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SITUATING LATIN AMERICAN MASCULINITY: IMMIGRATION, EMPATHY AND EMASCULATION IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S *DROWN*

John Riofrio

A brief survey of recent immigration literature reveals what is essentially common sense: identity is sharply connected to the process of movement we know as immigration. At the very least it can be said that immigration produces categorical shifts in how we experience and also understand ourselves as people. This essay examines Junot Díaz's collection of short stories, *Drown*,¹ as a means to investigate the potential trauma which immigration has on the male, working class psyche and how that trauma, the oft-cited dislocation of immigration, ultimately reveals the underlying tensions between memory, nostalgia and identity, categories which are in the end essential to our understanding of diaspora, immigration and assimilation.

Masculinity as Identity

Recent work in the field of masculinity studies has posited the notion that masculinity, like other forms of identity—race, sexuality, disability and class—is a social construct intimately connected to its

¹ During the 2003 Future of Minority Studies Conference at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, there was a lively debate as to whether or not one could consider Díaz's text a novel. Of the book's ten stories, six are explicitly connected by the presence of Yunior, the central narrator. These six stories do not form a convenient book-end (they represent the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 8th, 9th and 10th stories respectively) nor do they present a straight-forward chronology. Once gathered, however, the details form a coherent story of poverty, immigration and assimilation. The other four stories, by contrast, remain intriguingly ambiguous in terms of narrator. None of the narrators in "Aurora," "Drown," "Boyfriend," or "Edison, New Jersey" is given a specific name, but Díaz offers many clues as to their identities. All but one of them, the narrator of "Boyfriend," *could* be Yunior even if one factors in the particular tone, lifestyle and chronology of each of the stories. My feeling, then, is that taken in conjunction these stories offer a thematic cohesion more similar to that of a novel than a group of short stories. It is for this reason that I will, throughout this essay, refer to *Drown* as a novel.

social and historical context. To paraphrase Professor Keith Nurse, masculinism² is an ideology which is produced by its social context while simultaneously affecting the stability of that social context in order to further reproduce the ideal conditions for its continuation. The consequence of this ideology is that, like gender or race—with its accompanying notions of “color” or whiteness—men are not simply born, they are made. Or as Peruvian sociologist Norma Fuller posits, “Ser hombre es algo que se debe lograr, conquistar y merecer” (24). Fuller’s choice of words implies that you aren’t born a man; it is a title earned through action, often violent action.

Literary critic Satya Mohanty has argued that identities, like cultures, are a way of organizing the world we live in, of making sense of our experiences and what those experiences tell us about our social reality. Masculinity, like race, disability or sexuality, is thus a component of identity which reveals profound insights about the world we live in as well as the ideologies which shape that world. Definitions of what it means to be a “real man,” are imposed externally while functioning as social constructs masked as fundamental truths, the natural order of things. As anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu writes in his book, *Masculine Domination*, “what appears, in history, as being eternal is merely the product of a labour of externalization performed by interconnected institutions such as the family, the church, the state, the educational system, and also, in another order of things, sport and journalism” (viii). For Bourdieu, what makes masculinism so difficult to identify and overcome, both for men and women, is its link to the many differentiated layers of society. This linkage ultimately produces the effect of casting masculinity—its characteristics as well as its presumed place in the social hierarchy—as the natural and unavoidable state of things.

Masculinity in the Latin American Context

In Latin America, discussions of masculinity have long been dominated by the notion of *machismo*, a manliness that overpowers and in fact seems to spill over, an excess of masculinity. Machismo is present in representations of Latin Americans by Latin Americans such as the epic Argentine gaucho poem by Martín Fierro or the Mexican corridos which sing of “el caudillo,” but is also present in the ways

² Nurse defines masculinism as “the dominant philosophical value system in the gender framework.” Masculinity by contrast is a manifestation of that philosophy. Masculinism, therefore, can be seen as a system of thought, conscious and unconscious of which masculinity is its primary manifestation.

in which the U.S. has figured Latino males in films like *Zorro* where Zorro is the archetypal Latin male: tall, swarthy, virile and mysterious. Contemporary Latin American and Latin@ writers, like Peru's Alfredo Bryce Echenique, however, have begun to explore the construction of the Latin American male, working on definitions of masculinity which go beyond outward symbols of virility. In opposition to traditional figures like the gaucho or the caudillo, the "new" man is one who functions within cultured or privileged society, one who knows and "works" the system from within. Virility, still the central focus of the cultural expectations of masculinity, is now measured less in shows of courage or violence and more in tangible symbols of success, wealth, influence and social esteem. The break between the traditional Latin "macho" and the new man of society, is not, of course, absolute. There is overlap particularly when one considers the effect of social class: how men, for example, without access to privilege define themselves is often reminiscent of the more traditional masculine figures of the gaucho and the caudillo. Two constants, however, in the manifestation of masculinity in Latin America remain: the first is the persistent centrality of sexual conquest in notions of real masculinity; the second is the fact that as an identity, masculinity remains a label affixed to men by men, what Nurse describes as manhood "affirmed through homosocial enactment and male validation" (8).

Norma Fuller sees masculinity in terms of the dichotomy of "virilidad" and "hombria," where the former refers to the naturalized, "biologically oriented" behavior of the *macho* vs. the latter which embodies the domesticated but still patriarchal man of responsibility—"the breadwinner." For both Fuller and Nurse, masculinity is both variable and fluid but is not, however, free from restraint in that it is irrevocably tied to the concrete, if often subtle, expectations of male society. The paradox which Fuller's work illuminates is the troubling notion that one's biology does not simply make one a man. Dominican psychologist Antonio de Moya further explains that this process of self-affirmation, the need to prove one's masculinity beyond mere biology, is by no means a product of adulthood. Rather, the process of demonstrating one's merits for inclusion, which Fuller refers to as *ortopedia*, begins succinctly in childhood and adolescence where, though younger, the stakes are just as high. De Moya writes:

From early childhood, males are led to become self-conscious about those verbal and non-verbal behaviours which could lead others to suspect that they are not "true" or "real" men. This self-consciousness, which may become quasi-paranoid by adolescence for non-conforming males, is the product of an ongoing process of stringent, totalitarian "gender work", orienting towards the construction of a hegemonic male. (98)

De Moya points out the subtlety of expression upon which masculinity ultimately rests, but also clarifies the concrete ways in which masculinity depends on a kind of self-policing among its members. Freedom of expression, whether through body language or verbal and emotional communication, is scrutinized to a degree which then transforms the adolescent male into a well-trained subject “unconsciously” aware of the “natural” rules of masculinity. De Moya’s choice of the word ‘totalitarian’ is particularly well suited in that it implies, via the association of the political, the severity of the consequences engendered by non-conformity. To consider masculinity in these terms moves us beyond the simple binary of patriarchal privilege and dominance to a more nuanced understanding of masculinity as embodying both oppression and the oppressed.

Absent Masculinity and the Fatherless Generation

“Ysrael,” the first story of Díaz’s collection, sets the stage for the picture of masculinity which will reveal itself throughout all ten of the stories. In “Ysrael” we meet Yuniór, the narrator of six of the stories, his older brother Rafa, as well as Ysrael the boy whose face was devoured by a pig when he was still an infant. Rafa and Yuniór leave home one day to search for Ysrael with the hopes of seeing his disfigured face which he hides behind a surgical mask. They come across Ysrael in a field flying a beautiful kite which Yuniór identifies as definitely not “a local handmade job (16) but rather one that “had been manufactured abroad” (16). Yuniór, unaware of his brother’s plans for Ysrael (a topic I address later), strikes up an innocent conversation with Ysrael. “Where did you get that? I asked. Nueva York, he said. From my father. No shit! Our father’s there too! I shouted” (16). This simple exchange reveals an important detail about Dominican life: 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. Yuniór and Ysrael’s conversation functions as the grainy snapshot of an entire generation of Dominican boys forced to grow up without fathers. The absence of the father figure and the perpetual reality of abandonment which accompanies this absence oblige the generation of fatherless boys to construct their own vision of masculinity based, not only on the island’s remaining men, but also the hollow remains of what the fathers have left behind.

With the departure of their father, Abuelo—Rafa and Yuniór’s grandfather and one of the “remaining men”—once again becomes the man of the house and, by extension, the masculine role model.

But Abuelo is a broken man: “when Abuelo was around (and awake) he talked to me about the good old days, when a man could still make a living from his finca, when the United States wasn’t something people planned on” (73). With his lands dried up and his eyes failing him, Abuelo becomes a shell of a man who is either asleep or off building rat traps. For Rafa and Yunior, then, fatherhood and *real* masculinity are accessible to them only in the paltry remnants of their father: “he was the soldier in the photo. He was a cloud of cigar smoke, the traces of which could still be found on the uniforms he’d left behind” (70). For the fatherless generation, the emblem of masculinity, witnessed through the blurring haze of cigar smoke, becomes the juvenile hope of somehow, someday, being “man enough” to fill the empty uniforms in the closet. Like toddlers inserting dainty feet into father’s oversized shoes, the absent masculinity of the immigrant father is a tall order to fill.

The paucity of male role models and the unshakable reality of their poverty leave Rafa and Yunior starved, not only for food, but also for male role models. Fuller explains, however, that this is not such an easy desire to fulfill: “la masculinidad es también un campo móvil, sometido a un proceso continuo de redefinición y crítica” (27). In the case of the two brothers, Rafa and Yunior, the absence of their father compounds the fact that masculinity is already a slippery, shifting terrain. In their case, the process of redefinition is sparked by a dramatic shift in their understanding of how to go about acquiring the trappings of men. The result is that it is their peers and not their fathers who will be responsible for teaching them how to be men.

The all-too-predictable effect of this peer dynamic is that the young men left behind 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. When Rafa and Yunior get sent to the *campo* for a few weeks while their mother straightens out financial affairs, Rafa says plainly that this “is shit. . .when I get home, I’m going to go crazy—chinga all my girls and then chinga everyone else’s” (4). For Rafa, overt, boastful sexuality is the only 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. Díaz’s construction of Rafa in these terms, sexualized and egocentric, allows us to consider Rafa as a stand-in for the hegemonizing process of masculinity. Rafa demonstrates the way in which oppression over women and girls functions as a direct means towards the assumption of patriarchal privilege. By fucking his girls and everyone else’s, Rafa is assured of his virility both in his

own eyes, but more importantly, in the eyes of others. Central to this adolescent construction of masculinity is the figure of the feminine and its association with the emotional category of empathy.

The Coding and Consequences of Empathy in *Drown*

For Díaz's male characters, however, empathy is a dangerous and problematic sentiment. In the story "Edison, New Jersey" the narrator, who may or may not be Yunior (see footnote 1) makes a conscious decision not to empathize when faced with his partner Wayne's desire to commit adultery:

I really want to pile her, he tells me. Maybe on one of the Madisons.

Man, I say, cutting my eyes towards him. Don't you have a wife or something?

He gets quiet. I'd still like to pile her, he says defensively.

And what will that do?

Why does it have to *do* anything?

Twice this year Wayne's cheated on his wife and I've heard it all, the before and the after... Wayne can be a moody guy and this is one of those nights; he slouches in the driver's seat and swerves through traffic, riding other people's bumpers like I've told him not to do. I don't need a collision or a four-hour silent treatment so I try to forget that I think his wife is good people and ask him if Charlene's given him any signals. He slows the truck down. Signals like you wouldn't believe, he says. (117)

The narrator's initial impulse is to empathize with Wayne's wife who he considers "good people;" however, as the novel establishes, empathy brings immediate consequences like the punishment of a "four-hour silent treatment" or the possibility of a car accident. In the end, the narrator believes that the consequences of empathy far outweigh the benefits, and he wills himself to forget that he respects Wayne's wife. The narrator, rather than trying to show Wayne the callousness of his actions, sacrifices Wayne's wife for a peaceful work-day making her, in a sense, the victim of this rejection of empathy. The victimization of women, which runs throughout the novel, is intricately tied to their association as empathetic beings.

The representation of empathy and its associations with femininity, however, are only part of the story. Ultimately at stake here are the male characters' efforts to fashion their own sense of masculine identity. In a world coded symbolically in these terms, sympathizing with someone like Ysrael is a path to feminization and its associated consequences. Fuller, again writing about masculinity in Peru, explains:

lo femenino actúa como frontera simbólica de lo masculino, como la *abyecto* que presiona pero, sobre todo, permite visualizar sus fronteras, reconocer sus rasgos y adquirir, por esta vía, consistencia y fijeza. Consecuentemente, la masculinidad se mueve dentro de dos paradojas: la ilusión de su fijeza (origen biológico) y el temor de perderla amenazada por lo femenino. (27)

What is crucial about Fuller's observation is that it signals the manner in which femininity functions as a symbolic border. The adolescent, fatherless boys go about crafting their masculine identities via their interaction with, and reactions against, all that is feminine. For them, crafting a masculine identity is profoundly connected to the daily struggle to keep the feminine at arms length thus enabling the boys to rightfully claim their masculinity.

For Fuller, the true source of male anxiety rests in its very fragility, the fact that masculinity can be lost, or worse, taken away. In the story "No Face" Ysrael is, as always, being chased by his peers who wish to hurt him simply because of his disability. In a moment of distraction, he is caught unawares and tackled by the boys:

The fat boy with the single eyebrow sits on his chest and his breath flies out of him. The others stand over him and he's scared.

We're going to make you a girl, the fat one says and he can hear the words echoing through the meat of the fat boy's body. He wants to breathe but his lungs are as tight as pockets.

You ever been a girl before?

I betcha he hasn't. It ain't a lot of fun. (156)

In this scene the assault of Ysrael is made all the more terrifying by the threat of rape. The rape, however, also serves as a deeply significant lesson to the other boys, the ones doing the raping. As they lord their collective strength over Ysrael, their oppression of him and their ability to "make him into a girl" become a concrete reminder, albeit an unconscious one, of their own weakness. Empathy, by virtue of its association throughout the novel with the feminine, thus becomes a marker of weakness and a dangerous vulnerability, a vulnerability described with startling clarity in the opening story "Ysrael." The scene is, once again, the meeting between Yuniór, Rafa and Ysrael. Yuniór begins a sincere conversation with Ysrael:

Where did you get that? I asked.

Nueva York, he said. From my father.

No shit! Our father's there too! I shouted.

I looked at Rafa, who, for an instant, frowned...

What the hell are you wearing that mask for anyway? Rafa asked.

I'm sick, Ysrael said.

It must be hot.
 Not for me.
 Don't you take it off?
 Not until I get better. I'm going to have an operation soon.
 You better watch out for that, Rafa said. Those doctors will kill you
 faster than the Guardia....

This passage reveals the essence of the context in which Yuniór comes to understand the consequences of empathy. A naturally curious nine-year-old, Yuniór begins to show signs of a budding empathy. Upon hearing that Ysraél's father is also in Nueva York Yuniór unconsciously recognizes a common humanity which transcends No Face's disfigurement. The enthusiastic exclamation of "No shit!" reveals an instinctual empathy which immediately elicits a frown of contempt from his older, more street-savvy brother. As the scene unfolds Rafa's voice becomes easily distinguishable from Yuniór's. While Rafa assumes the tone of an inquisitor, Yuniór peppers the conversation with comments like, "It must be hot" and "Don't you take it off?" that reveal a profound and growing sense of empathic connection. Yuniór's empathy reaches a point in which he even abandons his brother's side in order to catch up with Ysraél who has run ahead of them.

Are you still into wrestling? I asked.

He turned to me and something rippled under the mask. How did you know that?

I heard, I said....

The mask twitched. I realized he was smiling and then my brother brought his arm around and smashed the bottle on top of his head. It exploded, the thick bottom spinning away like a crazed eyeglass and I said, Holy fucking shit....Roll him on his back, my brother said and we did, pushing like crazy. Rafa took off his mask and threw it spinning into the grass.

His left ear was a nub and you could see the thick veined slab of his tongue through a hole in his cheek....The damage looked old but I still jumped back and said, Please Rafa, let's go! Rafa crouched and using only two of his fingers, turned Ysraél's head from side to side. (16-19)

Rafa's silence during their prattle about wrestling betrays his sentiment that he has seen enough. At exactly the moment when Yuniór's empathy reaches its peak, when he is able to recognize the twitching under Ysraél's mask as the workings of a smile, Rafa breaks his silence by bringing the bottle crashing down on an unsuspecting Ysraél.

This scene, which is arguably the most powerful in the novel, functions on a number of important levels. Perhaps the most immediate is the lesson which Yuniór learns about empathy. Psychologist

Robert Katz has described the empathizer as one who, “tends to abandon his self-consciousness. He does not feel with the other person as if running along on a parallel track. The sense of similarity is so strong that the two become one—his identity fuses with the identity of the other” (9). I would argue that Yunior’s desperate cry of “Holy fucking shit” is wrenched out of him because of this kind of total empathetic identification with Ysrael; It is as if, for a moment, he is unaware that it is not his own head which has been smashed by the bottle. 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 sight of Ysrael’s disfigured face serve to inform Yunior as to the totalizing and inevitable consequences that empathizing with another brings.

For Bourdieu, this is precisely the manner in which patriarchy perpetuates itself: “Like the disposition towards submission, those which underlie the pursuit and exercise of domination are not inscribed in a nature, and they have to be learned through a long labor of socialization, in other words, as has been seen, of active differentiation from the opposite sex” (49). Ysrael’s disfigurement places him in the same category as the feminine, what Fuller has described as “la abyecto.” That the neighborhood boys’ goal in chasing Ysrael is to feminize him, is a concrete manifestation of what they already know: in their world, weakness, disfigurement, and non-conformity are all vulnerabilities which are to be exploited and castigated. By the time we see Yunior all grown up and living in the U.S. we understand that he has learned his lessons well. Díaz, however, understands that the masculinity of the abandoned boys is only one half of the story.

Fictions of Masculinity: Immigration and the Emasculation of Men

The romanticized vision of the immigrant man going off to the U.S. to provide for his family is not the sole product of the Dominican boy’s imagination. This vision, born in the painful middle word between hope and desperation, is a creation of the Dominicans and their need to, as Abuelo says, “plan on the United States.” The men who depart daily for the mainland take with them a small suitcase and the idea that they are going to a land which embraces those willing to work for a living. In the imaginative world of the immigrant, success is inevitable for one armed as Papi³ with “two hands and a

³ Yunior and Rafa’s father is referred to, throughout the novel, as both Papi and Ramón.

heart as strong as an ox" (167); poverty is the fate of those who do not leave.

The problem for Papi is that in the eyes of mainstream America any "new" immigrant is expected to play the role of Jo-Jo (his Puerto Rican friend, who represents the assimilationist Bootstrap Puerto Rican) or the successfully assimilated Cubans who came before him. This expectation is, of course, dangerously flawed in that it negates absolutely the material conditions which mark Cuban or Puerto Rican immigration as dramatically different from that of other Latin Americans. Díaz's Dominican characters do not benefit, as the first Cubans did, from refugee status; instead they groan under the dual pressures of assimilation: they are expected, as Jo-Jo does, to embody the American way, but also to fulfill a common notion of what it means to be "Latino."

Ramón's resistance to the pressures of assimilation begins with a rejection of Jo-Jo's good-natured proposal that he buy one of his hot dog carts, and the sure-fire success it offers. Papi makes no effort to reject the system or even the script (he does, after all, acknowledge that he is "looking for an investment"); he seems only to reject the specific details of Jo-Jo's plan for him: "I'm not a food man." Jo-Jo's retort, however, is illustrative: "What sort of man are you then... You Dominicans got restaurants in your blood" (191). Jo-Jo's response reveals an important fact. The script he offers for assimilation and success is also central to the formation of a genuine masculine identity. To not follow Jo-Jo's time-proven script is to risk failure and, consequently, to have your manhood questioned: if you are not the kind of man who wants to succeed (i.e. assimilate the American way) then "*what* sort of man are you?" Papi is not, counter to Jo-Jo's construction of his Dominican identity, a restaurant man, but he is also not a Bootstrap Puerto Rican who will make his money the way Jo-Jo did. Perhaps unconsciously, Papi believes that to simply accept Jo-Jo's way is to accept the categorization that all Latinos are the same.

Ramón's concerns and frustrations are made all the more troubling by his lack of monetary success, a lack which acts as a second blow to Papi's notion of his own masculinity. Keith Nurse describes the process by which Caribbean men are affected by the myths of masculinity they themselves help construct: "The social construction of the male breadwinner role is therefore an important mechanism by which men are ensnared into their own oppression. And because it is mythologized—taken out of historical context and made natural and eternal—it becomes an invisible force, especially to men" (15). Ramón's desire to come to the U.S. and make it on his own, convinced as he is of the strength of his own hands, competes with the

largely unconscious threat to his masculinity manifest in his failure as a provider. To *not* send for his family is to admit that he has come to the U.S. and failed to regain the role of provider which Dominican poverty had stripped him of. That this process of socialization is invisible means that the threat Papi perceives is one which emanates from an unknown source. The conflicts he experiences with the larger Anglo and Latino society, therefore, mix with the internal psychological battles rooted in his conditioning as a male.

Immigrant masculinity: Performance and Nostalgia

Throughout the course of the novel the nostalgia for this lost masculinity becomes inextricable from Papi's nostalgia for home, a home that, as time progresses, bears little in common with reality. The story "Fiesta, 1980" reveals both the compensatory masculinity which the immigrant male adopts but also the way in which this nostalgia for home manifests itself.

In "Fiesta, 1980" we see a different Papi. Having suffered a complete physical and emotional breakdown, Papi parts with his "American" wife and brings over his Dominican family. The Papi we see in this story is strikingly different from the demoralized, angry Ramón we see earlier in that he has finally given up resisting the script of assimilation by bringing over his family and making money (signaled in part by his Volkswagen van: "Brand new, lime-green, and bought to impress" [27]). Presumably it is the embracing of the American way which has reenabled Papi's masculinity. The masculinity we see now, however, is very clearly a compensatory machismo—a bravado which, like the bright green van, is adopted "to impress." Díaz sprinkles "Fiesta 1980" with details showing Papi's need to prove his masculinity: "He [Papi] and Miguel gave each other the sort of handshake that would have turned my fingers into Wonder bread" (31). The show of strength inherent in possessing a "manly" grip, is only superceded by the power of his voice, which he lords above everyone else's.

Tío Miguel and Papi's machismo is, of course, a show—squeeze harder, speak louder—but it relates directly to the way in which immigrant men actively reconstitute themselves. Integral to this reconstitution is the way in which they manage to reconstruct their past. With assimilation comes emotional distance and a renewed sense of masculinity which ultimately enables a very specific kind of selective reconstruction of the Dominican Republic. Uncle Miguel, speaking to Yuniór aged 11 or 12:

Do you want me to get you a drink? Tío asked. We got beer and rum.
Miguel, Mami said. He's young.

Young? Back in Santo Domingo, he'd be getting laid by now.

(31)

The reality of the Dominican Republic is one of near abject poverty—zinc roofs, partitioned rooms and plates of food where everything is boiled—yet, for the newly reconstituted immigrant male, home becomes the site of a virile hyper-sexuality. Poverty and desperation drop out of the masculine memory and all that remains is a gloating sexual past which only serves to further confirm a masculine identity which sees sex and the bravado of sexual conquest as the most concrete and salient ways in which to obtain and affirm manhood.

Conclusion

Papi's own struggle against both assimilation and emasculation leave him marked as one incapable of empathy. The danger, then, which the novel taunts us with is the very real possibility that Yuniór, with whom we have somehow come to sympathize, may someday turn out to be just like his father. That Yuniór would consciously reject empathy comes as no surprise, for as we have seen, Yuniór learns the lesson against empathy early in his life. Complicating this, however, is the fact that his development as a person takes place in a social context which devalues and, in fact, actively rejects empathy. For social scientist Pittu Laungani, "values, like air, pervade our cultural atmosphere, and we imbibe them often without a conscious awareness of their origins" (285). For Yuniór, the world where empathy is both limited and troubled becomes *fact*, and more insidiously, *truth*, a truth which he cannot perceive as merely possibility or even interpretation. "Yuniór's unconscious" assumption of values as well as his admission, in regards to his father, that "Our fights didn't bother me too much. I still wanted him to love me" (27) lead the reader to assume that Yuniór, like Rafa, is fated to become like his father. This is not, however, what Díaz has in mind.

The turn to empathy is by no means quick or easy but culminates with Yuniór's efforts in "Negocios" to construct the real story of his father's return. Yuniór's desire to imagine his father's return is a staple of his early childhood when he and Rafa would lay awake at night inventing the scene over and over again. Their grasp of reality, however, provides only wild fictions: "Rafa used to think that he'd come in the night, like Jesus, that one morning we'd find him at our breakfast table, unshaven and smiling. Too real to be believed. He'll be taller, Rafa predicted. Northamerican food makes people

that way” (87). The element of fantasy which marks Rafa’s story (the father as Jesus, the magical North American food which can make a grown man even taller) are entirely absent from “Negocios,” Yunior’s story about his father’s return. Even though, as he says, “anger has a way of returning,” (206) Yunior is finally able to finally imagine the “truth” of his father’s return by piecing together a story which chronicles the genuine hardships of his father’s time in the States, a time which, rather than make him taller, would break him down until he was much, much smaller than when he left. “Negocios,” however, ends poignantly: “The first subway station on Bond would have taken him to the airport and I like to think that he grabbed that first train, instead of what was more likely true, that he had gone out to Chiuto’s first, before flying south to get us” (207). This beautiful but also realistic portrait of his father is significant precisely because it neither heroicizes nor demonizes his abusive father. It represents Yunior’s ability to finally move beyond his anger and to construct this final, honest picture of his father. It is, I believe, Díaz’s impassioned declaration that to empathize is not, finally, to become vulnerable but rather to become human.

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