sort of fiction that shapes the reality of confused boys like Yunior.

The first example of marginalized male youth is presented "Ysrael," the first story in *Drown*. Yunior is far from the Dominican ideal of a man since he is not handsome nor does he have the characteristic hyperbolic interest for women his brother displays. Moreover, he complains and cries and is asked if he is "always going to be a pussy."⁴⁷ His brother, while they are still in the Dominican Republic, assumes the task of letting him know he is not a real man, that he is not like "papi." "You have to get tougher," Rafa tells him. "Do you think

⁴⁶ Riofrío, 2008. SITUATING LATIN AMERICAN MASCULINITY: IMMIGRATION, EMPATHY AND EMASCULATION IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S DROWN. In ATENEA Vol. XXVIII Num. 1 • junio 2008. 27.

⁴⁷ Díaz(1996). "Drown". 14.

papi's crying? Do you think that's what he's been doing the last six years?"⁴⁸ It is remarkable how most of the mentions of Ramón's figure are made to contrast him with Yuniór, from his character, which Rafa points out as courageous as opposed to cowardly, to his appearance. When Yuniór visits Nilda's house, years later, he looks at a photo of another one of Ramón's sons, he recognizes they are "brothers all right, though his face respected symmetry"⁴⁹, was more handsome than Yuniór's.

Ramón, even as a poor immigrant, is a figure of power, a man who even without a dollar to his name and a new arrival to the country, "pushed himself through the sit-ups and push-ups that kept him kicking ass until his forties"(169). Even lacking the monarchical power of Odysseus, Ramón represents what Foucault describes as "Power over Body." Even when "the body of the king was not a metaphor, but a political reality, his physical presence [was] necessary for the establishment of the monarchy." Since the nineteenth century, power is signified with a society's or an individual's "domination over the body acquired through occupation of power within the body: gymnastics, exercise, muscular development..."⁵⁰ His devotion to his own physical self is what makes Ramón a worthy role-model (in the context of the narrative), one who even "liked to show how his triceps and biceps could gather in prominent knots with a twist of his arm," one surprised when hit with the news that the son who bears his same name back in the Dominican Republic, was "so anemic people thought he was a corpse come back to life"(191), as described in one of his wife's letters. Yuniór is usually described as having a long way to go before he is able to fill his father's shoes, physically and mentally.

⁴⁸ Idem. 14.

⁴⁹ Díaz(1996). "Drown". 206.

⁵⁰ Foucault, M.(1979) "Microphysique du Pouvoir". Translated by Julia Varela y Fernando Alvarez-Uría. Las Ediciones de la Piqueta. 103-104. Found in <http://www.pensamientopenal.com.ar>

Therefore, while Telemachus hears about his father in encouraging tones and with the intention of letting him know how much he resembles him and how much he can accomplish if he follows in his footsteps, Yuniór only hears about his father in terms of how unlike him and how much of a disappointment he is. But Yuniór is not the only disappointment Rafa perceives and articulates. He is also aware that Ramón is not the responsible father he would like him to be. When Rafa confesses Yuniór he has read one of his father's letters which said he was going to come back, he also tells his little brother, "It ain't the first time he's made that promise."⁵¹ Furthermore, Paravisini-Gebert(2000:169) reads Ramón's character in his *Odyssey (Negocios)* as "a hard-working, flawed man, tyrannical and self-centered, weak and negligent of his family."⁵²

So it is not only that Yuniór cannot follow his father's footsteps, but the fact his father is far from being considered a hero, someone to look up to, a role-model. Even if his father were to come back, his memory, his idealization and his actual self are harmful or neglecting. While for Telemachus, every anecdote he hears regarding his father brings him one step closer to the ideal of the Homeric hero society demands of him, his memory is actually comforting in his times of need and a scaffold to glory.

The second element of contrast is the substitute father and role model. Yuniór's relationship with his brother, Rafa, is very distant from the one Athena has with Telemachos. This begins with the reasons each guide or mentor has for supporting the young character. They might seem the same in terms of somehow reproducing the image of the still absent hero. However, Rafa's reason for encouraging Yuniór to be like his father are linked to a clear sense of survival. He forcefully places his brother in a dominating class, the masculine

⁵¹ Idem. 82.

⁵² Paravisini-Gebert, 2000. Revisiting 'Those Mean Streets': Junot Díaz's *Drown*. In *U.S. Latino Literatures: A Critical Guide for Students and Teachers*. 168

one. Rafa proves he is well aware of the hegemonic stakes behind the performances of masculinity, or what LeGris(2014), referencing de Moya, calls, “a totalitarian image of dominant masculinity.”⁵³

In her essay, LeGris elaborates on how heteronormativity defines not only the social status of Dominicans but to a certain degree, their economic status. A male seems not to be worthy of the title unless he “allows himself to be powerfully shaped into an acceptable man, one who later enforces these same ritualistic and patriarchal masculinities, to which he struggles to adhere.”⁵⁴ Riofrío (2010:25) elaborates on the same subject and explains the difference between performances of masculinity or “how men, for example, without access to privilege define themselves is often reminiscent of the more traditional masculine figures” which are either “the persistent centrality of sexual conquest in notions of real masculinity” or “affirmed through homosocial enactment and male validation.”⁵⁵ Rafa, being poor, shows his little brother the performances of masculinity he is able to, which rely on sexuality or “chinga all my girls” as he puts it, and displays of violence acknowledged by another man. Rafa needs to show Yuniór his masculinity as opposed to another male, Ysraél.

“Ysraél was a different story”⁵⁶: that is how Yuniór opposes his brother with his characterization as a successful womanizer. After such introduction, Yuniór proceeds to describe an antisocial boy standing in an alley wearing a mask and persecuted by the other local children. Later on, he tells his brother about this boy, about how the pigs ate his face

⁵³ LeGris, Hannah Fraser, "HYBRIDITY, TRAUMA, AND QUEER IDENTITY: READING MASCULINITY ACROSS THE TEXTS OF JUNOT DÍAZ" (2014). Theses and Dissertations--English. Paper 9. Page 13

⁵⁴ Idem. 13-14

⁵⁵ Riofrío, 2008. SITUATING LATIN AMERICAN MASCULINITY: IMMIGRATION, EMPATHY AND EMASCULATION IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S DROWN. In ATENEA Vol. XXVIII Num. 1 • junio 2008. 25.

⁵⁶ Díaz(1996). “Drown”. 7.

when he was little and how he wears the mask to hide disfigurement. A trip to see this foil character becomes Yunior's Telemachian journey. Rafa suggests they "pay this kid a visit."⁵⁷

The nature of the journeys that Athena and Rafa propose differ in nature and also in how they unfold. While Athena takes precautions and selectively chooses who will accompany Telemachus on his boat, Rafa neglects his little brother. This happens when Rafa sends Yunior to the back of the bus while he hustles his way out of paying the bus fare. Yunior sits next to a somewhat muscular man who looks overpowering next to a nine-year-old, and eats a "pastelito" he was keeping in his pocket. When he notices the grease stain on his pants and tries to clean it, the man "spit[s] in his fingers and start[s] to rub at the stain but then he was pinching at the tip of [his] pinga through the fabric of [his] shorts."⁵⁸ Yunior tries to draw attention to his molester by shouting pejorative words for homosexuals, but the man grabs his arm and menaces him. Yunior and Rafa finally get off the bus, Yunior in tears, and Rafa telling him to adopt a more acceptable male behavior, thinking he is simply complaining about the way he cheated the bus driver.

Rafa's rejection and his own silence leave Yunior scarred and even more vulnerable, in contrast to Telemachus, who reaches Nestor's palace safe and sound. The experience that is supposed to encourage Yunior to adopt male behavior starts by his being abused by one of those very same dominant male performances he is supposed to imitate.

Having learned that denouncing abuse is not an option, Yunior discovers later that he must lose another one of his traits in this process towards masculinity: his empathy for others. "For Diaz's male characters, however, empathy is a dangerous and problematic sentiment,"⁵⁹ argues Riofrío, and his statement is illustrated by Rafa's dark encounter with Ysrael. It all

⁵⁷ Idem. 3.

⁵⁸ Idem. 12.

⁵⁹ Riofrío, 2008. SITUATING LATIN AMERICAN MASCULINITY: IMMIGRATION, EMPATHY AND EMASCULATION IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S DROWN. In ATENEA Vol. XXVIII Num. 1 • junio 2008. 28.

starts with a physical comparison, when Yuniór points out that Ysraél “was about a foot bigger than either of [them] and looked like he had been fattened on that supergrain the farmers were giving their stock.”⁶⁰ However, Ysraél’s intimidating physique does not have a negative effect on Yuniór; he knows he is not a normative male, he is a misfit regardless of how strong he may appear, and he cannot help but start a conversation with him about the kite he is flying, which “was no handmade local job. It had been manufactured abroad.” Much to his surprise, Ysraél tells Yuniór the kite was sent from “Nueva York,” and he reacts shouting, “No shit! Our father’s there too!”⁶¹ But Rafa disapproves of such bonding with a frown and starts a rhetoric inquisition about the mask.

Before the climax of the story, the interactions reveal “the essence of the context in which Yuniór comes to understand the consequences of empathy. The enthusiastic exclamation of “No shit!” reveals an instinctual empathy which immediately elicits a frown of contempt from his older, more street-savvy brother,” reads Riofrío. Yuniór fails again to follow the proper performance and starts taking the side of the marginalized individual, the enemy in his brother’s eyes. Ironically enough, it is Yuniór who innocently cues his brother into violent action. He asks Ysraél if he is still into wrestling, recalling the moment he saw him in the alley, collecting advertising for the sports event. Yuniór wants to continue the conversation and carries on. “Are you a wrestler?” “I’m a great wrestler. I almost went to fight in the capital,” boasts Ysraél, giving a Rafa the chance he needs to slide a threat in the conversation. He “laughed, swingin’ on the soda bottle and challenges saying, “You want to try it, pendejo?”, “Not right now”, declines Ysraél. Yuniór ignores the obvious signs of upcoming violence and keeps on bonding with the masked boy, with careful attention, until the moment

⁶⁰ Díaz(1996). “Drown”.15.

⁶¹ Idem. 16.

he “realized he (Ysrael) was smiling” under the mask, the closest thing he had ever gotten to making a friend out in the Dominican countryside.

“Then [Rafa] brought his arm around and smashed the bottle on top of his head.” It is with the explosion of the glass and the “Holy fucking shit” that escapes his mouth that Yuniór realizes that “empathy, by virtue of its association throughout the novel with the feminine, thus becomes a marker of weakness and a dangerous vulnerability,”⁶² as Riofrío points out. The feeling of empathy is brutally exchanged for a moment of otherness. Rafa, without saying a word, opposes and contrasts his brother to the deformed boy, showing him what can happen to a biological male that fails to subscribe to the right performances of strength and virility.

All it took for Telemachus to start his journey towards a sound male reputation was to have the courage to travel to a foreign court, escorted by a goddess, and address the highest authority with proper manners (which is not to be diminished in importance when such an act is placed in in temporary and geographical context). However, Yuniór had to witness violence and an act that is analyzed as being “eroticized by its juxtaposition against Rafa's pursuit of girls on which to exercise his manhood,”⁶³ the unmasking of Ysrael's deformed face. Following the fall of his unconscious body on the ground, both brothers roll him on his back, Yuniór taking now a different side and being a perfect accomplice, a man. Then Rafa takes off his mask and delicately examines the flaws of his victim's face. Riofrío concludes a reflection on this story stating that “the explosion of the bottle, Rafa's awful, cruel disregard for Ysrael, whom he touches with two fingers as if to avoid dirtying himself, and the terrible

⁶² Riofrío, 2008. SITUATING LATIN AMERICAN MASCULINITY: IMMIGRATION, EMPATHY AND EMASCULATION IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S DROWN. In ATENEA Vol. XXVIII Num. 1 • junio 2008. 29.

⁶³ Paravisini-Gebert, 2000. Revisiting ‘Those Mean Streets’: Junot Diaz's Drown. In U.S. Latino Literatures: A Critical Guide for Students and Teachers. 168

sight of Ysrael's disfigured face serve to inform Yuniór as to the totalizing and inevitable consequences that empathizing with another brings.”⁶⁴

So, in contrast to the ancient customs of privileged classes, reaching a state of male maturity relies little on simply travelling to foreign lands to present and express oneself out of one's comfort zone, a task for which the goddess Athena plays perfectly the role of a guide; in an underprivileged society a man must show who he is by overpowering others: women by sexual contact and men by physical violence. For this, Rafa is a perfect teacher who signifies a reversal in what is the classical Homeric instruction of manhood. “Ysrael carries in the flesh the emotional mutilations Yuniór has suffered during his fatherless childhood, which, although not visible to the eyes, remain just as profound”⁶⁵, interprets Paravisini-Gebert(2000). Our modern hero, Yuniór, is not encouraged after the journey. He is neglected, molested, robbed of a possible friend, a witness to horrible violence, and an accomplice to a symbolic rape (which was somewhat foreshadowed when Yuniór admits that the summer before he “pegged Ysrael with a rock” to hear the boys around him cheering for him and saying, “You fucking did it!”⁶⁶). Rafa, who was supposed to be his guide in the absence of a father, presents himself as a tormentor and leads him to a whole new place in his development. This is the second point of contrast from Telemachus' journey.

A third point of contrast is the difference between the substitute guiding figures, Beto and Peisistratos. As explained before, the encouraging figures at the beginning of both stories disappear at some point and pass on the “tutelage,” as Smith(2010:54) puts it. And the similarities persist regarding the attitudes of the characters. Beto is presented as a literate

⁶⁴ Riofrío, 2008. SITUATING LATIN AMERICAN MASCULINITY: IMMIGRATION, EMPATHY AND EMASCULATION IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S DROWN. In ATENEA Vol. XXVIII Num. 1 • junio 2008. 31.

⁶⁵ Paravisini-Gebert, 2000. Revisiting ‘Those Mean Streets’: Junot Diaz's Drown. In U.S. Latino Literatures: A Critical Guide for Students and Teachers. 168

⁶⁶ Díaz.(1996). “Drown”. 15

Latino with great expectations regarding his future, also as someone concerned about his friend Yunior to the point of telling him he “need[s] to learn how to walk the world. There’s a lot out there.”⁶⁷ The most poignant differentiation Yunior makes about his friend from himself is a beautiful analogy of space shuttles. He recalls how one teacher compared publicly his students with them, saying that “a few of [them] are going to make it. Those are the orbiters.” And Yunior saw Beto in that category. “But the majority of you are going to burn out.” He continued, “Going nowhere.” And the teacher dropped his hand onto his desk. Yunior “could see [himself] already losing altitude”(106). A sense of otherness is established to serve as a foil that highlights how far behind the young characters are in a coming of age story. In the same manner, “developmentally, Peisistratos is where Telemachus should be,” Smith (2010:51) points out. Both characters seem to find for themselves a character that is more relatable in age and fills the void of a male role model. The character is invited to integrate the experiences and knowledge of a more experienced young hero to grow faster; but Beto attaches a certain price to the “tutelage.”

A disruption in the relationship is clear from the beginning of “Drown,” the short story. His mother tells Yunior that Beto is back in the neighborhood, but he acts like he is not interested in the news. “Only when she’s in bed [does he] put on [his] jacket and swing[s] through the neighborhood to see” if it’s all true, if Beto is back. Shortly thereafter, the reason for sneaking through his own home to find him is revealed, which is that “he’s a pato (an undesired person, either a coward, a homosexual or someone that simply does not qualify as a part of any group of men) now but two years ago [they] were friends and he would walk into [his] apartment without knocking.”⁶⁸ Díaz does a great job synthesizing their whole

⁶⁷ Díaz.(1996). “Drown”. 102

⁶⁸ Díaz.(1996). “Drown”. 91

relationship in two lines, going from the previous state of intimacy to a conflict that puts enormous social pressure on it and ended their partnership, homosexuality.

At the beginning of the relationship, Beto shows himself to be a more supportive character than Rafa ever was. He treats Yuniór better, accompanies him on shoplifting sprees, encourages him to study and wants him to do well in life in an overall sense. Like Peisistratos, Beto shares more time with his father than Yuniór ever did with his. Even though Ramón, his father, was around when he met Beto, he is just an antagonizing figure who Yuniór ironically describes as “a charmer, a real asshole.”⁶⁹ This new guiding figure, in contrast to Rafa or his father goes to extents Yuniór never experienced before. While being pursued by the police once they are caught shoplifting, Yuniór starts to cry. Rafa would have told him to stop being so feminine in a scorching manner like he did after he saw Yuniór crying in “Ysrael”. But Beto “didn’t say a word” and “his hand squeezed [Yuniór’s], the bones in [their] fingers pressing together.”⁷⁰ The latter is undisputedly the greatest sign of affection ever shown to Yuniór in the entire story collection, the first time Yuniór feels protected and taken care of openly.

Contextually, the differences between Beto and Peisistratos are obvious; each environment demands different actions and attitudes. But the reversal of fortune for Yuniór in this part of his life, around seventeen years old, is an idiosyncratic character flaw of Beto’s. “Twice. That’s it.”⁷¹ Yuniór says to defend himself, his virility; or perhaps to defend Beto. The aforementioned passion Beto and his father share for adult films finally reaches Yuniór after an afternoon in the pool. The teenagers were by themselves in Beto’s apartment, watching “some vaina that looked like it had been filmed in the apartment next door”, a statement that

⁶⁹ Idem. 98.

⁷⁰ Idem. 99.

⁷¹ Idem.103.

further normalizes the movie beyond the fact that Beto and his father just watch them in the middle of the day. “What the fuck are you doing?” asks Yuniór when Beto suddenly reaches into his shorts. But he says nothing and continues masturbating him, without the least sign of consent given; Yuniór just “kept [his] eyes on the television. Too scared to watch.”⁷² It is inevitable to think back on the story “Ysraél” and the scene on the bus; and how a traumatic experience from his past which he never commented on or gave closure to, repeats itself now with an aggravating element. It is his best friend, his one-year-older role model and guide who is molesting him now. Yuniór being too scared to watch contradicts most of the critical essays on this story and the works of Junot Díaz that claim that is the characteristic Dominican-American homophobia acting up. The lack of consent; the “dry hand” of Beto, indicating a calm attitude about molesting Yuniór, opposite to a wet hand with the sweat of nervousness; a recollection of the scene where Yuniór is with Beto in the pool and he realizes Beto is definitely “stronger than him” when Beto “held [him] down until water flooded [his] nose and throat”(94); it all adds up to an abuse rather than the alleged negation of a latent homosexuality.

Also noteworthy is the fact that Beto “just sat there watching the screen” as a semen-stained Yuniór left his house panicking. The next day he avoids Beto’s invitations to the mall and a fear takes hold of Yuniór, the fear he “would end up abnormal, a fucking pato.”⁷³ Pato, the same word he used for the man than molested him on the bus. He now fears being one of them. But Beto was his friend and he says that “back then that mattered to [him] more than anything.”⁷⁴ So he meets Beto in the pool a second time for the sake of friendship. Yuniór’s nervousness is evidenced when his pulse was “a code” under Beto’s palm. But the

⁷² Díaz(1996). “Drown”. 104.

⁷³ Idem.

⁷⁴ Idem.

protagonist is invited once more to the apartment, saying he is feeling “fine”. Beto, once again, has “his hands bracing against [his] abdomen and thighs”, and Yuniór does not respond when asked if he wants Beto to stop. He just orgasms and remembers Beto is leaving in three weeks, as if giving himself reasons to please his best friend, feeling like “junk [held] against the shore” by the surf while Beto is soon to leave, to “sail away” and tells him that “nobody can touch [him],” trying to assert a sense of possession.

While Telemachus owes Peisistratos his gratitude for educating him on the ways of Homeric society and travelling with him, and even avoiding making an enemy of Menelaus when they visited him and made a *faux-pas* (leaving his palace without a proper farewell and not accepting a gift from the host), Yuniór wants to part with Beto. He becomes a completely different person. With Beto’s departure more changes come: His abusive father has left them for good and has become “a sad guy who calls her and begs [his mother] for money.”⁷⁵ He has become the “guy that sells them their shitty dope”⁷⁶, a drug-dealer that spends most of the nights out, drinking with friends and chasing women. And the one responsible for his mother and himself, although not financially. A two-year metamorphoses that happens in total silence, leaving the only close person he has left clueless, his mother. “She’s never understood why we don’t speak anymore.”⁷⁷

Yuniór seems to become a young adult who antagonizes the attitudes of his former best friend, or as Butler(1993:316) explains: “The self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered a separation, a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some “Other”.” The separation needed for Yuniór to choose a sense of self was his and Beto’s. This sense of “Otherness” is also seen with Ysraél, with

⁷⁵ Díaz(1996). “Drown”. 101.

⁷⁶ Díaz(1996). “Drown”. 93.

⁷⁷ Idem. 95.

whom he once sympathizes and then bullies to subscribe to the male performance demanded by his brother. Telemachus suffers a separation from his childish attitudes but not from any of the characters he once cherished. The fact Beto reached for Yuniór's genitals twice represents the "disruption of the Other at the heart of the self" that Judith Butler considers necessary for the construction of a sexual identity in the twentieth century and on. Beto is Yuniór's "Other", the "condition of that self's possibility,"⁷⁸ the strong resolve not to be like him or the "pato" on the bus while both individuals keep being a part of him. Yuniór never externalizes this process of construction, a characteristic Paravisini-Gebert (2000:170) also noted saying that "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." Leaving most of the depth of the stories out of the text is something that permeates all of *Drown*, and thus, the life of Yuniór. And the third point of contrast with Telemachus's journey, the subversion of the substitute guiding figure being reduced to a molester and foil character for the protagonist utilizes a narrative mask too. Which leads to the fourth point of contrast. Masks or silences.

The child who "wouldn't have raised [his] head" to denounce that he had been molested on the bus even "if God himself had appeared in the sky and pissed down on [him](14)." The same child whose mother "didn't want to hear nothing about [his] problems, the scratches [he'd] put into [his] knees," or "who'd said what,"(73) because she is exhausted from work. The same child who "didn't say anything" about his father's affair and the mistress he was introduced to and visited many times, because either fear or a fear of hurting the family "told him to keep his mouth shut.(39)" The child grown into a young man that is still not able to stand up to his best friend and confront him about the way he dared molest him without

⁷⁸ Butler, Judith(1993). "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in "The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader" journal.

consent and simply says there is “nothing to worry about. (105)” The child, son of the man who left his family in the Dominican Republic and made a new one in the U.S. but will not tell Nilda, the mother of his new son, even when she “could sense that something was wrong, that a part of him was detained somewhere else but each time she brought the subject up [he] told her it was nothing, always nothing”(192). All of Yunior’s life is, ironically enough for a work of literature, filled with silences. Yunior does not make explicit most of the pain he feels, only what caused it, without adding much color, without divulging how those situations make him feel.

These silences stand in contrast to the dawn of the Telemachian journey that starts with the hero exposing his grievances to the widest and most important audience he could gather. With art and respect for the attendants, Telemachus denounces in a very diplomatic yet poignant way what he perceives as harmful in his life and expresses his desire to protect the throne of Ithaka from anyone but his father on his return. It is the opposite for Yunior who has been silenced by his mother, intimidated by his father and other male oppressors, and simply grown accustomed to keeping things to himself, accustomed to what LeGris(2014:34) called “Queer silences”. These silences, in her perspective, are those who speak about “Yunior’s own queerness and anxiety about the stability of his machismo persona.” In other words, the doubts, fears and the overall emotional landscape of Yunior’s life is within these silences, implied in the texts.

There is a reason why these silences add such realism and depth to Díaz’s work and Yunior’s anecdotes, it is this unapologetic nature of the males: his dad, his brother, his molesters; and also the women shaped by that nature. It is all unsaid yet clear. Bourdieu, in his book called *Masculine Domination* (1998:9), argues that male behaviors are self-evident acts of strength, and that “the strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it

dispenses with justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimating it.” There are no explicit reasons for the assaults, the abandonments, the abuses; therefore, there seems to be no reason for denouncing, complaining or confronting. “The social order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the masculine domination on which it is founded,”⁷⁹ Bourdieu continues, elaborating on how modern male behaviors are so ideologically engraved in the culture they do not need to be justified, they seem to simply exist and be in the natural, social order of things. Neither the man on the bus nor Beto needed Yuniór’s consents. Rafa did not need Ysrael’s consent to strip him of his mask and look at his disfigured face. Ramón did not need the approval of his family to have an affair. It is all unnecessary when you are part of the dominant culture. And while Hellenic or Homeric society, as the Western precedent has been called here, relied on the articulate exposition of feats, feelings and aims for the construction of a male reputation; here it is shifted to simple actions. Paravisini-Gebert (2000:171) calls these silences, referring to Díaz’s style, “the quiet pathos of lives reduced to bleak everydayness.” It is how traumatic events are normalized in Díaz’s prose that puts a screen on the nature of the events and leaves them as just “Dominican-American ways” or naive “sexual exploration”, like most academics on the works of Díaz point out.

This fourth point of contrast is what the author expressed to be the emotional engine of his main character. In the 2013 interview for the *New Yorker* he explained that Yuniór’s “symbolic energy” was the fact he “has not addressed what he has to address;” that Yuniór is “the guy wrestling with his own inability to narrativize his own being as a survivor of sexual violence.” These silences are essential to his narrations, making them more profound. Apart

⁷⁹ Bourdieu(1998). “Masculine Domination”.Editions du Seuil. Translated by Richard Nice(2001)Stanford University press. 9.

from his being molested, Yunior also wrestles with another fact, realizing a certain fantasy has also crumbled; the fantasy of the man who would “come in the night, like Jesus, with gold on his fingers, cologne on his neck, a silk shirt, good leather shoes.” greeted by the whole barrio on his arrival like a hero and who would squat down to caress his face and trace his scars delicately with his fingers. Ramón de las Casas, his Odysseus and the fifth point of contrast between the maturation of the two characters.

The fifth and final element in the reversals of fortune experienced by Yunior is the deconstruction of the idealized father. His first attempts at a constructed recollection of his father start with a photograph of Ramón, “dressed in his Guardia uniform, his tan cap at an angle on his shaved head, an unlit Constitución squeezed between his lips. His dark unsmiling eyes were [his] own.” A smoking soldier with the same sad eyes as he is the foundation for an image of his father, which he complements with “pieces of [his] friends’ fathers, of the domino players on the corner, of pieces of Mami and Abuelo.” Ramón, for the first nine years of Yunior’s life, is but a “cloud of cigar smoke,” something blurry he cannot quite make out and the significant doubt regarding why “he’d abandoned [them](70).” During those nine years, Yunior and his brother cannot help but go back and forth between the aforementioned fantasy of the well-groomed man who would come for them and the reality of a promise sustained by letters where “Papi says he’s coming”(81), but Rafa has read those words so many times and tells his younger brother he can no longer believe him. Worse than a fantasy, an idea, Yunior’s first impression of his father is that he is a liar.

But such a lie is still an obstacle for Yunior. The collective idea of a man, combined with the hardships of the underprivileged environment he lives in and the virile image of his father in a military uniform set a high standard for Yunior. Again, Rafa’s words as a referent of masculinity are relevant when he tells Yunior he has “to get tougher”, and asks him if he

“think[s their] papi’s crying?”, if he thinks that is what their father has been doing the last six years. He has to be tough like a man he does not even know. And although the art of deception is a quality praised in Odysseus as a way to confront hardships, in Díaz’s depiction it is presented as harmful for his Telemachus.

When Yunior finally meets his father and is taken to the U.S., he can acknowledge some of the virtues, qualities or powers attributed to Odysseus, such as that of calling for a meeting. Like the head of the state, Odysseus was the only one with the authority to call for a meeting with the elders of Ithaca and the court. On a much smaller scale, another male figure decides when the family must gather. “Everybody decided that we should have a party” to celebrate the arrival of one of Yunior’s aunts to the country. But “actually, [his] pops decided.” Yunior feels he has to clarify who was the real authority that made official the gathering and that the rest just “thought it a dope idea.” The same power Ramón exercises logistically can be also physical and exercised on his children, since he could “have kicked [their] asses something serious” if he found they are not ready to go to the party once he got home, right after he “had been with that Puerto Rican woman (23).” Ramón’s strength is not only used to intimidate his children but in performances of masculinity such as greetings with other males like “the sort of handshakes that would have turned [Yunior’s] fingers into Wonder Bread.” A display Yunior acknowledges and feels out of his reach. Slowly, Yunior’s picture of his father becomes more complete. The intimidating man in uniform that lied and delayed his return to the island for six years continues to be all that but now is an abusive father who cheats on his mother almost openly and lives up to the myth of masculinity Rafa articulated so much when they were virtual orphans: an authoritative man with a “loud and argumentative voice” heard from afar, the opposite of his mother’s, which the children “had to put cups to [their] ears to hear(33).” It is later explained how Ramón takes both Rafa and

Yunior to his mistress' house, to eat or just spend time with her, in an attempt to normalize the situation in their eyes. This is something the brothers remain quiet about as part of the phenomenon of silences previously mentioned. During the welcoming party, Yunior does imagine someone exposing his father, screaming at him: "You're a cheater!" But nothing happens. And the tyrannical attitudes of his father, along with the silences, make Yunior see how much of Odysseus his father has in him, "how it would all end up in a few years, Mami [and himself] without Papi" (41). How he will eventually leave again just like Homer's hero does too.

With Yunior, Ramón continues to be the abusive father he always was. Later on, he becomes once more a haunting figure. He does not live with the family anymore but is still present. "Picturing [his mother] alone wasn't easy"(41), and she still calls Ramón, even though he lives with another woman in Florida; his words still have an effect on her, they "coil insider of her, wrecking her sleep for days (101)." His father now asks for money and keeps stunting the development of his original family.

Due to the limited time his father has spent with him and the blurry picture his brother and mother paint of him, Yunior feels that the portrait is incomplete. He needs to know about his father's past, what he went through and how he fared in the U.S., so he feels the need to relive his story through the words of Nilda, his father's second wife, just like Telemachus seeks information about his father from Nestor and Menelaus.

"Negocios," the last story in "Drown," represents the actual *Odyssey*, the journey of his father, and the revelation of his character as a man. Although Koy (2012, 79) argues that at the root of the Dominican Exodus is the American invasion that impoverished the state (and from which period the only photo of his father Yunior had to remember him by was taken) and Abuelo supports the idea, telling Yunior and Rafa "about the good old days, when a man

could still make a living from his finca, when the United States wasn't something planned on. (72-73)" It is Ramón's desire to thrive that leads him to the U.S., as if Odysseus thought there would be a better future for his family in Troy. But he does not procure himself the means to get there from his military exploits or his own wealth like the classic hero; he does so by "hustling and borrowing money from his friends," and later on, even when he has been caught "sleeping with an overweight [prostitute]" and his wife has "pierced him in the cheek" with a fork, he goes to his father-in-law and asks him for the rest of the money to leave, saying he wants to "take [his family] to the United States (163-164)." Reluctantly, over a month, Abuelo gives Ramón the rest of the money and only asks him to "make [his] children proud." And so he leaves, with only his sons to say goodbye to him and without a kiss from his wife, which only reminds him of where the money came from.

When he gets to the United States, he lacks the wits and plans of Odysseus. When asked about his plans, his address, who he can rely on in the country by a taxi driver, he only says he has "two hands and a heart strong as a rock." "Right," replies the driver, hinting that that is not nearly enough. Nevertheless, a certain sense of awareness, similar to Odysseus', is to be granted to Ramón, who recognizes that "the slightest turn of fortune could dash him (168)." But soon it is acknowledged that such concern is not about jeopardizing the future and well-being of his family: when he sleeps he "dream[s] of gold coins stacked high as sugar cane." But as a twenty-four year old father, "he didn't dream about his familia and wouldn't for many years" (169). So all the jobs, precautions and plans he makes revolve around his own idea of wealth and prosperity, not about a return. His journey from Miami to New York, plagued with the fear of being robbed that made him hide his savings in his underwear, the car ride with federal agents and a murderer, the two jobs and twenty-four hour shifts, the mechanical replies to his family with the promise of buying them tickets and the need to find

himself a wife to work around the situation of his visa having expired, slowly erase the feelings he has for his family. Finally, he meets his dream woman “on the morning before Christmas”(182), a Dominican-American citizen with an excellent English, his green card, his opportunity: Nilda, his Calypso.

With the excuse of asking for help with his English, Ramón enters her life with a purpose, unlike Odysseus who was supernaturally seduced. He meets her daughter and starts kissing her every time he goes for “English lessons,” and “within a month [he] moved out of his apartment into her house in Brooklyn. They were married by March (186).” The struggle Odysseus presents is subverted and it is seen how Ramón tries to take advantage of her, but soon his desires and conveniences make him dull, passive. His friends have to remind him he “can’t forget his familia like that” (187), that they were the ones who gave him the money to get there. And soon enough, after Nilda discovers he has a different family, he starts to deliver “some of his most polished performances to convince her that he no longer cared about [them]” (187).

It is his nagging conscience aroused by the letters from his previous wife that reach him no matter where he goes and tell him about how miserable his family is in the Dominican Republic that keeps the memory of his family lingering. Ramón is far from showing the courage and determination of Odysseus. Not even a visit to the islands, being a car-ride away from his family, encourages him to visit them. His sporadic money transfers and his increasing emotional distance from Nilda gives her the sense that “a part of him was detained elsewhere” (192). However, he continues to live with her and secretly save money to leave her, unable to face either of his wives with the truth, lying to the point of saying one of his sons in the island was dead and he needed to send money for funeral arrangements.

It is only when he hits bottom, with “his back killing him (due to work) and his life with Nilda headed down the toilet,” that he regains a certain will to go back to his first “familia” as the “logical destination.” He begins to see his family as “saviors, as a regenerative force that could redeem his fortunes” (204-205). They were back in Dominican Republic, his hope for comfort. From all of the testimonies he is able to gather, Yuniór ultimately finds out that his Ramón is a selfish man, a liar, sometimes a coward, and a very neglecting father figure. His father is no hero, not even someone who has made an effort to be with them; sadly, he is the only role-model Yuniór has. And in spite of the flaws he sees in his father, he “still wants him to love [him], something that never seemed contradictory, until years later, when he was out of [their] lives” (27). This is the fifth element of contrast between the narratives of Yuniór and Telemachus: a heroic versus a defective father figure.

Conclusions

The sum of a (geographically and emotionally) distant, discouraging and even emasculating father figure; a brother and guiding figure whom he looks up to as a substitute father that insults him and reaffirms his own masculinity by emasculating and abusing those around him; the friend, brother and role-model who once held his hand and encouraged him but who later abuses him and pushes him into the Otherness of the hyperbolic male performance that scars him in childhood; the many things he felt wrong about his life but never confesses or denounces and which now haunt him in adulthood; and finally the search for his father's persona by the words of those who intimately knew him and the disappointment caused by the findings: these all add up to the ironic turn of events experienced by Díaz's protagonist, and which stand in contrast to the universal Homeric structure he uses to portray his stories.

Irony is taken here in the same sense Haraway(1984) takes it in her approach to late twentieth century feminism, which is "about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true." And if these contradictions are what shape Yuniór's thinking and narration, he is defined by a series of oxymorons. Therefore, it is no wonder why authors like Riofrío and LeGris call this character "Queer," or fluid in his gender, cultural and social

performances. The static and predictable classic hero is in *Drown* nuanced and composed by more complex elements than just abandonment and the desire to follow in his father's footsteps or his identity as an immigrant. He is what Haraway refers to as a "Cyborg," a social myth that permeates reality, the confusion of boundaries and the ideal of a being that does not take sides in "the tradition of racist male-dominant capitalism" or many other stagnant traditions. It is an ideal opposed by the fact it is "the offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism,"⁸⁰ which is Yuniór's whole cultural and political background, as Haraway points out. By the end of the book, as he hears the truth from Nilda and reviews the events of his life through narration, he has a "cyborg" mindset, it is up to him to choose to be like his father or be true to all of his experiences and the performances he saw, not just the ones that favor him and which he has inherited; but until he decides, he is stuck with all of the experiences he has lived.

As Koy (2012) points out, Díaz's stories, Yuniór's included, can be labeled as "Minor Literature," although it is something Paravisini-Gebert(2000) seems to disagree in her review of *Drown* when she claims that the trait that separates Díaz from the earlier tradition of immigrant narratives, such as Piri Thomas' is "a lack of political intention" (165). However, the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, who coined the term "Minor Literature," describe such literature by three characteristics: the first being "the deterritorialization of language", or the fact that person writes in a language other than his own; the second being "the connection of the individual to a political immediacy," which explains that such navigation in another culture *is* a political statement that does not necessarily protest or ally with the major culture but underlines the interaction of at least two groups of people; and the third being "the

⁸⁰ Haraway, D. 1984. "A Cyborg Manifesto". In "The CyberCultures Reader" journal. 2000. pages 291-293

collective assemblage of enunciation”⁸¹; or the statement that not only the dominant culture has the ability or right to outline or describe a group of people, that a “minority” can actually use the instrument of communication imposed by the majority and present itself. Taking into account those three traits, *Drown* and Yuniors narration easily fall into this category. However, *Drown* is minor for reasons beyond that one.

More than juxtaposing Dominican culture to American, or Black to Anglo-Saxon, or poor to rich, Yuniors presents his own cultural mindset by disclosures of sexual assault and marginalization. He makes the sort of statement that in such a context would further plunge an individual into social rejection, as is explained in many case studies of adult males disclosing early sexual assault where it is revealed that “talking about sexual victimization is gendered, particularly by adulthood, and men and women face different risks and consequences of disclosure: Women tend to risk feeling damaged and being accused of being “loose,” whereas men are more likely to feel weak and be accused of being homosexual.”⁸² This is the same fear Yuniors describes in “Drown” after he is molested by his friend Beto, a “fear of being (labeled as) a pato.” In spite of social stigmas, Yuniors uses “major language,” and this refers not to English, but to the language and jargon of “machos” or heteronormative males, to describe the experiences of victims, the minority.

It is the creative feat of taking a classical tale such as *The Odyssey*, and using one of its main characters not to reaffirm male stereotypes as the victory of the character but to show how harmful they can be that makes Díaz’s version of the Telemachian experience unique.

⁸¹ Deleuze and Guattari(1986) ”Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature” by the University of Minnesota Originally published as Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure Copyright © 1975 by Les éditions de Minuit, Paris.

⁸² Sorsoli, Grossman and Kia-Keating(2008) “I Keep that Hush-Hush: Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse and the Challenges of Disclosure”. In the Journal of Counseling Psychology 2008, Vol. 55, No. 3, 333–345. This study analyzed the fear of marginalization of 17 men of which only one had disclosed being sexually assaulted as a child. All of them expressing a fear of being labeled as a latent homosexual; especially the black and latino participants.

Díaz uses art to present his political views (which are “pro-women” and “pro-cultural diversity” as he has expressed in many interviews) in a manner that is subtle, because “if it's too brute and too obvious,” Díaz said, “then it becomes allegorical, becomes a parable, becomes kind of a moral tale. You want to make it subtle enough so that there are arguments. Otherwise, you fall into the kind of preachy, moralistic fable that I don't think makes for good literature.”⁸³ Such a decision in style is what makes Yunió's disclosures sometimes go unnoticed, masked in his own inability to be clear about what happened to him, while at the same time they are what makes Díaz writing universal in structure, brave in content, quietly revolutionary in its declarations, and above all inventive in its form.

⁸³ FASSLER, J. (SEP 11, 2012) “How Junot Díaz Wrote a Sexist Character, but Not a Sexist Book” Last checked on May the 8th, 2017.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/how-junot-diaz-wrote-a-sexist-character-but-not-a-sexist-book/262169/>

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