

## Language and Race in Junot Diaz's Literature

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The recent trend of Dominican migration to the United States echoes previous patterns of Hispanic migration but with some characteristic aspects concerning race. As 75% of this Dominican migrant population is mulatto, their classification as black people in the U.S. has affected the way they see themselves compared to people still living in the Dominican Republic; this classification has also determined the living conditions that they are offered in a racially dualized world such as the U.S.. Junot Diaz, Dominican-American author, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2008 for his first long novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. His literature vividly depicts the life of this community, both in the U. S. and in the Dominican Republic, and his use of a musical and meaningful *Spanglish* is an implicit denouncement of the racism suffered but also paradoxically practiced by Dominicans. This paper will illuminate these aspects of race and identity in Junot Diaz's literary work.

Key words: Dominican, racial identity, Junot Diaz, Spanglish, Latino literature, Hispanics

### **Introduction**

“Between 1960 and 1986, more than 400,000 Dominicans migrated legally from the Dominican Republic to the United States, especially to New York and New Jersey, and many thousands more, illegally. By the 90's they had become the second-largest Hispanic group in the North-

east” (González 117). The event referred to in this statement has generated important consequences for the Dominicans migrating to the U.S., for their families in the Dominican Republic, for other Hispanic communities in the United States and for Americans in general. Today, with the Hispanic community being the largest minority in the U.S. and with projections of growth at a fast rate, the Dominican *diaspora* is another example of the “integration” of a Hispanic subgroup into American mainstream life and society. Analysing the causes of this migration, as well as its characteristics and/or consequences is out of the reach of this paper. But I would like to focus on a specific aspect of this event, namely the self-consciousness of racial identity in this community of migrants. To do so, I will use two sociological studies by Jorge Duany and Greta Gilberston, respectively, about the phenomenon generating these issues, as well as the literature of Junot Diaz, a young Pulitzer-awarded Dominican-American writer, who depicts an autobiographical (in a postmodern *latu sensu*) experience of being a Dominican-American in the U.S.. Diaz’s *Drown* is composed of ten short stories that follow the pattern of a *quasi* chronological narration of the story of a Dominican family. Each story is a chapter representing different moments in the lives of the characters and the narrator, Yunior, who grows over the course of the novel. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is similarly a Dominican-family saga centered on a young but disoriented Dominican-American man in search of love in a hostile world.

My intention with this contrapuntal examination of the two sociological and statistical studies about the Dominican community in New York-New Jersey and the books by Diaz is to support the thesis addressed by the previous authors showing a fictional but verisimilar literary example based on life experience. On the other hand, the racial theoretical corpus of the Dominican migration present in these sociological studies, along with its economic, social, intercultural and psychological implications could lead to a better understanding of the events and characters shown in Diaz’s literature. Summarizing, it could be

helpful and revealing in both directions.

“In 1965, the U.S. marines, fearing another Cuba-style revolution, intervened in the Dominican Republic supporting the military against a popular upheaval in behalf of the exiled Dominican president Juan Bosch. As a consequence, and to avoid tensions and a possible civil war in the country, they facilitated the migration of leftist activists to the United States starting one of the largest migration to the U.S. in the last forty years” (González 117). This intervention was the first wave of a series of migrations that is still taking place. In the Pulitzer-winning *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* —to which I will refer hereafter as *The Brief*—, Yunió, Diaz’s narrator and alter ego, uses the footnotes to give a personal view of the bigger picture of the politics in the Dominican Republic and the U.S. that lead to migration. But US-DR politics is only one of many different fields referred to by the narrator, who references literature, history, psychology, music and others with a very characteristic and sarcastic sense of humour. In this sense, the novel fulfils “the characteristics that define Post-Modernity, such as the relativisation of History, the transgression of genres, parody, etc.” (De Toro, Fernando 33). Dominicans were not to arrive in a migrant-void space but in one inhabited by many other Hispanics. Indeed, the already installed Puerto Ricans in the Northeast helped Dominicans because, in spite of the tensions and differences among Caribbean Hispanics in the U.S., “when facing Anglos or even other Hispanics, a sense of unity becomes curiously invited” (Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition* 57). The earlier arrivals helped to accommodate the latter into the new society. In *Drown*, with its ordeal-like migrant short story “Negocios”, we have an example of Puerto Rican Jo-Jo, owner of a successful grocery store, who gives advice and lends money to a Dominican Ramón, who is about to bring his family to New Jersey from the Dominican Republic after some years living by himself in the Northeast (*Drown*, 205). However, “in the 80’s, many Puerto Ricans in the Northeast blamed the Dominicans for the epidemic of cocaine and crack trade, which are to be with stories of poverty, drugs and low

-wage labour” (González, 127). It seems that there is a fluctuation of relationships that repeats patterns found in the countries of origin and that depends largely on the economic cycle. Again in *Drown*, Yunior, the short story *Aurora*’s narrator and Diaz’s *alter ego*, becomes a drug dealer in *el barrio* as a teenager, lives as a delinquent and doesn’t take precautions as for AIDS, assuming he is immune.

### **Race and Real Estate**

Maybe, what has most influenced the Dominican attitudes and patterns of behaviour in the United States is racial prejudice. Caribbean emigrants, especially those coming from the Spanish-speaking countries of Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, use the main racial categories of black, white and mixed, based on skin colour and some physical features like nose, lips, hair texture, etc. But “the dominant system of racial classification in the United States emphasizes a two-tiered division between whites and non-whites deriving from the rule of hypodescent” (Duany, 148). This means that no matter how little (in percentage) African blood or African racial physical features anyone might have, if one of his/her ancestors is black, s/he will be considered black. Taking into account that approximately 75% of the population in the Dominican Republic is mulatto, “New Yorkers tended to mistake them for blacks who happened to speak Spanish” (González 117). However for Dominicans, this was really alienating. As Duany states, “the dominant discourse on national identity defines it as white, Hispanic, and Catholic” (150). And the concept of black is left for foreigners, specifically for Haitians. But, suddenly, a Dominican who considers himself as white or *indio*, becomes in the U.S. black to the eyes of *Anglos* and their radical dualization. Thus one of the main consequences of this classification is that many times Dominicans in New York have been forced to settle in areas adjacent to those with a high concentration of African American people. This is due to the fact that “Racial steering by real estate agents whereby white homeseekers are directed to predominantly white neighbourhoods while blacks and

other racial minorities are shown homes primarily in integrated or non-white areas has proven to be a key institutional force in the perpetuation of the dual housing market” (Squires 54). At the same time this *ghettoification* in black neighbourhoods has many implications :

a) Lack of access to quality education, medical services and good jobs ; and economical difficulties because “the increasing incidence of crime, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, school dropout rates and other indicators of so-called underclass behaviour, are clearly linked to the deindustrialization, disinvestment, and isolation of city neighborhoods outside the central business district” (Squires 107).

b) There is a racial and ethnic tension among blacks and Hispanics which many times turns into violence. Some examples of this can be found in *Drown*. In the short story that gives the name to the novel, Yunior’s mother is telling him about some African Americans attacking Hispanics in the neighbourhood: “They punched her and kept her locked up in her place. Those morenos ate all her food and even made phone calls. Phone calls!” (96). It’s obvious in her speech the general idea of racial confrontation, mutual rejection, and fear. Also, the word “morenos” is a clear example of distancing themselves from African Americans. Most Hispanics use that word when speaking in Spanish in the United States because the translation of “black” into Spanish, “negro” is too similar to the strongly derogative and racially-loaded English word “negro”. Here, Junot Diaz makes use of Spanglish to show the group identity of the united Hispanics when facing the African-Americans. Spanglish, in this sense, could be considered, as Stavans defines it, as “The verbal encounter between Angle and Hispano civilizations” (*Spanglish* 5).

Another case of tension and verbal violence is also found in the short story “Negocios”, when at a laundry, four African American teenagers confront a medical student —probably Hispanic— and he mutters

“Niggers” referring to them. However, Dominicans-Americans, when talking to each other and referring to themselves in very informal, almost vulgar register, use the word “nigger”, showing self-consciousness of blackness not present when in the Dominican Republic. Both in *Drown* and *The Brief* there are plenty of examples of this, as in the short story “Boyfriend”, when the narrator says, talking about his Dominican neighbour downstairs: “And her boyfriend, olvídate. That nigger could have been a model” (Diaz 112). In this case, the use of Spanglish remarks their condition of Hispanics, of belonging to a community, and at the same time addresses a bilingual reader. As Lipski states: “The change of language codes is mainly used to show the bicultural world of the Hispanic communities in the United States, the same way it also expresses the rejection and ambivalence concerning the Anglo-American culture” (Lipski 18)<sup>1</sup>. The racial and ethnical tension often entails violence: in *The Brief*, Yunior has a regrettable encounter with “morenos” when walking home through an African-American area of the neighbourhood and they beat him up: “Two a. m., and I was on Joyce Kilmer for no good reason... Big mistake” (167). Also in *The Brief*, Oscar’s sister “fought boys and packs of morena girls who hated her thin nose and straightish hair” (15). Here we can even see that Lola’s racial physical features, more European-like, close to the at-the-same-time desired and hated whiteness, are the cause of that tension.

c) In spite of the tension between African-American and Dominicans, the geographical and physical proximity produces interracial or inter-ethnic relations: in *Drown*’s eponymous story “Drown”, the narrator states “many of the kids here are younger brothers of the people I used to go to school with. Two of them swim past, black and Latino, and they pause when they see me, recognizing the guy who sells them their shitty dope” (93). And later, the narrator explains clearly that the dualization of race previously commented on affects the limits of the neighbourhood, a physical but also a psychological location: “I used to

think those were the barrio rules, Latinos and blacks in, whites out” (114). Here the proximity and vicinity of African-Americans and Dominicans, and the idea of the segregation exerted by the whites Anglos towards the non-white and the reversal rejection exerted by the latter is also clear. The fact that Dominicans see themselves in a different way in the Dominican Republic than they are seen in the United States under the racial dualism prevalence, constitutes for scholar Moya Pons a “traumatic racial experience” (Duany, 165) and leads to Duany’s thesis: that “the racialization of Dominican immigrants has been a prime obstacle to their successful incorporation into the labour and housing markets of the United States and Puerto Rico” (166) and, above all, that “the persistence of a Dominican identity in the United States may be interpreted in part as resistance to the prevailing racial order” (166). “Under the unofficial American residential segregation, since the first arrivals of Dominicans to New York in the 60’s, they were located in the west upper Manhattan with some other communities of Puerto Ricans and African Americans. And with the boom of the real estate in Manhattan, they were eventually moved to northern Manhattan, to Washington Heights, above Harlem, where nowadays four out of five persons are of Dominican origin” (Duany, 161). Washington Heights is Dominican Republic in New York, a little *Quisqueya*, which is the way the Caribbean island is also called. In *Drown*, we find differing mentions of this neighbourhood in the short story “Negocios”: Washington Heights is the first place that Ramón, Yúnior’s father, finds when he gets to New York: “His first year in Nueva York he lived in Washington Heights, in a roachy flat above what’s now the Tres Marías restaurant” (*Drown* 177). We can see in this comment that it was the logical destination for any Dominican immigrant in New York. And, for if there was some doubt about the condition of the apartment, “And the roaches. The roaches were so bold in his flat that turning on the lights did not startle them” (179). The idea a small version of the original Dominican Republic, of restaurants and shops with Spanish names —like *Las Tres Marías*— is reinforced in the short

story “Edison, New Jersey”, when Yuniór recognizes a young woman as Dominican when she says that she lives in Washington Heights, and finally makes this revealing statement: “Everything in Washington Heights is Dominican. You can’t go a block without passing a Quisqueya Bakery or a Quisqueya Supermercado or a Hotel Quisqueya” (*Drown* 137).

This display of the Dominican identity seems to be both a product of the lack of integration into the *white* America and the rejection of the African-American culture. This lack of integration, as we have seen, also entails low-wage jobs and notes of racism towards Hispanics by mainstream America. This can be observed in *Drown* in “Negocios” when *Papi* gets a job with Reynolds Aluminium in West New York and although the money was fine “it was the first time he had moved outside the umbra of his fellow immigrants. The racism was pronounced” (*Drown* 194). He is given the hardest jobs and shifts, and is constantly bullied by his co-workers. But for *Papi*, it is a way of escaping poverty, a form of social integration, even if only geographically and economically. It is in this sense that scholar Stavans, when dealing with Diaz, states that *Drown* “addresses the need to survive ghettoification” (56).

### **Race in the Dominican Republic**

The radical racialization of Dominicans on their arrival in the United States does not mean that the Dominican Republic was free of racial tensions and prejudices, although many times they are directed towards *the Other*, towards the Haitians. Junot Diaz helps us to understand this with many examples and the use of a powerful Spanglish:

—As for the Haitians and their consideration by the Dominicans as black, including other negative stereotypes, we find, at the very beginning of *Drown*, for example, when a 9-year old Yuniór is teased by his brother for having a few African physical features: “...routines he liked to lay on me. Most of them had to do with my completion, my hair, the

size of my lips. It's the Haitian, Mami found you on the border and only took you in because she felt sorry for you" (5).

—The reiterated use of words in Spanish referring to blackness and their association with negative messages in *The Brief*, like “una prieta to boot” (100) or “black cara de culo” (141) expresses the rejection of blackness by the same Dominicans when in the Dominican Republic, but in this case is more open than in America and involves language in a more explicit way.

—Junot Diaz, through his narrator Yuniors, denounces openly and with a well-achieved sarcasm the racism and the desire of whiteness in the mulatto Dominican society: “Jack Pujols of course: the school's handsomest (read: whitest)” (*The Brief* 89).

—And politics joins the racial issue when, in the footnotes, we read that “Considered our national genius, Joaquin Balaguer was a Negro-phobe, an apologist to genocide, an election thief...” (*The Brief* 90). Indeed, he was the president who reinforced the idea of a *white* Dominican man and repressed the Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic to the point of persecution and homicide.

As we can see, in the Dominican Republic there is also racism and it is strong, but it ends up being directed towards *the Other*, the foreigner, the Haitian. The Dominican obvious blackness is thereby negated.

### **Household Transitions**

Another interesting aspect of the Dominican migration to the Northeast can be elucidated through Gilbertson and Gurak's study about household transitions in the migrations of Dominicans and Colombians to New York. This study compares the different characteristics of the two Hispanic communities of migrants at three points in time: six months before migration, six months after migration and eight years

after migration, the moment of the interview.

Six months before migration, Dominicans are more likely than Colombians to live in a single-parent household, 17% to 5% (Gilbertson; Gurak 28), as a consequence of divorced or separated parents. This reveals differences in the family structure in their place of origin that the authors explain through the different views and practices of Catholicism: “in Colombia, divorce and separation are less consented by the public and the religious morality than in the Dominican Republic, where those events are more common and socially accepted” (Gilbertson; Gurak 28). In *Drown*, we find some examples of this in the short story “Negocios”, when Ramón, not long before leaving for the States, cheats on his wife, is caught and eventually has to leave the house. Finally, his father in law mediates and helps him with the money for the plane tickets, which will lead to a reunification of the family. Junot Diaz seems to include sex and promiscuity as part of the reason for these family separations. For him, the Dominican man contains all the characteristics of machismo: violence, aggressiveness, promiscuity and sexual behaviour. That’s why Oscar, the main character in *The Brief*, with a personality so distant from the stereotyped Dominican man, is bullied by everyone and doesn’t fit in with that specific Latino society.

Let’s review some examples of promiscuous behaviour by Dominican characters in both books: an incipient promiscuity can be observed in Rafa’s behaviour and comments about girls: “The summer I was nine, Rafa shot whole afternoons talking about whatever chica he was getting with—not that the campo girls gave up ass like the girls back in the capital but kissing them, he told me, was pretty much the same” (*Drown* 5). The premature sex in the Dominican Republic is also made explicit by Tío talking about Yuniór, who is eleven years old: “Young? Back in Santo Domingo, he’d be getting laid by now” (*Drown* 31). In *The Brief*, Tío, the quintessential Dominican man, is even more explicit, with his Dominican Spanglish: “Listen, palomo, you have to grab a muchacha y méteselo. That will take care of everything. Start with a

fea. Coje that fea y méteselo! Tío Rudolfo had four kids with three different women so the nigger was without doubt the family's resident méteselo expert" (*The Brief* 24).

Returning to Gilbertson and Gurak's study, six months after migration, many more Dominicans than Colombians live in other-family households, at a rate of 60.3% to 38%. "This supports the idea that Dominicans are more reliant on a diversity of kinship ties shortly after migration probably due to both a greater availability of kin and a greater need for kin resources" (28). This is also connected with the fact that for Dominicans, the migration of children joining parents is more established than is for Colombians (32). Both things can be observed in *Drown* when Ramón moves into Nilda's household in the short story "Negocios", even though he has a family in the Dominican Republic. Later, there is a reunification with his Dominican wife and children five years after leaving the island.

In the long term —eight years—, both communities have different patterns of household transitions. "Dominican women are more likely to move into spouse-absent households" (Gilbertson ; Gurak 34), unlike their Colombian counterparts, who are more likely to move into only spouse households from any origin (Gilbertson ; Gurak, 34). This means, for Dominicans, separation and destruction of the family. Again in *Drown*, Yunior's family, while he is a teenager, is a female-headed family. He is a drug dealer at that time, and adopts the role of the father in the family, taking care of, supporting financially and controlling his mother. We do not exactly know what happened with the father, but he is not there any more. The disintegration of the family has finally taken place.

## Conclusion

The world depicted by Junot Diaz's literature is one that represents the Dominican diaspora to the United States through the eyes of its own protagonists. Alfonso de Toro is right when he explains that "Junot Diaz mixes the present and the past, different geographic spaces,

Spanish and U.S. cultures, and the two languages they represent” (410). But he does it specifically for Dominicans, with Dominican language, Dominican food and Dominican ways of thinking, when it encounters the American way.

If something is idiosyncratic to Dominicans it is race. And race is a matter always present as a buffer that explains their self-consideration as Dominican-Americans and holders of different traditions in a racially dualized world, and the contradictions and conflicts that this implies. The enforced re-evaluation of their own racial identity as somehow black but not African-American —just Dominican black— along with its implications in terms of housing and access to education, jobs, etc. plus the desire to distance themselves from American blacks creates a new Dominican society inside North America, a copy of *Quisqueya*, most times not integrated in the receiving society. *Drown*’s pessimistic tone manifests an implicit intention of denouncement: denouncing the ghetto, denouncing racism, denouncing the disintegration of the migrant Dominican family, and finally denouncing the lack of assimilation into the mainstream American culture by the Dominicans living in the Northeast. Marisel Moreno maintains a similar opinion when she claims that “while it cannot be denied that Diaz’s stories offer a rather negative portrayal of the Dominican immigrant experience, his bleak representations are not gratuitous. In presenting the negative side of the Dominican diaspora, his narrative contest the myth of the Dominican dream, which has been perpetuated in the country’s imagination” (107).

The characters in Junot Diaz’s world are *living* examples of the marginalization of the first migration to the United States, many times due to race. But at the same time it is also a story of struggling for life, self-improvement and escape from the ghetto. In fact, the characters in the second book, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, somehow manage to do so and escape from the ghetto: they go to university, get married and pursue “American” lives. Diaz’s humour, irony and sarcasm, spiced with a musical and perfectly used Spanglish give us a first

hand experience of the endurances, failures and successes of the Dominican dream and, at the same time, denounces racism both in the United States and the Dominican Republic.

### Note

1 My translation from Spanish

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