(http://media.salon.com/2012/07/diaz_362.jpeg)

Junot Diaz (Credit: Lily Oei)

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On May 19, 2012, I met over breakfast with Junot Díaz; we were both attending a two-day symposium about his work at Stanford University. The resulting conversation touched on Díaz's concern with race, his debt to the writings of women of color, and his fictional explorations of psychic and emotional decolonization. It also provided us the happy opportunity to renew our friendship, which began when we were graduate students at Cornell University in the early 1990s.

(http://www.bostonreview.net/)**Paula**: I was so pleased when, during your lecture yesterday, you stated — clearly and unapologetically — that you write about race. I have always been struck by the fact that, in all the interviews you have given that I have read, no one ever asks you about race. If it does come up, it is because *you* bring it up. Yet it has long been apparent to me that race is one of your central concerns. This is why, for my contribution to the symposium, I decided to focus on your story, "How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)." And because the story is about the way race, class, and gender are mutually constituted vectors of oppression, I decided to read it using the theoretical framework developed by the women of color who were writing in the 1980s and 90s. Honestly, though, I feel like I am swimming against the current — lately, I have seen a forgetting and dismissal, in academia, of their work; it is as if their insights are somehow passé. But it seems right to me to read your work through the lens of women of color theory. Does this make sense to you?

Junot: Absolutely. In this we are in sync, Paula. Much of the early genesis of my work arose from the 1980s and specifically from the weird gender wars that flared up in that era between writers of color. I know you remember them: the very public fulminations of Stanley Crouch versus Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed versus Alice Walker, Frank Chin versus Maxine Hong Kingston. Talk about passé — my students know nothing about these exchanges, but for those

of us present at the time they were both dismaying and formative. This was part of a whole backlash against the growing success and importance of women-of-color writers — *but from men of color*. Qué irony. The brothers criticizing the sisters for being inauthentic, for being anti-male, for airing the community's dirty laundry, all from a dreary nationalist point of view. Every time I heard these Chin-Reed-Crouch attacks, even I, as a male, would feel the weight of oppression on me, on my physical body, increased. And for me, what was fascinating was that the maps these women were creating in their fictions — the social, critical, cognitive maps; these matrixes that they were plotting — were far more dangerous to the structures that had me pinioned than any of the criticisms that men of color were throwing down. What began to be clear to me as I read these women of color — Leslie Marmon Silko, Sandra Cisneros, Anjana Appachana, and throw in Octavia Butler and the great [Cherríe] Moraga of course — was that what these sisters were doing in their art was powerfully important for the community, for subaltern folks, for women writers of color, for male writers of color, for me. They were heeding [Audre] Lorde's exhortation by forging the tools that could actually take down master's house. To read these sisters in the 1980s as a young college student was not only intoxicating, it was soul-changing. It was metanoia.

Paula: Can you say more about why the maps plotted by women of color seemed to you more dangerous than the critiques that were made by the men of color who were attacking them?

Junot: Think about that final line in [Frantz] Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks: "O my body, make me always a man who questions!" I remember reading these sisters and suddenly realizing (perhaps incorrectly, but it felt right to me at the time) that women-of-color writers were raising questions about the world, about power, about philosophy, about politics, about history, about white supremacy because of their raced, gendered, sexualized bodies; they were wielding a genius that had been cultivated *out of* their raced, gendered, sexualized subjectivities. And what they were producing in knowledge was something that the world needed to hear in order to understand itself, that I needed to hear in order to understand myself in the world, and that no one — least of all male writers of color — should be trying to silence. To me these women were not only forging in the smithies of their body-logos radical emancipatory epistemologies — the source code of our future liberation — but also they were fundamentally rewriting Fanon's final call in Black Skin, White Masks, transforming it into "O my body, make me always a woman who questions … my body" (both its oppressions *and* interpellations and its liberatory counter-strategies). To me (and many other young artists and readers), the fiction of these foundational sisters represented a quantum leap in what is called the post-colonial-slash-subaltern-slash-neocolonial; their work completed, extended, complicated the work of the earlier generation (Fanon) in profound ways and also created for this young writer a set of strategies and warrior-grammars that would become the basis of my art. That these women are being forgotten, and their historical importance elided, says a lot about our particular moment and how real a threat these foundational sisters posed to the order of things.

Paula: What do you think was the most important advance that women of color made on the work of those earlier male thinkers?

Junot: Well, first of all, these sisters were pretty clear that redemption was not going to be found in the typical masculine nostrums of nationalism or armed revolution or even that great favorite of a certain class of writerly brother: transracial intimacy. *Por favor!* If transracial intimacy was all we needed to be free, then a joint like the Dominican Republic would be the great cradle of freedom — which, I assure you, it is not. Why these sisters struck me as the most dangerous of artists was because in the work of, say, Morrison, or Octavia Butler, we are shown the awful radiant truth of how profoundly constituted we are of our oppressions. Or, said differently: how indissolubly our identities are bound to the regimes that imprison us. These sisters not only describe the grim labyrinth of power that we are in as neocolonial subjects, but they also point out that we play both Theseus and the Minotaur in this nightmare drama. Most importantly these sisters offered strategies of hope, spinning the threads that will make escape from this labyrinth possible. It wasn't an easy thread to seize — this movement towards liberation required the kind of internal bearing witness of our own role in the social hell of our world that most people would rather not engage in. It was a tough praxis but a potentially earthshaking one, too. Because rather than strike at this issue or that issue, this internal bearing of witness raised the possibility of denying our oppressive regimes the true source of their powers — which is, of course, *our* consent, *our* participation. This kind of praxis doesn't attack the head of the beast, which will only grow back; it strikes directly at the beast's heart, which we nurture and keep safe in our own.

Heady stuff for a young writer. Theirs was the project I wanted to be part of. And they gave me the map that I, a poor Dominican immigrant boy of African descent from New Jersey, could follow.

Paula: This reminds me of a point you made in the question-and-answer session following your lecture yesterday. You said that people of color fuel white supremacy as much as white people do; that it is something we are *all* implicated in. You went on to suggest that only by first recognizing the social and material realities we live in — by naming and examining the effects of white supremacy — can we hope to transform our practices.

Junot: How can you change something if you won't even acknowledge its existence, or if you downplay its significance? White supremacy is the great silence of our world, and in it is embedded much of what ails us as a planet. The silence around white supremacy is like the silence around Sauron in The Lord of the Rings or the Voldemort name, which must never be uttered in the Harry Potter novels. And yet here's the rub: If a critique of white supremacy doesn't first flow through you, doesn't first implicate you, then you have missed the mark; you have, in fact, almost guaranteed its survival and reproduction. There's that old saying: The

devil's greatest trick is that he convinced people that he doesn't exist. Well, white supremacy's greatest trick is that it has convinced people that, if it exists at all, it exists always in other people, never in us.

Paula: I wanted to ask you about something else you said in the lecture yesterday. You said you wanted to, and thought you could, "figure out a way to represent most honestly — represent in the language, and represent in the way people talk, and represent in the discourse — what [you], just one person, thought was a racial reality," but without endorsing that reality. You indicated that you aim to realistically represent "our entire insane racial logic" but in a way that "the actual material does not endorse that reality" *at the level of structure*. This is certainly what I would argue your work succeeds in doing. But I would like to hear more about how you go about creating, at the level of structure, a disjuncture between the realistic representation of race and an endorsement of the racial logic on which the representation is based.

Junot: The things I say. [Laughs.] OK, let me see if I can make sense of my own damn self. Let's see if I can speak to the actual texts. Well, at its most simplistic in, say, Drown, we have a book where racist shit happens — but it's not like at a thematic level the book is saying: Right on, racist shit! I was hoping that the book would expose my characters' race craziness and that this craziness would strike readers, at the very minimum, as authentic. But exposing our racisms, etc., accurately has never seemed to be enough; the problem with faithful representations is that they run the risk of being mere titillation or sensationalism. In my books, I try to show how these oppressive paradigms work together with the social reality of the characters to undermine the very dreams the characters have for themselves. So, Yunior thinks X and Y about people and that logic is, in part, what fucks him up. Now if the redounding is too blunt and obvious, then what you get is a moralistic parable and not literature. But, if it's done well, then you get both the ugliness that comes out of showing how people really are around issues like race and gender, but also a hidden underlying counter-current that puts in front of you the very real, very personal, consequences of these orientations.

Yunior, for example, uses the "n word" all the time and yet he is haunted by anti-black racism within and without his community. Haunted and wounded. In "How to Date," for instance, we see explicitly how he is victimized by a powerful anti-black self-hate of the Fanon variety. That for me would be a concrete example of how the deeper narrative of Drown offers a complicated counterpoint to Yunior's often-toxic racial utterances, the kind of call-response I'm trying to achieve in the work.

In Drown as a whole, the million-dollar question is this: Are Yunior's gender politics, his generalizations and misogyny, rewarded in the book's 'reality'? Do they get him anything in the end? Well, if we chart the progress of the stories in Drown, it appears to me that Yunior's ideas about women, and the actions that arise out of these ideas, always leave him more alone, more thwarted, more disconnected from his community and from himself. Yunior cannot even hope to bear witness to what happened between his mother and his father — which is to say he can't

bear witness to what really happened to him — without first confronting the role he plays and continues to play in that kind of male behavior that made his family's original separation and later dissolution inevitable. Yunior's desire for communion with self and with other is finally undermined by his inability, his unwillingness, to see the women in his life as fully human. (Which is kinda tragic, since without being able to recognize the women parts of his identity as human, he cannot in turn recognize himself as fully human.) The reason why the character of Yunior is at all interesting to me is because he senses this. He senses how he makes his own chains, and he rages against the chains and against himself, and yet he continues to forge them, link by link by link.

(http://www.salon.com/2012/07/02/the_search_for_decolonial_love/)

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