

# “Let Me Confess”: Confession, Complicity, and #MeToo in Junot Díaz’s *This is How You Lose Her* and “The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma”

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“I’m not a bad guy,” begins Yuniór, the narrator of Junot Díaz’s 2012 short story collection *This is How You Lose Her* (“Sun” 3). Yet Yuniór’s tone is immediately defensive and suspicious: If he is not, in fact, a “bad guy,” what compels him to persuade the reader otherwise? Yuniór appeals to readers directly, establishing from the collection’s very beginning an uncomfortable dynamic of complicity in which he will reveal compromising details about his love life—in this first story, Yuniór has been caught cheating on his girlfriend, Magda—in exchange, apparently, for some kind of moral absolution. This intimate, confessional style makes readers complicit in Yuniór’s bad behavior, forging an uneasy textual intimacy that he reaches for precisely when romantic and sexual intimacy are failing. I interrogate the role of confession in *Lose Her* in the context of immigrant self-writing in the United States and authoritarian legacies of hypermasculinity in the Dominican Republic. The textual dynamics of intimacy and complicity that Yuniór’s confession creates are intentionally uncomfortable, designed to expose the pressures on his self-expression as a Dominican American narrator caught between an authoritarian Dominican past and an oppressive US present.

By confessing his womanizing and infidelities, Yuniór conjures the Dominican Republic’s dictatorship under Rafael Trujillo (1930–61), who manipulated traditional Dominican notions of male honor by establishing a ruthless, hypersexualized persona and through his rampant “consumption of women . . . through sexual conquest” (Derby 111). Trujillo’s dictatorship, known in Spanish as the *trujillato*, also lends a sinister resonance to the meaning of “confession” for Dominicans, as it was a period in which information was a means of control and ordinary people were forced to comply with the regime, creating a gap between private and public selves. My reading complements Ana Rodríguez Navas’s brilliant analysis of gossip in Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar*

*Wao* (2007). Rodríguez Navas explores gossip in its historical and cultural context in the novel, exposing it as one of the tools through which Yunior transgresses the boundaries between private and public life, draws the reader into the story, and produces a sense of intimacy and complicity. My analysis of confession, like Rodríguez Navas's, emphasizes how these storytelling modes are entangled with the Dominican Republic's dictatorial past and maintain an ambivalent relationship with authoritarian power. Although officially a past event, the *trujillato* continues to haunt a present in which Dominican Americans such as Yunior also struggle against restrictive notions of selfhood in the contemporary US diaspora. I therefore interrogate the significance of confession for US minority writers who are expected to divulge their intimate lives for mainstream entertainment, proposing that Yunior's narration functions as a metatextual critique of these pressures on Latinx and other minority writers.

I push further, however, to critique the extent of Yunior's metatextual self-awareness as he confesses his masculine misdeeds: what, precisely, is the objective of his confessional text? While scholars and the author himself have embraced the idea that confession bears witness to a legacy of toxic masculinity, this reading often celebrates confession as an end in itself without fundamentally challenging the marginalization and abuse of women by men such as Yunior. Finally, I explore confession through Díaz's own, very public confession in a 2018 *New Yorker* essay disclosing his experience as a survivor of sexual abuse and the decades of "hurt" he caused intimate female partners as a result of his unprocessed trauma ("Silence"). While the practice of reading minority writers such as Díaz through a biographical framework is fraught, I suggest that by inviting readers to read his biography into his fiction—closing the gap between public and private selves—Díaz also invites (most likely unwittingly) critiques of his own authorial authority and desire to confess during the era of #MeToo. The global explosion of #MeToo in 2017 has provoked more nuanced public discussions around gender and abuses of power, leading to closer scrutiny of the meaning of confession and accountability.<sup>1</sup> Díaz's fictional representations of Yunior and his own autobiographical essay suggest that simply confessing male misbehavior does not in itself constitute a meaningful change.

Many of these issues around confession are distilled in an early review of *Drown* (1996), the debut short story collection that shot Díaz to literary stardom. In his *New Republic* review from 1996, James Wood makes casual use of the term "confess." He claims that Díaz's characters are people "without any obvious inner life." "Although they have pasts," Wood writes, "they are stunned and menaced by their present. They do not appear to want to confess their pasts; they narrate their stories to the reader as if we were oppressing them, and as if their inner lives were criminal and cordoned." Comparing *Drown* to American immigrant literature written a century earlier, Wood finds it lacking, concluding that Díaz writes, "an immigrant literature not too anguished about its immigration" (42). He bases

this criticism largely on the self-expression of characters and what he views as a lack of experimentation with language; this is notable because, since Wood's review was published, Díaz has received much commercial and critical praise precisely for his playful voice and language games, although this has mainly centered on *Oscar Wao*.<sup>2</sup>

Wood, of course, was writing about the debut work of an author whose oeuvre has since provoked a distinct body of critical analysis and been granted canonical status, which in turn shape how *Drown* is now read and received. Nevertheless, Wood's early review is of interest precisely because he makes astute observations about how Dominican American selfhood is inscribed in Díaz's work while failing, in revealing ways, to recognize its broader (Dominican and American) contexts. What Wood authoritatively claims to be the limitations of Díaz's work—elements that close down a reader's engagement with the text—can be productively deployed to opposite effect: as questions about a cordoned and criminalized selfhood that open up the existential anguish at the core of texts such as *Drown* and *Lose Her* and a departure point to examine the unique dynamic established between narrator and reader. Eschewing the finality of Wood's observations, I turn them into questions: why might a narrator such as Yunior feel as if the reader was oppressing him? Why might he feel as if his inner life is "criminal and cordoned"?

Some of the answers to these questions lie in the implied expectation for confession that Wood's review contains. Although they *have* pasts, these diasporic Dominicans do "not appear to want to confess" them; they are "stunned and menaced by their present" (42). Wood's perspective, as an "institutional authority" who represents the mainstream literary establishment in the United States (Sehgal), suggests that a successful immigrant narrative hinges on a willingness to confess the anguish of the inner life, the immigrant's most intimate self. Yet self-writing—in the form of memoir, autobiography, and coming-of-age fiction—has occupied an ambivalent role in establishing minority writers in the canon. While a historically important literary genre for marginalized and minority communities, life-writing can prove limiting (Japtok 24).<sup>3</sup> Life-writing by Latinx and Chicanx writers, as Ylce Irizarry has noted, is often more highly valued than their experiments in form and genre, both by marketing in the publishing industry and scholars who "tend to read and teach books through biographic criticism, not through the genres they cultivate" (27). A hunger for self-writing reflects a mainstream literary market happy to position minority writers as cultural spokespeople and to consume their private lives. This conflation of authors with their characters can therefore be reductive and invasive, based on the idea that readers feel "entitled to know everything as they approach a text . . . with the conspiratorial intimacy of a potential partner" (Sommer ix). Díaz's fiction plays with audience, intimacy, and self-expression to intentionally highlight mainstream expectations for minority confession. However, when Díaz ventures

into explicitly autobiographical territory in his *New Yorker* essay, he closes the gap between autobiography and fiction, private and public, to the extent that critiques around Yunior's motives for confession (absolution, authorial control) can be leveled at the author himself.

### "Let Me Confess"

As if responding to the kind of critique of *Drown* exemplified by Wood in 1996, Díaz's story collection, *This is How You Lose Her*, begins with a confession. However, instead of emphasizing the more common first-person point of view, Yunior's confessional style makes use of the second-person "you," which fosters a much more unusual—and uncomfortable—reader-narrator relationship. While *Lose Her* does not draw attention to its own construction in the same way as Díaz's novel *Oscar Wao*—which deploys footnotes, asides, subheadings, and overt metatextual commentaries about the likeness between writers and dictators (*Oscar Wao* 97)—its use of the second person nevertheless underscores how the relationship between reader and narrator is shaped by readers' expectations of how the text will function. In "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," the opening story in *Lose Her*, in which he cheats on his girlfriend Magda, Yunior repeatedly alludes to "another kind of story" he would tell without explicitly explaining what prevents him from doing so: "If this was another kind of story, I'd tell you about the sea" (9). Yunior introduces into the story a list of details with the repeated preface, "I'd tell you," holding these details at bay in a hypothetical state (9–10). The list alludes to the chaos and poverty of the capital but also to Yunior's family, his birthplace, his "abuelo and his campo hands." These personal glimpses, however, are quickly shut down, with Yunior concluding that such details would make it a different kind of story—and that this one is already proving too complex to convey to an outsider. Yunior's narration conjures a shadow story that haunts the main narrative, one too intimate to divulge. Instead, he says, "You'll have to take my word for it. Santo Domingo is Santo Domingo. Let's pretend we all know what goes on there" (10).

I want to highlight the three pronouns he uses: "I" (implied in "my word"), "you," and "we." Narrative voice has traditionally played an important role in immigrant self-writing in the United States: through stories of a protagonist "I," a community of "we" is evoked and humanized in mainstream consciousness, perhaps because stories of individual becoming are palatable to an American culture that values individualized stories of success (Japtok 24). Narrators in early immigrant texts, Werner Sollors notes, also frequently distinguish between past and present selves through the use of third and first person, respectively, emphasizing the distance between these selves (32–33). Díaz often employs the second-person "you," with the appearance of closing this gap, providing a story of self that is

even more intimate than one in the first person. In fact, a second-person perspective simultaneously marks distance as it highlights—in the passage above, for example—that Yunior has information “you” do not: “you” will have to take his word for it, reinforcing his position of control as authoritative voice in the narrative.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, the textual “we” functions uneasily. What community, if any, is bridged across the distance between the textual “I” and “you”? Who are “we”? Furthermore, what knowledge do “we” actually share about Santo Domingo and what merely makes non-Dominican readers *feel* as if they know this place with, to borrow Doris Sommer’s phrase, the “conspiratorial intimacy of a partner” (ix)? The conspiratorial tenor comes through the sharing of secrets; significantly, when Yunior begins the passage about his return to the capital, he uses the words “Let me confess: I love Santo Domingo.” Yunior’s tone is characteristically conversational, featuring the kind of oral tics that a raconteur uses to draw a listener into the story. At the same time, Yunior’s metatextual signaling at how the narrative is constructed hints at coercion, a lack of choice. That Yunior (feels he) has to “confess” that he loves Santo Domingo suggests that this information is out of the ordinary, that it should remain hidden, and that he feels guilty or ashamed of this love—or a combination of all of the above. His tone in the passage following the confession hints that what he loves may be clichéd tropes of diasporic narratives of immigration and return: returning Dominican Americans, their gifts for relatives, passengers clapping when the wheels hit the runway. However, if it was “another kind of story” (“Sun” 9), Yunior would also map out a more complex portrait of a beloved but problematic birthplace, whose contradictions apparently exceed the bounds of the present narrative.

Describing the Santo Domingo that is real to him would make it “another kind of story,” one that is perhaps not marketable or even translatable in the US mainstream. Where Wood suggests that characters in *Drown* appear oppressed by the reader, impairing their ability to communicate, in “Sun” and throughout *Lose Her*, Yunior intentionally underlines this dynamic. These are the “readership demands for authenticity” that shape Yunior’s narration (Machado Sáez, *Market* 163)—he is not free to tell the full story in the way that he wants. This fact is subtly reinforced in the examples of direct address mentioned above: “You know how it is” (Díaz, “Sun” 3), “What can I tell you” (11), “Let me tell you” (5), “You don’t even want to hear” (4). These interjections casually emphasize the fact that Yunior selects information for his story based on what he can and cannot tell the reader, what he assumes the reader does or does not want to know, and, finally, what the reader will “let” him confess. The pressure leads him to suggest openly: “Let’s pretend we all know what goes on” in Santo Domingo (10). The text thus forges intimacy with the reader, in both senses of the word “forge.”<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, it creates a familiarity that is sometimes unsettling, in that it implicates the reader in Yunior’s guilt—a dynamic of complicity

that I explore below. On the other hand, this intimacy is shown to be a performance: Yunior is willing to pretend he and the reader have an understanding in order to tell the story the mainstream wants to hear.

In fact, in the epigraph to *Drown*, Díaz had already signaled this inherent tension common to diasporic Caribbean writers and immigrant and postcolonial writers more broadly: how to write about and resist imperial histories while using the colonizer's tongue. *Drown's* epigraph comes from a poem by Gustavo Pérez Firmat and warns the reader:

The fact that I  
am writing to you  
in English  
already falsifies what I  
wanted to tell you.  
My subject:  
how to explain to you that I  
don't belong to English  
though I belong nowhere else.

Analyzing Díaz's adoption of this poem, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez point out that the meaning of "you" here is ambivalent, unclear whether it refers to "an insider or outsider to the Latino/a community." They propose a tension between the two instances of "you," where the first refers to the non-Latinx, dominant literary mainstream readership to whom the narrator writes in English—an act that limits authentic communication with the second and distinct "you," which here signifies the Latinx community, the community that the poem's narrator (and by implication, Díaz's narrator) really wants to address (77). Indeed, this epigraph signals that *Drown's* very premise is precisely the kind of constricted, menaced tension that Wood's review levels as a criticism. Possibilities of self-expression are already limited—falsified, even—by the very act of expressing selfhood to a mainstream readership.

Consequently, as Dalleo and Machado Sáez note, the textual relationship that Díaz constructs with his Latinx audience also resists "easy surface readings" (77). This is in large part due to the abundant—and contradictory—translated and untranslated passages in the narrative voice. Díaz exposes the limitations of traditional binaries for Latinx authors of either "selling out" to mainstream US culture or resisting it (Dalleo and Machado Sáez 159)—categories implied and reinforced by an analysis that seems intent on definitively addressing the issue of audience. Analyzing *Oscar Wao*, for example, Ignacio López-Calvo highlights Yunior's slippage between explaining Dominican culture, apparently for the benefit of non-Dominicans, and addressing readers as "plataneros," Dominican slang for Dominicans (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 155). López-Calvo suggests that Yunior's willingness to gloss Dominican culture and language for the presumably Anglo-

American mainstream means the author plays the role of “native informant” that he claims to eschew; that is, that he is on some level selling out (78).<sup>6</sup> While I agree that analysis of Díaz’s resistance to translation has sometimes been overstated—as Lourdes Torres has pointed out, Díaz is not the most radical Latinx writer when it comes to using untranslated Spanish (87)—I would contend that the contradictory nature of Díaz’s narrative points precisely to this inner conflict. This is Yunior’s sensation that, caught between Dominican past and US present, his inner life is “criminal and cordoned” (Wood 42).

Indeed, the very idea of being an “informant” is charged in the Dominican context beyond its postcolonial meaning, given the importance of information as an authoritarian means of control. *Oscar Wao* itself frequently alerts us to the possibility that authorship and authoritarianism often share a common goal: authoritative control of the (hi)story. In an important and much-cited footnote in the novel, Yunior suggests that writers and dictators have traditionally opposed each other, not because of their differences but because of their similarities: “What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? . . . Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that’s too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like*” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 97). Thus, while it performs vulnerability, confession also offers another way for Yunior to assert narrative control by seducing the reader into a dynamic of complicity. Rodríguez Navas’s observations about gossip in *Oscar Wao* likewise apply to confession in *Lose Her*: Yunior’s conspiratorial storytelling “subtly draws [the reader] into ideological complicity with him and seduces them into accepting, and perhaps even adopting, the ideological stance on which Yunior’s telling of the events is founded” (55). In the long wake of Trujillo’s hypermasculine ideology, confessions about gender and abuse prove particularly troubling. The specter of the *trujillato* raises fundamental questions for how Yunior tells his stories, questions that also implicate Díaz. How much does the past dictate the present? Who or what does confession serve? What is the role of individual responsibility in narrating the past?

### **A Gaping Abyss Within: Confession and “Face-Saving Strategies” during the Trujillato**

Immigrants do not arrive in a country without a past. It is therefore crucial, when considering how immigrant writers position a narrative of self within wider society, to examine how this history, and not only their contemporary US context, informs the kind of story that is told. The notions of confession and self-writing carry a sinister resonance in the Dominican context of authoritarianism, wherein sharing information or revealing your private self had violent consequences. As

Lauren Derby has explained, the Trujillo regime established a pervasive culture of informing, which mutated ordinary gossip and social relations into a poisonous web (11). In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz allegorizes this surveillance culture through science fiction, citing the paranormal television series *The Twilight Zone* and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: "You might roll your eyes at the comparison, but, friends: it would be hard to exaggerate the power Trujillo exerted over the Dominican people and the shadow of fear he cast throughout the region. Homeboy dominated Santo Domingo like it was his very own private Mordor" (224). In this informant culture, where Yuniór estimates "between forty-two and eighty-seven percent of the Dominican population was on the Secret Police's payroll," people were "betrayed by those they considered their *panas*, by members of their own families, by slips of the tongue" (226). As Rodríguez Navas notes, the sometimes fatal devastation wreaked on ordinary Dominicans in the novel for gossiping—or even merely being perceived to gossip—underscores that, in this context, "grave danger could arise from a fleeting moment of unguarded intimacy" (62). This terrorized association between surveillance and storytelling, trust and betrayal, has an enduring afterlife. As Yuniór explains: "You wonder why two generations later our parents are still so damn secretive, why you'll find out your brother ain't your brother only by accident" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 226).<sup>7</sup> The ongoing impact on how information is shared in even the most intimate relationships "reveals the bitter cost inherent in the discord sown by the Trujillo regime," long after its official end (Rodríguez Navas 63).

Self-expression under the *trujillato* was therefore extremely dangerous: surveilled, dictated by propaganda, and violently controlled through state terror and individuals' internalization of authoritarian modes of control. One of the consequences of this surveillance culture, then, is the transformation of not only how individuals tell stories about themselves but also how the very notion of self is formed under such constricted, terrorized circumstances. For Dominicans living under Trujillo, Derby explains, identity

was not a choice but rather a problem since it was close to impossible to cast oneself as an honorable subject resisting Trujillo and his depredations; a political subject was then forced to resort to face-saving strategies when a gaping abyss opened between the self one wished to be and the one he or she had become. For some, this created a kind of split identity, a gap between one's self and person, one's view of oneself and one's public face, one's past and one's present, that took much face work to reconcile. (11)

The story that begins with Yuniór confessing "I'm not a bad guy"—trying to cast himself as an honorable subject—comes to its end with him staring into a dark hole in the Dominican *campo*, a cave he believes should be "the perfect place for insight, for a person to become somebody better" (Díaz, "Sun" 24). I read this as a literalization of the gaping internal abyss that Yuniór confronts when his past



collides with his present. After his cheating on Magda is exposed, he must confront the gap between his public and private selves, the self he “wished to be and the one he . . . had become” (Derby 11). For a Dominican American writer such as Yunior, self-writing must contend with the violent legacy that the *trujillato* has carved in the very notion of selfhood: in Yunior’s narration the relationship between self-expression and confession exposes a gulf between how individuals want to live (“I’m not a bad guy” [Díaz, “Sun” 3]) and the ways they are compromised through complicity with immoral or even violent behavior.

In part, this gulf has been carved out through a historical legacy of ruthless, hypersexual masculinity in the Dominican Republic. It is no accident that this cave is described to Yunior as “the birthplace of our nation” by two macho Dominican figures that he meets in the resort bar after fighting with Magda (“Sun” 22).<sup>8</sup> Beyond Yunior’s personal infidelities, there are sinister collective histories at work. When Yunior says the revelation of cheating “detonates everything, past, present, future” (4), he is referring simultaneously to his personal life and to a collective Dominican experience, which includes Trujillo’s authoritarian violence and a legacy of what E. Antonio de Moya calls “totalitarian” masculinity. Hypersexual womanizing forms an important part of this lasting phenomenon, where masculinity is “a totalitarian notion that produces intricate strategies (power games) for men to oppress other men and to prevent oppression by them” (98). It involves a strict code of behaviors passed down from parents to children that dictates how Dominican men and boys express themselves and interact with others (100). As Derby explains, Trujillo’s overt “consumption” (111) of women was part of the “important economy of male personal status in the Dominican Republic” (115). There is no doubt that Yunior’s lying, cheating, and womanizing behavior is “eerily similar” to Trujillo’s own hypersexualized persona (Machado Sáez, “Dictating” 543). De Moya writes that, “consciously or unconsciously, we seem to help keep the ghost of the patriarch alive . . . even when we question and attempt to deconstruct it” (100).

Consequently, when Yunior tells the reader that he is “not a bad guy” in *Lose Her*’s opening lines, he follows up with a telling addition: that Magda, his girlfriend, does not agree. She thinks he is just “a typical Dominican man: a scocio, an asshole” (Díaz, “Sun” 3). Given that Trujillo deployed his hypermasculine persona as the “master symbol of Dominican identity” (Derby 9), Magda’s accusation of being a “typical Dominican man” is damning, welding Dominican masculinity to immorality and a violent and apparently inescapable past. “All of Magda’s friends,” Yunior explains, “say I cheated because I was Dominican, that all of us Dominican men are dogs and can’t be trusted” (Díaz, “Sun” 18–19). In fact, the story’s end refutes this claim, showing that contemporary Dominican manhood is not inevitably dictated by the past; Magda writes Yunior a letter about the “very nice guy she’d met. Dominican, like me. *Except he loves me*, she wrote” (25). Obviously, intimacy is not a problem for all

Dominican men—it is a problem for Yuniór. As Yuniór himself has earlier explained: "From my perspective it wasn't genetics; there were reasons. Causalities" (19). Looming in this chain of historical causality is, of course, the hypermasculine figure of Trujillo, whose propaganda proclaimed that "transcendental, almost cosmic, forces" united his destiny with the nation's (Rodríguez 38). In the wake of such logic, Yuniór struggles to disentangle himself from a shared history, to wrestle his own personal accountability from the idea that his future as a *dominicano* has already been written—as the story's title suggests—in the sun, moon, and stars.

In this light, Yuniór's confession appears as a means to close the gap in his split sense of identity, between past and present, private and public. While Wood's review located the failure of *Drown* in characters' reticence to "confess their pasts" (42), in *Lose Her*, Yuniór confesses almost compulsively, conjuring his own sexist past together with historical Dominican masculinity, dictated by Trujillo and then formed, perpetuated, and further shaped in the US Dominican diaspora. Yuniór's return from the diaspora to the Dominican Republic with Magda can be understood as a hunt for a coherent and original self that is linked to a shared Dominican past. However, even as it performs reconciliation, Yuniór's behavior continues to reproduce Trujillo's violent script. Yuniór's narration, as Machado Sáez warns, exposes "the diaspora's inheritance of a masculinist model of dictation" and, rather than a multiplicity of voices as is often claimed, represents "one individual . . . empowered to translate the history of a Caribbean diaspora to an audience" (*Market* 156).<sup>9</sup> In this context, confession is a further means of narrative control for Yuniór, binding the reader to compromised behavior in ways that echo the regime's tactics. Yuniór's confession can moreover be read as a "face-saving" strategy that does not constitute substantial change in how he treats or represents women.

### Confession and the Trujillato: An Unsolicited Gift

Earlier, I explored Yuniór's sensitivity around divulging information in the context of the *trujillato*. Yet if Yuniór is informing on anyone, it is himself: his confession is not a "slip of the tongue" but a choice. I therefore analyze the compromising information that he shares to show that, through this confession, Yuniór deliberately works to establish an asymmetrical power dynamic with the reader—a dynamic with sinister echoes of the *trujillato*'s own tactics. As a systematic strategy to maintain power, Trujillo practiced asymmetrical gift-giving to poor Dominicans who could not reciprocate with anything but their loyalty (Derby 11). I read Yuniór's confessional narrative as a reproduction of this dynamic. Building on the work of Marcel Mauss, Derby explicitly makes the link between gifts and information as debt: "Gifts resemble secrets. They are

inherently duplicitous, apparently disinterested and voluntary, but in fact interested and binding” (265). The confession of Yuniór’s misdeeds binds readers to him, implicating them in a relationship of reciprocity, like one of the regime’s unsolicited gifts—and as in the regime’s gift-giving, there is a sinister edge. Gossip, Rodríguez Navas notes, fosters complicity and a common position between people, usually in opposition to the subject of gossip (58). The fact that Yuniór has provided gossip about *himself*, however, complicates this dynamic: Yuniór is the subject of gossip and has informed on himself, giving classified personal information that the reader is now compromised by knowing. Moreover, Yuniór has overtly created a dialogue through the use of the second-person “you.” As a result, “you,” the reader, are bound to Yuniór, taking part in his personal life even when his disclosures, such as cheating and lying, or his style—for example, his use of sexist language—make “you” uncomfortable. This unsolicited gift of confession creates complicity for the readership in a particular male culture of cheating, deception, and dissembling that conjures the “ghost of the patriarch” and his violent regime (De Moya 100).

The behavior that Yuniór discloses also reproduces Trujillo’s script of hyper-masculinity by coercing readers into the same compact to which Yuniór’s brother and father introduced him at a young age. In *Drown*, Yuniór’s Papi initiates his sons into manhood via precisely the kind of secret that Yuniór later confesses to the reader: infidelity. In *Drown*’s story “Fiesta, 1980,” Yuniór and his brother Rafa become bound through shared knowledge of their father’s cheating on Mami with a Puerto Rican woman and therefore to a broader inheritance of masculinity founded on lying, duplicity, and the simultaneous exploitation and exclusion of women. Although it remains unspoken, this behavior carves a chasm in Yuniór’s perception of their family: “Me and Rafa, we didn’t talk much about the Puerto Rican woman. . . . [W]e still acted like nothing was out of the ordinary. Pass the ketchup, man. No sweat, bro. The affair was like a hole in our living room floor, one we’d gotten so used to circumnavigating that we sometimes forgot it was there” (31). Exploiting his position as the family’s patriarch, Papi coerces his boys into a form of complicity—and a code of silence—that causes a gaping abyss in their intimate family life. It is therefore no accident that “Sun” finds Yuniór looking into a cavernous abyss in the Dominican Republic after he has been caught cheating: Yuniór’s complicity in this damaged and damaging masculine behavior unites him with a patriarchal inheritance that is both biological (Papi, Rafa) and political (Trujillo).

Consequently, just as his own Papi bound him to this inheritance through unsolicited sharing, Yuniór enacts this on the reader. Returning to the question of audience, Yuniór’s tone, in its easy intimacy, displays confidence that the reader will understand this kind of male behavior, that the reader *is* male and already initiated. “You know how it is,” he says, referring to the affair with Cassandra as “a smelly bone, better off buried in the backyard of your life.” He

describes the details of the affair outlined in Cassandra's letter as "[s]hit you wouldn't even tell your boys drunk" (Díaz, "Sun" 3). When he advises which lies will and will not work to win back a girlfriend, he uses a direct imperative: "[Y]ou got to say it anyway no matter how stupid and unreal it sounds: say it" (6). Such interpellations casually presume that "you," the reader, occupy a male role in the same male-dominated world as the narrator, a world that excludes women from such knowledge. Presumably, "you" would have committed similar sins but not have told "your boys" about it.

Even when Yunior appears to address female readers, he reinforces the narrative's atmosphere of male camaraderie. There is a moment in *Oscar Wao*, for example, when Yunior directs the narrative to "sisters." Beli, who is dating two men but falls in love with a third, a shady character called the Gangster, makes the "classic mistake of telling these Dominican hombres about the new love of her life, how happy she was. Sisters: don't ever do this. It's about as smart as telling the judge who's about to sentence you that back in the day you finger-fucked his mother" (131). While it is arguably only a comparison, a simile, the "finger-fucking" reference nevertheless reinforces the standard trope of macho insult: that the worst way you can insult someone is to say you had sex with their mother. Yunior's real focus, as ever, remains his boys, always angling to impress, appeal to their macho frames of reference, and reinforce his own blasé and hypermasculine persona. "His boys," Christopher González writes, "appear as peripheral reminders of the kind of man Yunior ought to be. Collectively they exert a kind of peer pressure on Yunior, and that pressure reinforces his behavior modeled after what Magda calls the typical Dominican man" (119). In a similar way, Yunior's narrative appears angled toward male readers and therefore its expression is restricted by this invisible, collective pressure.

Furthermore, for all the celebration of Yunior's subversive and innovative language games, and his apparent remorse regarding Magda and other women he has hurt, his narrative mode in *Lose Her* reinforces his centrality as protagonist. His confession sounds like an act of reconciliation between different selves and with others, and yet in his disclosures and his assertions that he is "not a bad guy" (Díaz, "Sun" 3), who is Yunior really talking to? Rather than fostering dialogue, the second person, as Mieke Bal has pointed out, is often "simply an 'I' in disguise, a 'first person' narrator talking to himself" (29). Díaz himself has called Yunior the "dictator of the novel" ("He"). Not only does Yunior's confession conform to Trujillo's dictatorial legacy in maintaining authorial control, but it also recreates a dynamic that journalist Lili Loofbourow has identified in the era of #MeToo confessions and culpability as "the male self-pardon": a phenomenon in which famous men are accused of sexual misconduct or mistreating women and then proceed to publicly apologize for their misbehavior to anyone—God, their wife, the public—but the women that they harmed. This is important because, as I will explain below, Yunior's confession is often read as an admirable

act of witnessing and therefore an end in itself, leaving open the question of what constitutes reparations and substantial, systemic change in the era of #MeToo. These questions have another, paratextual dimension given Díaz's own participation in the #MeToo dialogue, with his 2018 disclosure in the *New Yorker* of sexual trauma and his confession that he hurt women as a result. The invitation in Díaz's essay to read his fiction into his trauma and his blurring of those lines—closing the gap between public and private selves—implicates the author in the same questions as Yunió regarding confession, complicity, and control.

### What is the Point of a Confessional Text?

In a review of *This is How You Lose Her*, Carmen María Machado provides a critical perspective on the objective of Yunió's confession. Machado questions whether confession is the means to the end, or the end in itself, for Yunió. *Lose Her's* evolution arcs from the defensive "I'm not a bad guy" (Díaz, "Sun" 3) to Yunió sitting down in the collection's final story to confess his misdeeds in writing, penning the book that, in a characteristically metatextual twist, Díaz's readers apparently hold in their hands. In "The Cheater's Guide to Love"—after months of unsuccessful dating, the physical breakdown of his body, depression, wallowing, and blame: a total crisis of self—Yunió finally submits to writing as the activity that will give him meaning. "In the months that follow, you bend to the work, because it feels like hope, like grace—and because you know in your lying cheater's heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get" (213). These are the words that end not only the story but also the collection. In terms of concrete future actions or even resolve to change, however, the ending remains vague. Instead, Machado asserts, "the act of writing for an audience—the most grandiose of confessions, the most public—becomes what Yunió hopes will be grace." Yet even this is misleading, as redemption relies not so much on the act of writing itself but on the "generous heart of the reader" who, having witnessed Yunió's childhood episodes, has come to understand him "from every angle" and is "willing to grant him pardon." While his behavior as an adult, Machado argues, is just one course of action and not a "natural evolution of those tragedies" he experienced in childhood, Yunió's context seeks to provide the reader with a sympathetic portrait. This portrait points, however obliquely, to the "causalities" behind his bad behavior.

I highlight Machado's review partly because, at the time of its publication in 2012, it went against the general tide of positive reviews of *Lose Her*. Moreover, this review reveals the influential role that Díaz's public persona plays in the reception of his work and hints at why his life and art are so often blurred in audiences' and reviewers' readings of his fiction.<sup>10</sup> Díaz's interviews often serve as paratextual confessions that on the surface offer insight into the writerly process but, more

subtly, serve to "correct" the way gender is perceived in his work. Machado's review incorporates her attendance at a public forum with Díaz where, according to her, the author was asked "how it felt to write a character who exhibited such 'borderline-sociopathic disregard' for his many girlfriends and lovers." In response, she claims that he "balked at the description" and cited the act of confessing to past crimes as an expression of empathy, one that displays Yunior's commitment to "obsessively bear[ing] witness to everything he does wrong in relationships."

Virginia Vitzthum describes a similar exchange with Díaz when she questions the portrayal of women in his work as "sets of culo-and-titties." Vitzthum writes that she felt compelled to ask him about sexism in *Lose Her* because she recognizes Díaz's interest in women's marginalization (importantly: she forms this view based on his authorial persona). Vitzthum perceives a disjuncture between the text's and the author's ethics. However, "when I tell him that some of the book made me flinch," she writes, "Díaz goes all professorial, explaining (unnecessarily) that a narrator is not the same as the writer"; that is, that he represents but does not therefore condone Yunior's point of view. Representation of Yunior's inner workings is important, Díaz tells her, because "it's astonishing how little we understand male subjectivity." Díaz more extensively explains this argument in an interview that probes perceptions of his work as "glorifying male chauvinism" ("Junot Díaz: Writer" 45). Unimpressed responses, he explains, actually represent women's shock at an ugly truth being revealed: "A lot of women respond, 'Yo. Fuck you!' It's like a physical violence. They're not used to hearing these voices in a public space, because this is the language of boys, how they talk when they're amongst themselves" (45–46). In this interview, he also suggests that where Toni Morrison and Alice Walker were criticized for pathologizing male characters, these authors in fact let men "off easy"; the shock of Díaz's work, according to the author himself, is that it dares to fully inhabit the macho voices "we never want to hear about" and exposes them to the world (45).

According to Díaz's view, then, this is Yunior's confession. Male subjectivity—and its confronting, violent discourse on women—lurks beneath the surface, hidden away in men's inner life. Yunior's confession exposes it to the world and in this act asks for forgiveness. In multiple interviews, Díaz himself has confessed that, growing up, "I wasn't really encouraged to imagine women as fully human." For Díaz, the "journey" that many men—and not only Dominican men—must embark on means

wrestling with, coming to face, our limited imagina[tion] and growing in a way that allows us not only to imagine women as fully human, but to imagine the things that we do to women—that we often do blithely, without thinking, we just sort of shrug off—as actually deeply troubling and as hurting another human being. And this seems like the simplest thing. A lot of people are like, "Really, that's like a huge leap of knowledge, of the imagination?" But for a lot of guys, that is. ("Fidelity")

Once again, Díaz evokes the motif of a gap in how men such as Yuniór imagine themselves and others: a gap that invites a leap of imagination to become “somebody better” (“Sun” 24). Furthermore, Díaz uses his authorial, paratextual persona to confess his own complicity in a culture that dehumanizes women. Yet even Díaz’s paratextual confessions are, like Yuniór’s casual camaraderie and use of the second person, directed toward men.

Díaz’s textual and paratextual confessions certainly expose experiences of men’s complicity in gendered violence, a complicity that is often denied or covered up. Yet this does not in itself engender complex or feminist representations of women.<sup>11</sup> The “huge leap of knowledge” that Díaz identifies for male readers (“Fidelity”) does not by default provoke a similar response in female readers. Women grow up alongside men and receive this same message—that is, that they are less than men: less valuable, less capable, less intelligent, and less interesting as literary protagonists. As such, women’s response of—in Díaz’s words—“Fuck *you*” likely derives not from their disbelief that this “language of boys” exists in private but from precisely the opposite: an oversaturation of this sexist language in public life (“Junot Díaz: Writer” 45, 46). Public discourse is soaked in misogynistic language, and male subjectivity steers the course of politics and culture.<sup>12</sup> As such, those who question Díaz over sexism are not expressing surprise that men do not see women as fully human; they are not shocked at “hearing these voices in a public space” for the first time (46). (In Vitzthum’s summary: “I’ve been reading about women through a lens of leering contempt forever.”) To claim that concerns about the perpetuation of sexist tropes are due to mere shock that they exist seems a willful misreading of feminist frustration. Moreover, it is one that diminishes women’s imagination, experience, and capacity for critical reading.

By drawing attention to the distinction between representation and authorial intent, as in the interviews cited above, Díaz highlights the gap between what his work aims to do and how it is read—but perhaps not in the way the author intended. Maja Horn points out the “noxious [ways] Díaz’s narrative is read by mainstream media, as a progress narrative leading towards greater ‘feminism’” (137). For example, Vitzthum’s article for *ELLE* magazine still ran with the title “Junot Díaz’s Pro-Woman Agenda” despite its far more critical content (a decision likely made by the editors, not Vitzthum).<sup>13</sup> This attitude is somewhat echoed in critical writing that frames Yuniór’s narrative as an important act of witnessing. Several scholars argue that Díaz’s emphasis on the consequences of historical violence, rather than a redemptive solution, centers the importance of testifying to this legacy. Stefania Ciocia, for example, asserts that in *Lose Her*, Yuniór accepts “the responsibility to bear witness to, and acknowledge his acquiescence with, the curse of hypermasculinity” (140), while Anne Mahler views this kind of transparency around violence and power as the “ethical ideal” that Díaz’s writing pursues (135).<sup>14</sup>

It is commendable that Díaz seeks to expose and explore the damage done when men cannot—or will not—imagine women as fully human. Critical feminist readings of Díaz's work, however, probe the issue of sexism because they want to know what it offers that is new, *beyond* representation or witnessing: what it subverts. In the twenty-first century and over the decades that Díaz and his narrator Yuniór have been in the spotlight, discourses on gender have continued to shift. Contemporary feminist critiques therefore ask for more: not only that Díaz's texts acknowledge the difficulty men have in imagining women as fully human but also that the texts *themselves* imagine women as fully human. Put another way: that women's humanity is not sidelined, once again, in the pursuit of understanding male subjectivity, even—and perhaps especially—when the intention is to interrogate masculinity. The era of #MeToo has produced further challenging questions about what constitutes change. Through witnessing, what personal responsibility does Yuniór actually take for his actions? Furthermore, what if confession, while appearing an act of transparency, is yet another act of uneasy intimacy—one in fact aimed at authorial control? Yuniór's journey is mapped in sympathy, rendered in the psychological and carnal detail of a full-on crisis. What about the women that he hurts?

### The Male Self-Pardon

In 2018, such questions were turned on the author himself, following Díaz's disclosure that he survived sexual assault as a child, published in a *New Yorker* essay that went viral. In the essay, titled "The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma," Díaz reveals he was raped as an eight-year-old child by someone he knew and maps the indelible impact this trauma has had, over a lifetime, on his sense of self and his intimate relationships. In particular, he catalogs failed relationships with women that he explains he "hurt" as a result of his unprocessed abuse. Díaz's raw, extremely personal essay confesses a dark corner of male subjectivity that, shamed and terrorized, truly has been hidden from public discourse. While white-dominated society continually criminalizes black men as sexual predators, Díaz writes powerfully in the essay, it fails to imagine and in fact actively erases the ways that black men and boys are sexually preyed *on*. He explains that he had remained silent in part because he was haunted by what it meant to be a "real" Dominican man: "Real Dominican men, after all, aren't raped" ("Silence"). In this regard, the author also shares with his protagonist Yuniór a lasting preoccupation with authentic Dominican masculinity, a core obsession of Trujillo's nationalist and patriarchal regime. For Yuniór, going back to the historical roots of this conception of Dominicanity—traveling back to the Dominican Republic to stare into the cave that is the "birthplace of our nation" (Díaz, "Sun" 22)—is a way to understand whether and how the past



continues to dictate the present. In “Silence,” Díaz undertakes a parallel journey to unite the past and present, the public and private selves split by trauma, traveling back to his own personal history of violence to verbalize the event, confessing its legacy of shame and silence.

Comparing Díaz and his protagonist, as I do here, is a common yet fraught practice. As outlined earlier, minority writers in the United States are often limited to their biographies in a self-fulfilling cycle wherein autobiographical works are more readily consumed by a mainstream readership, and they are then presumed to produce autobiographical works. Put another way, minority writers are not permitted a leap of imagination and instead fully bear the burden of representation. In interviews, Díaz has consistently resisted the approach of “pursuing my autobiographical details” (“Mil”), although he admits he loves to play with this boundary (“Fiction” 905). Yet, in his memoir-essay “Silence,” Díaz’s tendency to play with fiction and autobiography takes a new turn when he invites readers to read his own life into his fiction. “Silence” employs many of the same distinctive techniques and themes from his fiction: like the stories of *Lose Her*, which bear the names of women Yunior has loved, hurt, and lost, Díaz’s breakdown in the essay is charted through a series of damaged relationships. He also employs the second-person narrative style; a confessional, intimate tone; and censors first names with em dashes—all features of his fiction.

Most significantly, however, he invites readers to understand his life as parallel to and interwoven with his fiction with lines such as, “In the novel I published eleven years after ‘Drown,’ I gave my narrator, Yunior, a love supreme named Lola, because in real life I had a love supreme named Y—.” Indeed, he refers to writing about Yunior as “crafting my perfect cover story” for his own unprocessed trauma. For those familiar with even the bare skeleton of Díaz’s biography, there are obvious parallels between his life’s trajectory and that of his recurring protagonist: the two share poor childhoods in the Dominican Republic, absent fathers, similar names (Yunior/Junot), brothers suffering cancer, and prestigious writing and academic careers in Boston, via adolescence in New Jersey. Structures and episodes that repeat in life and fiction are not in themselves remarkable. However, I am drawn to what it means for a fiction writer such as Díaz to “uncover” the real-life roots of these episodes in an essay that performs the raw and intimate confession of painful memoir yet continues to employ techniques from his fiction.

I want to fully acknowledge the horror of the childhood brutalization that Díaz’s essay recounts, the vulnerability and bravery it requires to speak out, and the significance of male survivors’ stories in the era of #MeToo. I hope to do this alongside a reading of Díaz’s essay as a literary text that, as a writer contributing to the public sphere, he invites. My aim is to unpack the essay’s voice and aspects of its reception in relation to the notion of confession. Notwithstanding the accusations of sexual misconduct and harassment leveled

against Díaz just one month after the essay's publication, which significantly complicated Díaz's involvement in the #MeToo conversation, I propose that the negative reception was in part because of the essay's structure and confessional mode, rather than merely its contents, and particularly the ways that it blurs boundaries between fiction and life.<sup>15</sup> Having made the distinction many times between writing life and writing fiction, Díaz's revelations in "Silence" stimulate new questions. The women that he confesses having "hurt" are not characters but real individuals. The use of em dashes and initials in the essay to censor their names therefore prompts certain questions: what function does this silencing of their names serve, and who does it protect? Furthermore, who speaks in this narrative and why? Who does not—or cannot—speak?

The confessional tone familiar to readers of Díaz's fiction bears different ethical implications when Díaz is writing about real-life women. No doubt to protect their privacy, Díaz chooses to censor the names of women mentioned in the essay. Yet, given that his own experience is fully fleshed out, this leaves the women as side characters—as "not fully human"—in ways that echo his fiction's frequently limited and conscribed representation of female characters. One woman, whom the essay refers to only as S—, later wrote about her place among the "lettered lovers in his catalog" and the way "working through the alphabet" in this manner "also references entire lives that are being simultaneously resurrected and erased" (Shreerekha). Furthermore, Díaz's confession, which is styled as a dialogue to a woman and fellow survivor, is in fact a monologue; in Bal's words, "an 'I' in disguise, a 'first person' narrator talking to himself" (29). Indeed, as other writers have pointed out, Díaz's confession is not directed to any of the women he admits hurting; rather he has chosen a stranger, "X," who approached him at a reading and told him that she sensed from his fiction that he, like she, had been abused. At the time, he could not admit it; the essay is framed as a letter to X in a belated attempt to articulate what he was unable to say to her in the moment. In the conversational second person characteristic of his fiction, he writes: "I know this is years too late, but I'm sorry I didn't answer you. I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth. I'm sorry for you, and I'm sorry for me" ("Silence").

As powerful as they are, the apologetic words come too late for the woman in question to hear or even perhaps to process, although just as in Yuniors' fictional narratives they express the speaker's remorse and self-reflection. More damning, however, is that while Díaz's *New Yorker* essay "makes every effort to appear inclusive and conversational; its form is even epistolary," it is like much of his fiction, "functionally . . . a monologue" (Loofbourow). Crucially, as critics have noted, "even in the midst of such a profoundly vulnerable confession, Díaz's most pointed and poignant apology isn't [directed] to any of his former lovers but to an admirer he'd met for only a few minutes at one of his many book signings" (Kai). Its impact is thus intimate (for narrator and reader) but not personal (for those wronged). This is the essence of Loofbourow's critique of

“male self-pardon”—a public act of remorse and an arc of redemption, granted by the male wrongdoer without directly addressing the wronged individuals themselves. Women are widely expected to accept an apology they never received, as Loofbourow observes, and then move on. For Loofbourow, such public displays not only disrespect the women who have been harmed but, in performing the arc of remorse and redemption as a monologue rather than a dialogue, miss the fundamental requirement of a pardon, which must be “a communal relation.”

Confession in Díaz’s writing reaches for this communal relation but falls short where it fails to imagine women as fully human as its male protagonists. Díaz intentionally draws attention to gaps and to failed intimacy: between intimate partners; between reader and narrator; between past and present, public and private; and between fragmented parts of a traumatized self. Where a mainstream reviewer such as Wood sees this representation of cordoned, criminalized selfhood as a failure to convey the anguish of immigration, I read the opposite. The gaping abysses in Díaz’s writing in fact expose the legacies of a violent past at work in a present that also constricts self-expression for individuals traumatized on both intimate and collective scales. Confession, in this context, appears as a multifaceted way to highlight these obstacles to self-expression—obstacles that include the invasive pressures of a mainstream readership—and even to foster intimacy by closing the gaps.

Yet simply paying witness to these damaged and damaging legacies does not in itself constitute meaningful change, especially when it comes to gender. In *Lose Her* and “Silence,” confession centers the male protagonist’s journey to “become somebody better”—at the expense of women. While Díaz’s writing performs vulnerability through confession and remorse, it nevertheless continues to reproduce a well-worn script of male dominance. The contemporary conversation about gender, complicity, and change demands much more than a masculine monologue that echoes into the void. Without women fully fleshed out and vocal, the radical potential of these narratives in the age of #MeToo is limited.

## Notes

I would like to express my gratitude to Stewart King for helping to shape early drafts of this article and to George Wood for carefully proofing a later draft. Many thanks also to the anonymous reviewers whose incisive feedback challenged my thinking and made my arguments tighter and more focused.

1. It is important to note that the #MeToo movement was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke, a youth worker focused on the experiences of young black women and girls from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Me Too). Burke’s original, grassroots project emphasized community building, led by survivors, and promoted healing through empathy and solidarity. However, it was the

- adoption of Burke's phrase "me too" by celebrities on social media, as a way to share stories of sexual abuse and harassment, that sparked a viral hashtag and global movement. This has led to allegations and subsequent criminal proceedings against powerful men, most notably Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (MacKinnon).
2. For examples of critical scholarship that explore language in Junot Díaz's work, see Eugenia Casielles-Suárez, Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien, Ed Finn, Rune Graulund, Monica Hanna, and Tim Lanzendörfer. For examples of mainstream press reviews, see Michiko Kakutani and Nuria Barrios.
  3. Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) is the quintessential example of life-writing from the Latinx-Caribbean diaspora in the United States and has had a noted influence on Díaz's writing, especially *Drown* (1996). The similarities with Díaz's fiction—the coming-of-age trajectory, language, and confessional style—are evident. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert cites Thomas's memoir in calling *Drown* "a sort of throwback to the Nuyorican literature of the 1950s and 1960s" (165). Lyn di Iorio Sandín calls *Down These Mean Streets* "the foundational novel of U.S. Latino/a Caribbean literature . . . [and] a confessional narrative written in street language with a generous sprinkling of Spanish and Spanglish" (108). The similarities to reviews of Díaz's work, especially *Drown*, are striking.
  4. Díaz uses the second-person perspective throughout his writing to varying effect. In the *Drown* story "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl or Halfie," the advice to a prospective teen lover becomes more detailed and specific, and the generalized "you" narrows down to reveal a specific "I"—Yunior. This story's second-person point of view is therefore "peculiarly self-reflexive" because it makes Yunior both subject and object of his narration (Bautista 83). In other stories, Yunior's use of the second person is more ambiguous, appearing to address the reader, an ex-partner (such as "Flaca" in *This is How You Lose Her* [2012]), or himself. In all instances, the second-person perspective allows Díaz to explore issues of intimacy and distance not only thematically but also through the very structure of the text and the dynamics it creates between reader and narrator. In an interview, Díaz has suggested that the second person offers something unique and essential to how *Lose Her* unfolds, due to its "simultaneous distance and cloying familiarity" ("Baseline").
  5. Monica Hanna highlights the duplicity of the word "forge" as it appears in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). In a footnote, Yunior explains that the Trujillo regime's main accomplishment was "the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state" (3); as Hanna notes, the term connotes both creation and forgery (503). Katherine Weese views this footnote in the novel as yet another instance where parallels between Yunior and the dictator Trujillo are made clear: for Weese, Yunior's dictatorial narrative style—

- together with the direct comparison he makes between dictators and writers (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 97)—“openly invites readers to compare Díaz’s narrator with the infamous dictator in the ways that they construct reality” (Weese 99). The slipperiness around the meaning of “forge” once again draws attention to Yunior’s duplicitous inheritance in the wake of the *trujillato*, where acts of creation or generation are also ones of dissimulation.
6. “I write for people I grew up with,” Díaz asserts in an interview. “I took extreme pains for my book to not be a native informant. Not: ‘This is Dominican food. This is a Spanish word.’ I trust my readers, even non-Spanish ones” (“Outsider”).
  7. This sentiment is supported in Lipe Collado’s observation of a tendency under the *trujillato* for Dominicans to limit their social circle to relatives and allies (34). Such a decision, Yunior’s wry observations suggest, might still not offer protection from the petty jealousies of your family and friends, or your own “slips of the tongue.”
  8. These men, especially the shadowy figure referred to only as the Vice President, invoke the masculinity of the *trujillato* through their fine clothing, drinking, weapons, womanizing attitudes, and the violence brewing beneath their immaculate presentation. This cave, according to the Vice President, is the Cave of the Jagua, a place of central importance in the island’s indigenous culture, as the point from which the indigenous Taíno people emerged (Keegan and Carlson 95). However, the Vice President’s claim that it is the birthplace of the *nation* is somewhat misleading; Taínos may have emerged from the cave, but the Dominican nation emerged much later. The inclusion of this reference in Díaz’s stories hints at the existence of identities and experiences on the island of Hispaniola that extend long before (and after) Trujillo’s reign, a point that, as Lorgia García-Peña asserts, is often lost in Dominican studies (15). At the same time, this reference gestures toward the kind of mythologizing of Indigenous and Hispanic roots so common to *trujillista* nationalism, which, as many scholars have demonstrated, has contributed to the erasure of African history and Blackness as part of Dominican identity (Candelario 159; Torres-Saillant 51).
  9. For scholarship that emphasizes the polyphonic nature of Díaz’s narration, see endnote 2 above.
  10. Often asked in interviews to comment on the similarities and differences between Yunior and himself, Díaz instead prompts his audience to consider the motivations behind this yearning to find the author in the fiction. While he admits to considering Yunior his fictional alter-ego, Díaz criticizes “pursuing my autobiographical details” and proposes instead “having a conversation about how in this age, we’re very hungry for autobiographical details in an area, fiction, where we should not be looking for them” (“Mil”). Drawing attention to the tendency to read minority writers for sociological rather than

literary merit is important. Nevertheless, I regard this interview as an instance of authorial control, in which Díaz tells readers how to read his writing—only to later encourage them, as I will show in my analysis of his essay "The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma" (2018), to do the opposite: that is, to read his biography into his fiction.

11. As Maja Horn eloquently explains, "The problematizing of this masculinity, which is indubitably the principal concern in this ['The Cheater's Guide to Love'] and other stories, nonetheless does not extend to a more complete narrative awareness of how it circumscribes and delimits female roles" (136).
12. President Donald Trump's "locker-room banter"—his boast, recorded on tape in 2005, of sexually assaulting women with the impunity of being a "star," followed by his 2016 excuse while campaigning that "this was locker-room banter, a private conversation"—is a high-profile example of how widespread and public this discourse is and how few consequences there are for exposing men who talk this way (Fahrenheit).
13. It is striking that Virginia Vitzthum's article ends with a criticism that she directs "not to Díaz, but to *This is How You Lose Her*. About my failure to engage productively with your maps of male subjectivity? It's not me, it's you." Having repeatedly questioned Díaz on his representation of women—and displayed dissatisfaction both with his replies and with *Lose Her's* lack of "authorial empathy" for its "less interesting" female characters—it is not clear why Vitzthum restrains from criticizing the author for the text he produced. I interpret this last-minute pivot as reflective of the willful desire to read feminism into Díaz's work. It also points to Díaz's favored status in commercial and academic criticism—at least before the 2018 #MeToo revelations—as "a writer who is somehow beyond critique" (Blanco 301). Vitzthum, having consistently made her critiques explicit, pulls back at the last moment.
14. Anne Mahler refers to "the transparent rendering of colonialist mechanisms of domination" (135). However, her argument about (Yunior's narrative resistance to) hegemonic power structures also implicates Trujillo's legacies of totalitarian masculinity and its violent, macho discourse.
15. In 2018, Díaz not only came out as a survivor of sexual assault but was subsequently accused of sexual misconduct and abusing his position of power over younger women within literary and academic circles. While much of the sensationalized media coverage described (and often subsequently dismissed) the accusations against Díaz as alleged verbal bullying rather than anything as serious as sexual assault, I will examine other allegations made by women of color, mostly writers and academics, which were often sidelined by mainstream press. Although these stories have not received wide reporting, they point to core elements of the issue with Díaz that are not adequately conveyed in how allegations of verbal abuse have been reported. Instead, these accounts

expose the nexus of race and gender at work in gatekeeping cultural spheres, especially Díaz's standing as a literary celebrity. As such, they convey a particular devastation from within marginalized communities that the celebrated author, "whose triumph felt our own," did not, in personal encounters, live up to the "feminist solidarity" that his work and authorial persona perform (Belliard; Shreerekha). It must be noted, of course, that they also describe serious sexual harassment, emotional abuse, and bullying in professional spheres, often in ill-defined workplaces with no Human Resources department, which may rely on seniority and mentorship (see Marianella Belliard, Shreerekha, and Alisa Rivera).

A more holistic and systemic analysis of #MeToo was also the objective for the many female scholars who cosigned the "Open Letter Against Media Treatment of Junot Díaz" published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on 14 May 2018. In it, they decried what they perceived as sensationalism, a lack of nuance, and racial targeting of Díaz that "reinforces racist stereotypes that cast Blacks and Latinxs as having an animalistic sexual 'nature.'" The letter instead encourages "an open, reflective, and critical conversation" that neither "dismiss[es] current or future accusations of misconduct by Díaz or any other person" nor conflates all kinds of sexual harassment and violence or vilifies the accused along racial lines (Beliso de Jesús et al.). It is notable, then, that despite disagreements, many of the contributions by women of color in the #MeToo conversation about Díaz point to the same urgent need: critiques of power that account for race and class in addition to gender, whether in the #MeToo movement or in academic and literary institutions. While individuals will inevitably form their own opinions in regard to the debate, when read together, the contributions of women of color offer much-needed nuance to the #MeToo conversation. Shreerekha's essay, in particular, demonstrates the capacity to explore the dynamics of power and silence she experienced as a student in a relationship with Díaz, a professor, without diminishing the trauma that Díaz himself suffered and survived. The breadth of her perspective further highlights how this holistic consideration of multiple people's pain is missing in Díaz's "Silence."

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