

## Drowned Out: Silence in Junot Díaz's Short Stories

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### Article abstract

This study proposes the silence that defined Junot Díaz, as revealed in his New Yorker (2018) essay “The Silence,” also permeates his fiction. I explore how the artistic and ideopolitical function of silence in *Drown* (1996) informs violence and masculinity. The representations of sound and its absence, though seemingly innocuous, articulate hierarchies that reinforce and contest masculine codes, while gestures transform them. *Drown*'s stories are “moment of truth” narratives predicated on the rupture of silence and subsequent protagonist development. This essay elucidates Yunior's complex relation to silence and his evolution from vocal boy to reticent adolescent and, eventually, to the author-narrator of the collection's stories.

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## *Drowned Out: Silence in Junot Díaz's Short Stories*

*Este estudio propone que el silencio que caracteriza a Junot Díaz en su ensayo "The Silence" publicado en The New Yorker (2018) también destaca en su ficción. Examino cómo la función artística e ideopolítica del silencio en Drown subyace la violencia y la masculinidad. Las representaciones del sonido y su ausencia, aparentemente inocuas, articulan jerarquías que respaldan y subvierten los códigos masculinos, mientras que los gestos los transforman. Los cuentos de Drown son narrativas del "momento de la verdad", donde la ruptura del silencio promueve el desarrollo del protagonista. Este ensayo expone la relación complicada que Yunior mantiene con el silencio en su evolución de niño vociferante a joven reservado y, finalmente, al autor-narrador de los cuentos de la colección.*

Palabras clave: *silencio, sonido, masculinidad dominicana, violencia, literatura latina de Estados Unidos*

*This study proposes the silence that defined Junot Díaz, as revealed in his New Yorker (2018) essay "The Silence," also permeates his fiction. I explore how the artistic and ideopolitical function of silence in Drown (1996) informs violence and masculinity. The representations of sound and its absence, though seemingly innocuous, articulate hierarchies that reinforce and contest masculine codes, while gestures transform them. Drown's stories are "moment of truth" narratives predicated on the rupture of silence and subsequent protagonist development. This essay elucidates Yunior's complex relation to silence and his evolution from vocal boy to reticent adolescent and, eventually, to the author-narrator of the collection's stories.*

Keywords: *silence, sound, Dominican masculinity, violence, U.S. Latino/a literature*

"Even as a boy my voice carried farther than a man's, turned heads on the street" (Díaz, "Aguantando" 83). So says Yunior de las Casas, the primary narrator of *Drown* (1996), who speaks from New Jersey and reflects upon a younger version of himself in his native Dominican Republic. When reading Junot Díaz's debut collection of short stories, however, one would hardly

consider Yunior to be outspoken. In fact, Yunior's self-censorship is his most salient feature; it characterizes his interactions with family members, friends, and romantic interests. Countless are the instances when Yunior opts not to speak up and, when he does, it rarely ends in his favor. Yunior avoids "mouthing off" to his older brother, Rafa, who routinely instigates and then settles verbal disputes with physical beatings, nor does he look at, or much less speak to, his father, whom he has dubbed "the Torturer." Yunior's reticence with male family members seems an attempt at self-preservation, yet he also withholds thoughts from women. He admits to being too terrified to court girls and regrets failing to remind his mother not to feed him before car trips. Yet nowhere does Yunior's suppressed speech seem so palpable as when he imagines his father being exposed at a family party: "*You're a cheater!*" (Díaz, "Fiesta, 1980" 40). The italicized font of the exclamation is a stark contrast to Díaz's relatively unpunctuated narrative and invokes an audible voice complete with raised pitch and inflection. For Yunior, the moment of verbal reckoning with his father does not come to pass. And while he occasionally incurs risk by speaking up, Yunior is plagued by the tension of speech and silence, increasingly opting for the latter.

Literary critics and interviewers alike have viewed Junot Díaz's protagonist, Yunior, as an authorial stand-in or alter ego making the author's life, including Díaz's disclosure of sexual abuse, something especially relevant to consider when analyzing his fiction. In the *New Yorker* essay "The Silence" (2018) Díaz recounts his childhood rape and its consequences: his inability to return to the simple pleasures of youth, like taking long walks or relishing the taste of *pastelones*, his need to wear an "adamantine mask of normalcy" to bury the past, his social withdrawal, the failed relationships that marked his youth as well as his adult life and, of course, his silence. He concludes: "More than being Dominican, more than being an immigrant, more, even, than being of African descent, my rape defined me" (Díaz, "The Silence"). Since the mid-twentieth century and the emergence of contemporary Latina/o literature, autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works of diverse genres – memoirs, novels, short stories – have been the primary vehicles for exploring identity and Díaz's *Drown* is no different. As such, Díaz's conversations, personal essays and biography may be read in conjunction with his fictional publications.

While Díaz's appeal to silence in the wake of his sexual assault cannot be overstated, it is not the first time he has discussed suppressed speech. In an interview with Edwidge Danticat shortly after the publication of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Díaz recalls the terrorizing ethos of Dominican dictatorship: "The fear people had of speaking, really speaking – that's not something I will soon forget" (Danticat and Díaz 94).<sup>1</sup> Trujillo's

well-known physical aggression and hypersexuality, both predicated on suppressed speech, yielded the state-run terrorism to which Díaz refers as well as notions of Dominican masculinity.<sup>2</sup> Díaz's early exposure to the nexus of violence-trauma-silence within the framework of Dominican dictatorship preceded his childhood sexual abuse where he confronted another form of the same destructive nexus. My purpose in referring to Díaz's own experiences is not to conflate fiction with individual reflection, but rather to underscore the analogous condition of silence that defined Díaz for much of his life and, as I will show, the deep-seated undercurrent of silence that runs throughout his writing.<sup>3</sup>

This study, thus, proposes an exploration of the intersection of artistry and cultural conditioning. I am interested in the ways in which silence permeates the collection of Díaz's short stories in the portrayal of Yunior and how this literary treatment of silence informs discussions of masculinity, particularly those related to Dominican dictatorship, hypermasculinity, and the trauma of abuse. As such, I consider silence more broadly as suppressed speech as well as the absence of sounds. In order to identify instances of suppressed speech, I discern and analyze the multiple voices of Díaz's narrative. Throughout the collection, Yunior, a character-bound narrator, recounts the events of his life and occasionally those of other characters. When relating his past, Yunior's internal monologue reveals the thoughts he wanted to verbalize at the time, but that remained unspoken. Yunior's description of the interaction between characters likewise indicates suppressed speech. As we will see, the characters devise alternate modes of communication, audible and silent, to replace spoken exchange. Lastly, the dialogue between Yunior and other characters is often truncated by the more dominant interlocutor, or supplanted by other sounds, notably, music and television. My analysis, thus, also accounts for the complex relationship between silence and sounds, wherein the latter may either rupture or give rise to yet another form of silencing.

The term "soundscape" is particularly useful in examining sounds other than speech, like music and television. By soundscape I mean ambient sounds that exist in relation to a specific locale and its listeners. The term, coined by R. Murray Schafer, is widely used in sound studies, though its meaning and application varies.<sup>4</sup> Curiously, my use of the term is aligned with the tenets of Schafer's initial conception. His approach to the soundscape addresses a passive acoustic environment as well as the listener's active engagement to assess and possibly reconfigure those same surrounding sounds. He envisioned this approach as an emerging interdisciplinary field called "acoustic design" (Schafer 4-5). The soundscape as it appears in *Drown* and other literary texts is a function of narrative

construction, subject to varying forms of articulation. Ambient sounds may be described by the narrator as the setting or portrayed as a more dynamic element that the characters not only perceive, but also modify for particular ends. This essay explores both.

In analyzing instances of silence and their relation to soundscapes, I seek to demonstrate Yuniór's character development from vocal boy to quiet adolescent and, ultimately, to author-narrator to engage questions of hypermasculinity and abuse. My discussion of "Ysrael," for example, explores how a soundscape establishes a vertical relationship between the brothers during their youth, and is employed in subsequent stories to articulate Yuniór's increasingly subordinate and muted position within gendered hierarchies. In "Fiesta, 1980," I argue that the suppressed speech imposed by patriarchal figures gives rise to other forms of communication that contest, reiterate, and reassess masculine codes of conduct. These silent and audible modes of exchange showcased in "Fiesta, 1980" are invoked again in "Drown," thereby establishing their literary and ideological significance. Lastly, in my study of "Boyfriend," I examine Yuniór as a young adult and the transgressions he commits. In this story, Yuniór has evolved from the target of hypermasculine aggression to a practitioner of it. Yet unlike his father or his brother, who suppress the speech of others, Yuniór's hypermasculine behavior is shrouded in silence. In other words, rather than an explicit show of dominance, Yuniór turns to covert acts of deception, such as eavesdropping, to manipulate others. Consideration of Díaz's narrative structure, however, suggests that this behavior signals more than just the modification of masculine codes. Yuniór's appeal to silence to manipulate Girlfriend, in particular, contrasts with the revelatory nature of his narratorial voice, evincing his final transformation from vocal youth and reticent adolescent to authorial persona. Since I take Díaz's artistry as a starting (and end) point, my work is situated alongside those of other scholars, such as Christopher González, who open the field of Latino/a literary criticism by giving "equal consideration to form and design as a means of better understanding the cultural and thematic concerns that resonate with Díaz's fiction" (5).

I begin my analysis, perhaps unexpectedly, by examining a story which privileges sight rather than sound. "Ysrael," is a tale about Rafa and Yuniór's quest to unmask a boy whose face was eaten by a pig. While the brothers are motivated by a curiosity to gaze upon the grotesque, Rafa also seeks to harass the boy and displays behavior typical of hypermasculinity. In *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (2006), Lucía M. Suárez proposes that Dominican masculinity based on Trujillo's systematic violence encourages physical, verbal, and sexual abuse to silence

its victims but also requires an ancillary silence or “erasure” for its progression (97).<sup>5</sup> Thus, when Rafa beats the disfigured boy, Ysrael, Suárez points out how Yunior makes no attempt to intervene on behalf of the abused. As such, the dual silence of violence is enacted by an aggressive perpetrator and a tacit witness who “erases” the assault. Given the boys’ interest in seeing Ysrael’s mutilated visage and the violence inflicted on this already marginalized figure, *Drown’s* opening story is often analyzed for its visual significance.

In “Words Stare like a Glass Eye,” Tobin Siebers attributes the brothers’ persecution of Ysrael to a fascination with the grotesque, also pursued in the visual arts (1318-19). For David Cowart, Ysrael’s mask serves as a cinematic intertext that may harken back to the popular films of Díaz’s childhood and teenage years. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Friday, the 13th* (1980), and *Mask* (1985) all portray individuals with disfigured faces, concealed or not (Cowart 197). In the realm of the literary, Cowart suggests J.D. Salinger’s “Laughing Man” from *Nine Stories* (1953) while Suárez proposes Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as a source for Ysrael as deformed victim-turned-vigilante (Cowart 194-95; Suárez 198). González, on the other hand, makes the correlation between “Ysrael” and similar quests to behold the forbidden in Greek mythology, but situates the masked Ysrael as a superhero, firmly within the genre of comics (16, 18-19). And, lastly, Anne Connor frames “Ysrael” within the Latina/o literary canon. She considers Ysrael among the disfigured faces in Cecile Pineda’s *Face* (1985) and Cristina García’s *The Agüero Sisters* (1997) that serve as tropes for questioning and articulating identities, social and cultural (148-49).

Whereas scholarly interest and the story’s title draw attention to Ysrael as a disfigured boy, the text’s opening lines, which also occupy a place of prominence, suggest an auditory assessment:

We were on our way to the colmado for an errand, a beer for my tío, when Rafa stood still and tilted his head, as if listening to a message I couldn’t hear, something beamed in from afar. We were close to the colmado; you could hear the music and the gentle clomp of drunken voices. I was nine that summer, but my brother was twelve, and he was the one who wanted to see Ysrael, who looked out towards Barbacoa and said, We should pay that kid a visit. (Díaz, “Ysrael” 3)

Instead of visual representation, each sentence focuses on the audible: Rafa “listens” to a message, the boys “hear” music and drunken voices, and Rafa “says” they should seek out Ysrael. This early depiction of silence – and its interruption – effectively sets the stage for the final scene, making the attack on Ysrael the culmination of a dynamic soundscape. That is, Díaz first

conveys the relation between fictional characters, as well as Yunior's dual role as protagonist and narrator, through ambient sounds punctuated by speech.

From the first line, Rafa is portrayed as superior to Yunior – not because of his adherence to a hegemonic masculine code – but because of his sharp auditory abilities. *En route* to the *colmado*, “Rafa stood still and tilted his head, as if listening to a message I couldn’t hear, something beamed in from afar” (Díaz, “Ysrael” 3). The key to Rafa’s auditory perception is two-fold. Like a TV or radio antenna that has been adjusted, Rafa’s static and bent position suggests a metaphor. The successful receiver (or listener) must first be able to capture the sound in order to decipher it. In other words, Rafa knows not only how to pick up the signal; he also makes sense of it. Yunior, on the other hand, is less experienced. He is unable to perceive the sound and, hence, inferior to Rafa. Instead, Yunior imagines the inaudible noise as a coded communiqué “beamed in” from another dimension. His description of the far-out sound is an early intimation of the science fiction and fantasy genres that consume him and later cast him as “nerd,” confirming, once again, his subordinate role in this fraternal relationship. And while Yunior, the character, cannot identify the initial noise, neither can his retrospective narrator self. As such, Rafa’s dominant status is established by his ability to perceive the sounds of the countryside remain even beyond the narrator’s purview.

As the boys move along, Yunior’s listening improves and Rafa’s role as sole auditor is eclipsed: “[W]e were close to the *colmado*; you could hear the music and the gentle clop of drunken voices” (Díaz, “Ysrael” 3). The overwhelming silence of the *campo* is now punctuated by some semblance of speech, which suggests Yunior’s impending arrival as well as his capacity to make out the scene. The sounds emanating from the *colmado* create a soundscape that enables Yunior to orient himself rather than rely on his brother for direction. Nonetheless, Yunior’s newfound self-assertion is fleeting. The distorted voices of the *colmado* paint an imprecise or partial depiction. The limitations of Yunior’s aural prowess are conveyed through the shift in the narrator’s use of first person to second: “*you* could hear the music and clop of drunken voices”. (Díaz, “Ysrael” 3). The second-person addressee “*you*” is invoked here to verify the sounds of the *colmado*. The narrator’s self-imposed distancing from the characters in order to appeal to “*you*” relegate Yunior to the background, emphasizing his limited potential in making out the scene despite his improved orientation.<sup>7</sup>

Rafa’s pronouncement in the closing line marks the final rupture of silence and reinforces the unequal relationship between the brothers: “We should pay that kid [Ysrael] a visit” (“Díaz, “Ysrael” 3). Rafa, literally and

figuratively, finds his voice. Now that the boys have fulfilled their uncle's request at the *colmado*, Rafa becomes the alpha male of the family and takes charge by issuing this directive. What's more, sound is no longer something perceived by the brothers, but rather produced between them. Rafa initiates a dialogue and is transformed from receiver into transmitter. The conversation, however, is suspended, for Yunior never responds. Instead, Rafa has the last word, leaving Yunior speechless and compliant, as character and narrator.

In ceding his word to Rafa, Yunior implies he will accompany his older brother on the quest and that their encounter with Ysrael will be a hostile one. To "pay someone a visit" is to taunt, to instigate. The silence of Yunior, the narrator, however, also produces an unmediated setting to the reader. Rather than recount the brothers' exchange, the narrator's absence allows for the boys to speak for themselves. Yet only Rafa voices his thoughts. Yunior's dual silence in the closing line, thus, is a tacit acknowledgement of Rafa's hypermasculinity, as well as an invitation to the reader to approximate a fictional setting where the brothers continue to display their roles of dominance and subordination in the attack on Ysrael.

Dominican male codes of conduct, thus, are first expressed through Díaz's handling of silence and sound in the opening lines. Through soundscape, narrative construct and dialogue, Díaz establishes the hierarchical order between the brothers to be developed in greater depth throughout this and other stories. What the opening lines of "Ysrael" also show is that the power dynamic inherent in Dominican masculinity, usually acknowledged for its overt expressions of violence, is captured in Díaz's artistry through seemingly unrelated subtleties, like Rafa's superior listening ability or innocuous contexts, as in running an errand to the local store, which not only shroud hypermasculinity but also present it as benign.

As with the opening lines of "Ysrael," the lead paragraph of "Fiesta, 1980" revolves around silence. In this second story, silence is rendered as suppressed speech rather than the absence of sound amidst an emerging soundscape. "Fiesta, 1980" takes place after the boys and their mother are reunited in the U.S. with father and husband, Ramón de las Casas. Papi's refusal to converse and his demand that others in the family refrain from discussion, however, are made evident from the start:

On the afternoon of the party Papi came back from work around six. Right on time. We were all dressed by then, which was a smart move on our part. If Papi had walked in and caught us lounging around in our underwear, he would have kicked our asses something serious. He didn't say nothing to nobody, not even my moms [*sic*]. He just



pushed past her, held up his hand when she tried to talk to him and headed right into the shower. (Díaz, "Fiesta, 1980" 23)

In this first scene, Yunior and Rafa surmise that Papi refuses to engage in dialogue, since he has just arrived home after having visited his Puerto Rican lover. Instead, Ramón hastens his trip to the bathroom where he can "wash off the evidence" and avoid questions of his whereabouts (23). Given Ramón's refusal to speak, he relies on gestures to convey his thoughts. "Pushing past" Mami, Ramón initiates an act of physical aggression and then raises his hand. The hand motion mimics a "stop" sign to indicate that Mami should keep quiet. Yet Ramón's gesture is more than mere directive, for it is preceded by the violent act of shoving his wife aside. Mami's self-censorship, thus, is not a response to a simple gesture with a singular message, but rather to her initial brush with violence that imbues Ramón's raised hand with further significance: she intuits not only the request for silence, but the possibility of being struck by Papi's raised hand should she not comply.

Ramón's threatening gestures lead to Yunior's fixation on hand movements, even when they are not overtly meant to be signs of communication. On several occasions Yunior notices Mami's hands, how they worked with great skill in preparing dinner or how their cool and smooth texture soothes his neck to relieve his car sickness (Díaz, "Fiesta, 1980" 34, 27). This, in contrast, to the "dry papery" feel of the Puerto Rican woman's hands that pressed down hard on Yunior as she helps him clean up after becoming ill (35). Like these observations, there are many others. Yunior, however, goes beyond mere description and imbues hand movements with meaning; they convey the unique relationships he maintains with each character, often with respect to gender. For instance, Yunior's perception of the handshake between Papi and Tío Miguel stresses their physical strength, a masculine attribute which Yunior does not possess, for he surmises their grip would have "turned my fingers into Wonder bread" (31). Yunior's deviance from Dominican hypermasculinity is further confirmed since he interprets a typical Dominican male show of strength in American terms, likening the gesture to sliced white bread. Relying on a bicultural frame of reference, then, Yunior learns to "read" hands; he extrapolates meaning from hand movements in the absence of verbal communication. Yet Yunior's reading, however perceptive, is limited to a one-way system in which he deduces meaning from observations and interactions without saying a word.

In order to establish a dynamic exchange, Mami and the boys resort to another kind of practice. After Yunior shoves Rafa for abandoning him, Rafa gives his brother a "*Don't start*" look (Díaz, "Fiesta, 1980" 26). The glare is a

warning for Yunior to settle down lest Rafa respond in kind. Mami also employs commanding stares: when Yunior enters the kitchen, she gives him the “eye” that says “Don’t stay long... Don’t piss your old man off” (34). Through glances the family members attempt to influence the actions of one another. The family’s reliance on visuality, therefore, is essential for their communication. In fact, they have developed their own kind of double vision where the eye not only perceives cues, but also creates them through looks and glances.

In “The Origins of Language,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau meditates on verbal and visual systems of communication. While the former requires the oral or written signs of language, the latter resorts to gesture and pantomime based on physical movement and sight. Although verbal communication and gestures can be equally complex and effective in transmitting ideas, Rousseau determines the most likely response to develop from each method: unspoken visual cues are conducive to imitation, while verbal exchange, spoken or read, heightens interest (290-92). In the de las Casas family, visual communication is an attempt to circumvent the verbal silence imposed by Ramón. However, the alternate forms of expression employed by Mami and the boys are also an imitation of Papi’s authoritarian gestures aimed at suppressing the will of others, as suggested by Rousseau. To give someone the eye in the de las Casas family is to curtail the actions of others through threat of violence, as does Ramón with his gestures.

Given the mostly antagonistic relationship Yunior has with his brother and the domineering presence of Papi, Yunior gravitates to a youngster at the party to whom he is not related: a mute boy named Wilquins. Although a minor character, Wilquins contributes much to the discussion of suppressed speech, masculinity, and silence. He also happens to share many of Yunior’s realities. Both, for example, bear patronyms. Yunior is the Hispanicized spelling of “Junior,” a common moniker for sons named after their fathers, while Wilquins is the Hispanicized form of the English “Wilkins,” where the suffix “kins” means “son of.” The names aptly characterize the boys’ subordinate position beyond progeny, as they are also subject to their fathers’ unyielding authority.

Although both boys are often deprived of a voice, Wilquins’ mute state physically precludes the ability to speak, making his relation to suppressed speech fundamentally different from that of Yunior. Rather than resort to a silent system of communication to circumvent suppressed speech, Wilquins appropriates sound to orchestrate his own soundscape. Such is the case when the kids watch television in the living room. Yunior comments on the outburst coming from the adjacent room, particularly from his father.

Bothered by the competing sounds coming from the TV and the kitchen, Wilquins turns up the volume to drown out Ramón. He uses the voices of the television as an audible gesture to supplant Ramón not because of what the TV characters say, but rather the loud tone in which they say it. As such, Wilquins reshapes his sonorous surroundings. He appropriates the spoken words of others to assert himself in a way that defies linguistic convention for the speech itself lacks meaning. Put another way: Wilquins creates an audible gesture, whose content is irrelevant, but whose making has meaning and serves to challenge paternal authority.

Indeed, Wilquins's TV tuning is successful on many counts. To start, the act is one of resistance to patriarchal dominance and, thus, has the potential to subvert it. In fact, Wilquins's method is so effective it draws the attention of his father in the kitchen, who then enters the living room to reprimand him. The father's response confirms the "audible gesture" was heard and perceived as an affront to both him and Ramón. Second, and despite expectation, Wilquins's father does not beat him; instead, he scolds him. Being chastised may seem a defeat for Wilquins, but the raised TV volume is not intended to go unnoticed or unchecked. It is meant to overpower Ramón's voice and in so doing question his superiority. Wilquins's appropriation of TV voices demonstrates that contesting patriarchal authority does not always result in physical reprisal and that conventional language, particularly dialogue, is not the only effective way to communicate.

Despite Wilquins's ingenious use of sound to challenge authority and convey meaning his father lowers the volume on the TV before returning to the kitchen, signaling the limits of Wilquins's actions and prompting a closer look at the scene. Indeed, by raising the TV volume Wilquins engages in the same sort of domineering behavior as Yuniór's father and suppresses Ramón's speech through a show of dominance. Moreover, Wilquins disregards the voices coming from the TV by ascribing them new meaning. Wilquins's appropriation of TV voices is, in short, an act of dual silencing. Boys like Wilquins and Yuniór who are subject to hypermasculinity ultimately inflict this oppression on others. They also engage this behavior in subtler and multifaceted ways, as in their choice of TV shows. The television is tuned to a movie with martial artist "Bruce Lee beat(ing) Chuck Norris into the ground of the colosseum", evincing the boys' immersion in a culture of aggression (Díaz, "Fiesta, 1980" 38). Wilquins, in turning up the volume, amplifies the violence on the screen, while Yuniór views the film instead of fighting with his brother. The movie serves either as a proxy in which Yuniór can vicariously express his aggression, or it acts as a

distraction. Either way, violence is the predominant manner in which the boys interact on a daily basis and seems to permeate their every activity.

Years later, as a teen in high school and living alone with his mother, Yunior repeats the hypermasculine behavior he has witnessed and to which he had been subject. In "Drown," Yunior prohibits his mother from conversing with Ramón, who now lives in Florida. Rather than raise his hand to signal that she cease talking: "I walk in on her and hang up the phone. That's enough, I say" (101). He also takes a cue from Wilquins. While watching the Spanish-language news, Yunior avoids answering his mother's questions by posing one of his own: "Can't you see I'm watching television?" (95). Although he does not raise the volume on the set, he draws attention to the juxtaposition of her voice with that from the news and invokes her silence by prizing the latter, which he describes as "drama for her, violence for me" (95). Once again, the violence of television is amplified and serves to invert, rather than subvert, the dynamics of dominance and subordination.

Yunior is not the only one who uses ambient sounds to stifle speech, nor are TVs the only electronics to give rise to the soundscape. To prevent Yunior from overhearing conversations with Ramón, his mother opens the refrigerator door so that the hum of the compressor muffles her voice (Díaz, "Drown" 101). Yunior's mother – also having been subject to Ramón's demands – has taken to modifying the sounds around her, to creating her own soundscape, in order to speak clandestinely. Although Yunior has assumed the role of his authoritarian father in regulating his mother's speech, he does not necessarily view the silence borne from subordination as weakness. Of his mother he observes: "She has discovered the secret to silence: pouring café without a splash, walking between rooms as if gliding on a cushion of felt, crying without a sound. You have traveled to the East and learned many secret things, I've told her. You're like a shadow warrior" (94). Yunior admires his mother for the knowledge and skill she has acquired to go undetected in her pursuits. Perhaps in recognition of their shared experience living under Ramón or as a model to emulate, Yunior relates to his mother and conceptualizes her in familiar, if not familial, terms. She is the "shadow warrior of the East," a silent practitioner of martial arts, a Bruce Lee or Chuck Norris turned ninja. Yunior, like his mother, now understands the "secret of silence." Rather than a hindrance, silence becomes the method through which the will is made manifest. Yunior's mother imparts new meaning to silence and, as such, regains agency. While Yunior's mother has become proficient in navigating the domineering behavior of Ramón and her teen-aged son, further assessment of Wilquins suggests a modification of masculine codes.

After turning down the volume on the TV, Wilquins continues to resort to alternate modes of communication and challenges authority when he proposes that Yuniór and Rafa join him in a game of dominos. The invitation is presented at a moment of heightened tension between the brothers and as a means to resolve the conflict. The quarrel begins when Yuniór poses a relatively innocuous question about Wilquins's hearing after learning the boy is mute: "Does he understand?" (Díaz, "Fiesta, 1980" 33). Not surprisingly, Rafa distorts Yuniór's inquiry to embarrass his brother and responds: "Of course, he understands. He's not dumb" (33). Rafa plays on the dual definition of "understand" to mean both aural perception and intellectual comprehension. Because of Rafa's reinterpretation, Yuniór's question appears to insult Wilquins's intelligence. Wilquins quickly picks up on Rafa's slight and challenges him to dominos, but not before recruiting Yuniór as his teammate. The two boys, both recently demeaned, pit themselves against Rafa in an attempt to regain their stature. Rafa, still in pursuit of girls, partners with Leti.

The choice of game and arrangement of players serve as an opportunity for Wilquins to once again "voice" his ideas and to dispel any misconception of his limitations, sensory or cognitive. This silent game, however, is more than just a means of self-affirmation. Dominos is a man's game, and by partaking in this competition of skill, Wilquins associates himself with a traditional male practice. Since Rafa is depicted as an aggressive and successful suitor for having partnered with Leti, the Wilquins-Yuniór domino win proves their intellectual superiority in a masculine activity, and discredits Rafa's sexual dominance. Wilquins's participation and victory in the game effectively shifts the measure of male proficiency from sexual conquest to intellectual skill.

The multifaceted nature of silence and its relation to masculinity, especially suppressed speech, is aligned with a particular narrative structure that Díaz employs throughout the collection. In "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It," Mary Louise Pratt explores the emergence of the modern short story and argues that it developed in response to the novel. As such, the short story incorporates many of the elements previously disassociated with the "longer" or more "complete" literary form (Pratt 182). Among the attributes ascribed to the short story, and of interest here, is the "moment of truth" narrative. These narratives, regarded as the canonical form of the modern short story, are predicated on the concealment of information and its subsequent revelation as a response to crisis. The disclosure of hidden knowledge brings about the "moment of truth," which in turn alters the protagonist's life trajectory (Pratt 182). While the novel recounts a life in its entirety, the "moment of truth" short story depicts a

transformative event in the life of the protagonist. *Drown*, however, is a collection of stories that center on Yunior and the de las Casas family. Rather than a singular “moment of truth,” *Drown* presents many revelatory moments.

Read as a collection, *Drown* is situated at the intersection of both genres in which one can trace Yunior’s transformation through a series of “truths” that are not fully realized until his life is narrated in retrospect.<sup>8</sup> Some examples are: Yunior’s sexual assault in “Ysrael”; the homosexual encounters with Beto in “Drown”; his eavesdropping in “Boyfriend”; and the visit with Nilda in “Negocios,” where he learns of Ramón’s double life with her in the U.S. All of these stories are “moment of truth” narratives. Yet, Yunior’s role in each is distinct. His fulfillment of different acts with respect to suppressed speech and its revelation alters his relation to silence and, as such, results in his continued transformation. Moreover, these stories take place over a span of time. “Ysrael” is set in the Dominican Republic when Yunior is nine. In “Drown,” Yunior is in his late teens, attending the final years of high school. “Boyfriend” recounts an episode during his years as a young adult living alone, and “Negocios” occurs when Yunior is a mature adult and seeks out Nilda, his father’s companion in the U.S., “many years later after he [Ramón] had left us for good, after her [Nilda’s] children had moved out of the house ... [and] Milagros had children of her own” (Díaz, “Negocios” 206). He evolves from vocal boy to reticent adolescent and, finally, to an adult who tells all, an evolution which corresponds to his development from character to narrator and author. I will return to all four stories to demonstrate such a transformation.

According to Michel Foucault, the need for revelation is, in part, due to the transition from sovereign to disciplinary power. He proposes that modern society has secularized the ritual of confession such that individuals are compelled to speak almost at any time and in any public place: individuals have internalized the external expectation to confess, for only in public is knowledge validated (Foucault 59-60). For Foucault, the confession is a ritual that Western Society has relied on since the Middle Ages for the production of truth. Aside from other rituals of observation and testing, confession has become one of the primary means to ascertain truth. Rather than requiring another to vouch for the self, “the truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of the individualization by power” (Foucault 58-59). Through the process of self-examination and speaking the truth, one could unburden the self of wrongdoings and, thus, become liberated (62). The need to confess, Foucault notes, has become so ubiquitous that not only have we “become a singularly confessing society” but literature, as well, has evolved from a pleasurable recounting of tales of

bravery or sainthood to “the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage” (59). Pratt’s analysis of the short story structured around a “moment of truth” and Foucault’s theory of secularized confession are both rooted in the rupture of silence. The short story narrative depends, then, on the revelation of something previously hidden, much like how the act of confession exposes a transgression from the past. In order for the act of confession to be fully realized, one must not only recount their misdeeds but direct those comments to a listener vested with the authority to absolve them. For Foucault, confession takes place within a power relationship where the interlocutor “requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (62). In each story, there are multiple spheres of authority in which the act of confession plays out. If omniscience forms the pact between narrator and reader, the latter requires the confession. He or she, thus, is ostensibly in a position of authority and has the power to condemn or exonerate the fictional persona, in this case, Yunior. For Yunior to be absolved in the fictional setting, however, the confession must take place between characters; it must be heard by a fictional listener with the power to judge and absolve.

In *Drown’s* lead story, we learn the brothers are involved in a series of wrongdoings on their journey to seek out the deformed boy: Yunior secretly takes his uncle’s empty Coke bottles and exchanges them for the deposit then buys some *pastelitos* at the *colmado*; Rafa and Yunior ride the bus without paying the fare; and Yunior is sexually assaulted on that very same bus ride by a man seated nearby. In each of the three cases, the infractions are made evident to other characters. How the confessions are made, to whom, and to what extent are all variables that have bearing on the realization of the confessional act and, hence, the character’s ability to unburden the self. Moreover, and perhaps of primary importance, are the characters’ attitudes towards confession, and the ostensible “need” to break the silence.

In the first instance, Chicho, the *colmado* owner, surmises that Yunior has taken the Coke bottles without permission and initially instructs him to return the bottle refund to his uncle. Shortly thereafter, Chicho recuses himself from any position of authority and announces “business is business” when he accepts the refund as payment for the *pastelitos* (Díaz, “Ysrael” 11). Chicho denies knowledge of any misconduct and, thereby, strips himself of the power to judge while simultaneously suppressing Yunior’s would-be confession to the listener vested with the most authority to absolve: his uncle. Of note is Yunior’s passive role in this first scene; he does not initiate

the confession, nor does he fess up to the stealing once he is questioned. Furthermore, Chicho's decision to exact payment from Yunior undermines any encouragement to voice the truth and absolve the self. This runs contrary to the notion of confession as a compulsory act. Advocacy for secrecy over admission is also echoed by Yunior's role model, Rafa, when he denies having skipped the bus fare.

There is, however, an instance where Yunior does attempt to break the silence. Once on the bus, Yunior carefully lowers himself into his seat to prevent the *pastelito* in his pocket from staining his shorts, but to no avail. A man with big teeth and a clean fedora notices Yunior's attempt to avoid soiling his clothes. By professing to share in Yunior's concern about the stained attire – a plausibility given his “clean” fedora – the man establishes a sense of trust with Yunior. He does so, however, only to take advantage of it. Having gained Yunior's confidence, the man begins to rub out the stain on Yunior's shorts. The behavior soon turns devious when his spot cleaning becomes a pretext for fondling: “He spit in his fingers and started to rub at the stain but then he was pinching at the tip of my pinga through the fabric of my shorts. He was smiling” (Díaz, “Ysrael” 12). No longer the perpetrator of minor infractions and potential penitent, Yunior is now the victim of sexual abuse and seeks to denounce the crime of the other, enacting a confession by proxy. Yunior responds by pushing the man away and then gives voice to the transgression. He at once berates and denounces the man, calling him a “low-down pinga-sucking pato” (12), but Yunior is bullied into keeping quiet. No one on the bus seems to notice and the incident goes unacknowledged.

Yunior is so disturbed that he has a second outburst and begins crying shortly after he gets off the bus. While Yunior's upset has the potential to break the silence, Rafa assumes Yunior is crying because they did not pay the fare collector. Yunior's tears are likely the result of his recent sexual assault, given the gravity of the circumstance. His weeping also begins when he sees Rafa take off his shirt, suggesting that this act of exposure is evocative of Yunior's recent trauma (Díaz, “Ysrael” 13). Rafa, less concerned with the cause of Yunior's disturbance, browbeats his younger brother for his emotional breakdown and leaves him speechless, enforcing the idea that silence be maintained in the face of transgression. Rafa, of course, is acting according to masculine codes that prohibit any expression of vulnerability. Yunior, as younger brother and victim of Rafa's aggression, already begins to exhibit a more reticent nature.

Yunior's inability to speak up and correct Rafa's misinterpretation of his crying, curiously, stymies two confessions. On the one hand, Yunior's silence prevents a recounting of the sexual assault, which would constitute



confession by proxy. On the other, Yuniór fails to redress Rafa, who, in turn, is not made to answer for his scolding of Yuniór. Furthermore, by saying that Yuniór has to “get tougher” and sexualizing his weakened state by calling him a “pussy,” Rafa verbally reenacts the physical abuse Yuniór suffered on the bus (Díaz, “Ysrael” 14). Yuniór’s attempts to break the silence about his abuse on the bus and subsequently with Rafa are not only unsuccessful attempts at confession; he also suffers further victimization at the hands of his brother, which shapes his sense of masculinity, sexuality and silence in later stories. What all three of the aforementioned scenes also demonstrate are the repeated instances where Yuniór is discouraged from admitting to his wrongdoings as well as pronouncing the wrongdoings of others. For Yuniór, the culture of Dominican masculinity is replete with silence.

Yuniór suffers two more episodes of sexual transgression in “Drown,” set during his last years in high school. A comparative analysis of the assault on the bus and the sexual encounters with Beto establish consistencies that puts Yuniór’s transformation into relief. To begin, the structural and thematic parallels surrounding the sexual encounters in “Drown” and “Ysrael” are many. For one, the initial description of Beto, Yuniór’s best friend and the initiator of the unwanted sexual advances, casts him not only as a dominant figure, but also as a man much older than his years. According to Yuniór, Beto’s entrance into his apartment had the power to stir his mother from her room and summon Yuniór from the basement. It was not merely his presence that conjured them to flock to him; it was the sound of his voice, a voice Yuniór describes as “crackled” and reminiscent of older men, like “uncles or grandfathers” (Díaz, “Drown” 91). While the two were only a year apart in school, Yuniór’s impression of his friend as an older man ascribes to Beto the superiority that goes along with seniority. It also exaggerates their age differential, making it more akin to the one Yuniór experienced with the man wearing the clean fedora when Yuniór was only nine years old. Indeed, Yuniór appears to extend the same distaste he had for the man on the bus to Beto when he refers to him degradingly as a “pato” (91).

Curiously, all three scenes of sexual encounter share similar soundscapes that serve the same purpose, highlighting the importance of sound and its ability to silence. For instance, the man on the bus starts a conversation with Yuniór by complaining that the bus driver’s radio is tuned in to “La chica de la novela” (Díaz, “Ysrael” 11). It turns out that in addition to the song being played one too many times, the volume was turned up one too many notches. With the radio blaring the man changes topic, now focusing on the grease stain on Yuniór’s shorts. Their voices are drowned out by the noise, making Yuniór vulnerable to the man. What’s more: the

driver, one of two authorities on the bus, becomes distracted by the song: “too busy with his radio to notice what was happening” (12). Music here creates a diversion and acoustic cover up, silencing the sexual abuse and Yunior’s objections. Years later, when Beto reaches into Yunior’s pants as the two are seated on the couch, the TV similarly serves as a distraction to mask the trauma of the sexual encounter: “I kept my eyes on the television, too scared to watch” what Beto was doing (Díaz, “Drown” 104). TVs, radios, and their soundscapes are intimately tied to silence, trauma, and violence in such a way that they take on these connotations even when referring to scenes devoid of these subjects. Such is the case when Yunior drives through Washington Heights and notes the “merengue’s falling out of windows like TVs” (137). The description is meant to convey the dense, powerful, and prolific sounds of music heard in the neighborhood, but there is a violence to this simile. The synesthesia couples otherwise dissonant sensory perceptions: the hearing required for the song with sight or touch for the falling TV. Moreover, the intangible soundwaves of the song contrast with the physical weight of the television set, rendered evermore apparent given the allusion to its freefall from the window. Both instances evoke violence, whether for conflating dissonant sensory perceptions or for the implied, yet inevitable, destruction of the television when it hits the pavement.

For Yunior to break the silence, denounce another’s transgression and thus submit a confession by proxy, he needs not only to verbalize but to overcome the distraction and the noise of the soundscape. While he attempts such an act on the bus, his responses to Beto infer that the subjugation inflicted by the man and Rafa contribute to Yunior’s increasing reticence and submissiveness. When Beto makes his first sexual advance by reaching into Yunior’s shorts, Yunior conveys that the actions are unwanted, much like he did on the bus. Yet rather than a direct objection or an explicit command, Yunior asks: “What the fuck are you doing?” (Díaz, “Drown” 104). The question reveals Yunior’s hesitation and his expectation that Beto withdraw: “I asked, but he didn’t stop” (104). Yunior, the narrator, also describes Beto’s hand as “dry,” insinuating a potentially unpleasant experience. The descriptor is reminiscent of Ramón’s Puerto Rican lover for she, too, had “dry (papery)” hands, which Yunior considered irritating when she subjected him to a harsh scrubbing (Díaz, “Fiesta, 1980” 35). Nonetheless, by posing his directive as a question, Yunior’s objection is muted, especially when compared to the rant he directs to the man on the bus.<sup>9</sup> Yunior later anguishes over the episode with Beto, afraid that he will become “abnormal,” yet he is compelled to return to Beto’s apartment the next night. The two go through the same ritual: they sit on the couch and turn on TV.

This time, Beto initiates and then asks permission. Yuniór doesn't respond, making his silence absolute and his submission utterly complete.<sup>10</sup>

In "Boyfriend" Yuniór becomes a *de facto* confessor rather than potential confessant. The change in perspectives yields self-reflection and ultimately alters his relation to silence resulting in the fully developed and adult persona of Yuniór, the narrator, we later see in "Negocios." In "Boyfriend," Yuniór accidentally overhears a woman who lives in the apartment below and learns the most private details of her disintegrating romantic relationship. The scenario reads as a confession because of the confidential subject matter to which Yuniór is privy, and its allusion to the religious rite. Much like the priest that listens through a screen inside of a confessional booth, Yuniór is "separated by a floor, wires and some pipes," through which he perceives the voices of Girlfriend and her partner emanating from below (Díaz, "Boyfriend" 112). As he learns the "truth" about the couple, Yuniór draws parallels between their relationship and his own. He identifies and, to a certain extent, empathizes with Girlfriend's emotional distress such that her crying "would have broken [his] heart if it hadn't been so damn familiar" (112). Whether Yuniór witnessed the emotional outburst of his former girlfriends or felt the heartache of breakup, he makes clear that he has endured many failed relationships. Yet he admits a certain emotional callousness that he has developed, being "numb to that sort of thing" and having grown "heart leather" (112). The emotional outburst and its subsequent denial is reminiscent of Yuniór's earlier trauma of unwanted sexual engagement. Neither Rafa, the pedophile on the bus, nor Beto validated Yuniór's objection and pleas. Yuniór, like Girlfriend, knows the suffering that comes from the inability to expose emotional, verbal, and physical abuse. Yet, he denies his neighbor's outburst, as others denied his. That Yuniór is now "numb to that sort of thing" (112) demonstrates the persistence of imposed masculine codes, and the silencing of sexual and emotional abuse.

As character, Yuniór is not yet capable of confession. In fact, Yuniór's next step only invites more of the same failed and damaging emotional interactions. Rather than an innocent bystander and *de facto* confessor, Yuniór becomes an agent of his own wrongdoing as he continues to listen in on his downstairs neighbor without her consent. After eavesdropping for a month, he uses the information to prey on Girlfriend's emotional instability. In short, Yuniór takes advantage of Girlfriend's predicament by inviting her for coffee when she is most vulnerable, not to assuage her pain but in hopes of cajoling her into a relationship (Díaz, "Boyfriend" 115). Yuniór never admits his transgressions to Girlfriend. Instead, they serve as clandestine and wrongful acts, each one an opportunity for him to break the silence as

he ultimately does when he becomes the narrator and author of his own story. Yunior's role as unsolicited confessor demonstrates his capacity for self-reflection regarding his own relationship track record, which is made explicit in this and other stories by Yunior the narrator.

Only in the closing pages of *Drown* do we witness Yunior's transformation from protagonist to narrator. Years after Ramón abandons the family, Yunior looks up Nilda, his father's companion in the U.S. with whom he has a child. Yunior is an adult when he visits, but the scene is a familiar one. He sits quietly with her in the kitchen; their lack of conversation draws attention to the soundscape outside. After sipping *café con leche* and hearing the occasional sounds of a neighborhood stickball game, Yunior recovers his will to question Nilda about her life with Ramón – the very substance of which has informed the story we are reading. Yunior has found his voice as narrator, as confessant, and has his verbal reckoning after all not by speaking up, but rather through silence. He has exposed the oppression and violence of Dominican hypermasculinity, the sexual abuse, and his role as both subject and perpetrator throughout the pages of the book.

Throughout this first collection, Díaz's handling of sound and silence in its various forms drives the interactions between characters and narrator. When *Drown* is read with an ear for sound there is an eye-opening dissonance: a quest to "see" a disfigured boy can be understood as a dynamic soundscape that articulates the fictional dimensions and a hierarchical fraternal relationship, which characterize this and other stories; a minor and mute character voices some of the most effective challenges to suppressed speech and traditional Dominican masculinity; the role of confessor, predicated on silence and listening, can be just as powerful and transformative as speaking; and one brief line mentioned in passing reveals far more about Yunior's voice than anything else he or the narrator says or withholds: "Even as a boy my voice carried farther than a man's, turned heads on the street" (Díaz, "Aguantando" 83). The statement describes Yunior's tantrum one day in the Dominican Republic after Mami refuses to let him see photos of his father who has recently emigrated to the United States. But just how far does Yunior's voice carry? Far from drowned out, Yunior's "voice" extends from one narrative realm to another; it travels from the Dominican Republic to the U.S. and beyond, all without making a sound for this author-narrator has also discovered the strength of silence.

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## NOTES

- 1 This silencing is met with resistance, which prevents Caribbean diasporic peoples from developing their own language. For Díaz, the dual silencing of oppressed speech and resistance led to his sustained interest in literary genres at the margins – fantasy and science fiction – as well as his use of uncomfortable or disturbing language (Danticat 92, 94).
- 2 For further discussion of Dominican masculinity and politics, see Lucía M. Suárez's assessment of Christian Krohn-Hansen, who concludes that Dominican men, oppressed by Trujillo's omnipotence, forged their own masculinity in his likeness (97-98). See also Horn's review of interdisciplinary scholarship, including anthropology, sociology, and political science. She, too, argues that hegemonic masculinity "exists alongside a variety of Dominican masculinities and femininities" (11). Furthermore, hegemonic masculine norms serve as ideals that inform everyday situations. Rather than a set of attributes, Dominican masculinity is rendered as a "structural force" (Horn 8-15).
- 3 In "'The página is still blanca,'" Jones explores silence in Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) as the historical omissions of the Trujillo dictatorship. In addition to Oscar's attempt to fill-in the blanks that were censored, Jones argues the novel's language and organization create further lacunae to present the reader with a partially censored fictional work. In turn, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* requires an engaged reader to address the omissions in the text.
- 4 In "Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies," Ari Kelman discusses the inconsistencies in Schafer's definition and its (mis)appropriation by contemporary scholars. He argues that Schafer's notion of the soundscape conflates ambient sound with acoustic design, wherein the listener distinguishes between sounds to identify those "that matter." Schafer encourages this selective hearing to create a preferred soundscape from the one that exists (Kelman 217-18). For Schafer, the active process of listening had ecological objectives, namely, to counteract modern sounds or "noise pollution" with "pastoral" or natural ones (Kelman 216-17).
- 5 See Birkhofer and Riofrio. In her study, Birkhofer argues that the visual snapshots in "Aguantando" circumvent the silence of dictatorship, and function to both recover a suppressed history and articulate a counter narrative (43-44). See Riofrio's analysis of "Ysrael" for a discussion of the consequences of immigration on Dominican masculinity. In particular, he explores the emergence of surrogate male role models for sons who are left fatherless. These surrogates are often other boys who distort traditional male

- codes into a “hypermasculinity hopelessly disconnected to reality and selfish in the way that only adolescent machismo allows” (Riofrio 27). See also Irizarry on the trope of arrival in immigration narratives.
- 6 T.S. Miller explores Díaz’s integration of the science fiction discourse in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. For Miller, Díaz’s extensive engagement with the genre is without “almost any precedent in the author’s corpus of unequivocally “mainstream” short stories, including his 1996 collection *Drown*” (92). He does, however, acknowledge a few isolated allusions to science fiction in Díaz’s collected stories, such as “No Face’s” resemblance to a masked comic book superhero (Miller 106).
  - 7 For further discussion of the self-imposed alienation of second-person narration see Mieke Bal’s *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (29-31). Bal argues that second-person narrative cannot effectively address the reader nor does it address a character. As such, there is no addressee to validate the subjectivity of the narrator, resulting in a sense of alienation.
  - 8 Paganelli Marín also cites Pratt in his discussion of genre and proposes that Díaz recounts Yunior’s life through the collection of short stories, thus “eschewing” the novel. He argues the “constant movement in space and time in the telling of each story mirrors the construction of Yunior’s subjectivity,” and that the fluidity of narrative development “emphasizes a fluidity in class, race, ethnicity and gender” (335). He examines, in particular, a queering of Yunior’s sexuality. For Paganelli Marín, the spatiotemporal fluidity of the narrative juxtaposes flashbacks of homophobic violence with Yunior’s encounter with Beto, thereby underscoring the fluidity in Yunior’s sexual identity (337-38).
  - 9 See “Creating a ‘Novel’ Dominican Male Subjectivity.” Paganelli Marín discusses the fluidity of Yunior’s sexual identity and its relation to narrative fluidity, particularly Díaz’s use of “anachronies”, a term he borrows from Mieke Bal to refer to the seamless movement between space and time - past, present and future (Paganelli Marín 338).
  - 10 For an analysis of Yunior’s relationship and sexual encounters with Beto, see Ylce Irizarry’s “This is How You Lose It: Navigating Dominicanidad in Junot Díaz’s *Drown*.” Irizarry proposes that Yunior is made vulnerable to homosexuality in the absence of Ramón’s “über-heteronormative masculinity” (156-157). She also interprets the hierarchical relation between Yunior and Beto as a challenge to stereotypes that conceive of homosexual men as passive given that Beto enacts the dominant role. Lastly, her nuanced treatment of the term “pato” addresses a more complex Latin American discourse on homosexuality. Men who are the “givers” of homosexual acts do not risk their heteronormative masculinity; only receivers or men in the passive role are considered gay. Yunior engages in two homosexual acts with Beto – one in which he is passive, the other in which he is the receiver – and distinguishes

between the two. As such, he no longer conceives of heteronormative masculinity in binary terms (Irizarry 156-60). I propose, however, that Yuniór is passive in both encounters.

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