The Dangers of Intimacy: The Importance of Metacognition in Junot Díaz's "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie"

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Abstract

This paper proposes a pragmatic reading of Junot Díaz's short story "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie" by making use of Cultural Quotient (CQ, a/k/a Cultural Intelligence) a new branch of academics that draws from the fields of linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and international business to make one more culturally aware. Additionally, the paper gives focus to CQ Strategy, the metacognitive step of the CQ process, and uses the cognitive psychological concept Theory of Mind (ToM) to explain how human consciousness has evolved to read and anticipate the mental states of others. Both CQ and ToM depend on metacognition in order to navigate from one cultural context to another. The article attempts to explain how metacognition enables Díaz's Dominican protagonist, Yunior, to become culturally intelligent as well as anticipate the emotions of the various American girls he dates and hopes to seduce. Finally, the article will propose what learners of a second language can gain from reading works by Díaz, and thus other cross-cultural fictions, by using a pragmatic approach to literature.

Keywords

Junot Díaz, cultural intelligence, metacognition, theory of mind, intercultural fiction, postcolonialism, second-language acquisition

Cultural intelligence or cultural quotient (CQ) is a rather green branch of academic study that incorporates the older disciplines of anthropology, linguistics, and psychology with international business. Cultural Intelligence is a general term that is defined by one's ability to work across cultures, to have the motivation, knowledge, and empathy required to succeed when executing decisions that impact intercultural or multicultural teams, or simply one's ability to navigate the many challenges of a strange cultural environment. Those who teach literature to students who read English as a second language can and should make use of the cultural intelligence methodology to investigate literature. This article seeks to give a pragmatic reading of the Dominican-American, Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Junot Díaz's early short story "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie," from his debut collection *Drown* (1996) through the lens of the four CQ steps: Drive, Knowledge, Strategy, and Action, paying particular attention to the third step – Strategy – as it is the one most difficult to conceptualize, perhaps because it is concerned with the rather abstract concept of metacognition, which, when understood properly, can be a powerful tool in reading intercultural fiction. In an effort to further understand the role of metacognition when engaging in intercultural interaction, negotiation, diplomacy, or in the case of Junot Díaz's teenage narrator Yunior, seduction, the article will also draw from the Russian-American critic Lisa Zunshine's book *Why We Read Fiction* (2012), as Zunshine is also interested in using a pragmatic approach to

reading literature and her analysis of how metacognition functions in literature make an interesting counterpoint to David Livermore's map of how mental strategy functions in the real world.[1]

Cultural Intelligence evolved from emotional intelligence, which was popularized in the 1990s by Daniel Goleman's book by the same name, *Emotional Intelligence* (1995); cultural intelligence received its first book-length study in P. Christopher Early and Soon Ang's *Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions Across Cultures* (2003).[2] Since then, CQ has not yet concerned itself with literature. Indeed, the field's strongest voices seem to come from consultants in the academic world, experts who translate the insights of linguistics, anthropology, and cognitive psychology to the global business world. David Livermore has become incredibly successful in communicating the insights of CQ to the business community. Similarly, it can be argued that literary studies can learn much from CQ's pragmatic approach to cultural studies. Following Livermore's lead, this article attempts to give a pragmatic reading to literature, so rather than give a classically deconstructive or transnational reading of Díaz's story, this article will make use of Livermore's CQ scaffolding in hopes this process brings insight into the cross-cultural relationships depicted in the text and further sensitize readers to issues common to nonnative speakers of English.[3]

According to Livermore, Dominicans and other Latin American cultures are both "High Power Distance" and "Collectivist", and these cultural value dimensions lay the foundation for Junot Díaz's collection *Drown*, which recounts several episodes in the life of Yunior, a boy who emigrates with his parents and brother Rafa, from the Dominican Republic to the neighborhood of London Terrace in Union City, New Jersey.[4] Yunior's father, like most Latin men, is a disciplinarian (High Power Distance), but Yunior's father seems to be an extreme case, almost suffering from a kind of compulsive need for military order, which prompts him to beat his sons for even minor infractions like failing to tie their shoes correctly. He also has many women on the side, living up to the Dominican machismo, known specifically as the *tiguere*, which the scholar Marisel Moreno identifies as "the prototypical Dominican macho."[5] Quoting from the Christian Krohn-Hansen's article "Masculinity and the Political among Dominicans: 'The Dominican Tiger,' Yunior's father, is not only strong and sexual, but he is "astute and socially intelligent" as well as "cunning and convincing; and a gifted talker who gets out of most situations."[6] By the time the reader of *Drown* reaches "How to Date a Browngirl," one of the later stories in the collection, Yunior's father has

1 Junot Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie," in *Drown*, by Junot D*íaz* (New York, Riverhead Books, 1996), 111–116. Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012), Kindle.

2 P. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam, 2005); Christopher Early and Soon Ang, *Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions Across Cultures* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003).

3 In terms of combining literature with a pragmatic CQ methodology, this article could be read as a companion to my previously published article aimed at Second-Language Teachers. See Brad Vice, "Cultural Intelligence and Literature" in *Anglophone Literature in Second-Language Teacher Education: Curriculum Innovation Through Intercultural Education*, eds. Justin Quinn and Gabriela Kleckova (London: Routledge, 2021), 106–120.

4 David Livermore. *Expand Your Borders: Discover 10 Culture Clusters* (East Lansing: Cultural Intelligence Center, 2013), 101.

5 Marisel Moreno, "Debunking Myths, Destabilizing Identities: A Reading of Junot Díaz's 'How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie,'" *Afro-Hispanic Review* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 20.

6 Christian Krohn-Hansen, "Masculinity and the Political among Dominicans: 'The Dominican Tiger,'" in *Machos, Mistresses, Madonnas: Contesting the Power of Latin American Gender Imagery*, eds. Marit Melhuus and Kristi Anne Stølen (London: Verso, 1996), 109. Quoted in Marisel Moreno, "Debunking Myths, Destabilizing Identities: A Reading of Junot Díaz's 'How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie,'" *Afro-Hispanic Review* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 20.

gotten out of his family "situation" by talking an American woman into marrying him so he can obtain a green card.

While "How to Date a Browngirl" grapples with issues of cultural intelligence, it certainly is not politically correct; indeed it is constructed to face stereotypes head-on. The flamboyantly un-pc title purposely provokes, especially with the term "halfie," which may make a contemporary audience, thirty years after its original publication, wince rather than smirk. There is no question, the girls in the story are not only stereotypes (the typical "whitegirl," the typical "blackgirl," etc.), but objects, nameless and faceless, not only objects of desire but objects of analysis, reflection; this is to say they are objects of Yunior's thoughts, fantasies, daydreams – his metacognition: as when he is not with them, Yunior seems to be thinking about them in an endless loop.

Yunior himself is not named in the story either, as it is written in a rather strange second-person point of view where the protagonist seems to be talking to himself. Díaz simultaneously builds and deconstructs a masculine stereotype, a teenage version of the Dominican Tiger, who in turn divides girls into types and then assigns them seduction strategies according to their racial and socioeconomic attributes. In other words, "How to Date a Browngirl" is about picking a strategy; or maybe more precisely, it is a story about strategic thinking.

Before diving more closely into the story, it will be useful to consult Livermore to learn more about the core principles of cultural intelligence, and perhaps show how strategic thinking is important for navigating intercultural interactions. In *Leading with Cultural Intelligence* (2010), Livermore explains that "Cultural intelligence is a four-dimensional framework" and that "[a]ll four dimensions are essential in order to gain the benefits of CQ."[7] Livermore suggests that the "four-step cycle offers a promising way to move CQ from theory to practice":

> Step 1: CQ drive (motivational dimension) gives us the energy and self-confidence to pursue the needed understanding and planning necessary for a particular cross-cultural assignment.
> Step 2: CQ knowledge (cognitive dimension) provides us with an understanding of basic cultural issues that are relevant to the assignment.
> Step 3: CQ strategy (metacognitive dimension) allows us to draw on our cultural understanding so we can plan and interpret what's going on in this situation.
> Step 4 CQ action (behavioral dimension) provides us with the ability to engage in effective, flexible leadership for this task.[8]

Drive

Yunior's drive is at once both obvious and complex – sex. Yunior's compulsion to seduce so many girls has less to do with raging hormones, and more with his hunger for experience. The story begins with Yunior addressing himself in the second person, feigning illness to avoid a family trip to see the "tia who likes to squeeze your nuts (he's gotten big, she'll say)."[9] Though this seems like reason enough to avoid such a trip, the protagonist's conscious motivation to remain home has

7 David Livermore, *Leading with Cultural Intelligence: The New Secret to Success* (New York: Amacom, 2010), 25.

8 Livermore, *Leading with Cultural Intelligence*, 30–31.

9 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 111.

more to do with having the apartment all to himself. With no father there to force him to visit his tia, the narrator's mom – an avatar of Latin (collectivist) culture, a culture that always puts family first – is upset by his refusal to join the family, "Go ahead and stay, malcriado," she says out of a combination of hurt and disdain.[10] Much like Ernest Hemingway or Sandra Cisneros or any number of other intercultural writers, Díaz uses a hybrid Spanish/English prose, not only to give the reader a flavor of Dominican/Hispanic culture but to some extent keep the reader on unsure ground: *tia*, *campo*, and even *malcriado* (a spoiled child) are dropped into the prose with little regard for the Anglo reader's attenuation to Spanish.

Yunior's motivation to avoid his inappropriately friendly "tia" and her tendency to "squeeze" his testicles, according to critic Daniel Bautista in his article, "In and Out of the Mainstream: Dominican-American Identity in Junot Díaz's 'How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie,'" "metaphorically and literally reveals just how vulnerable his 'manhood' is still. The vulnerability at least partly explains why Yunior must rely on subterfuge and strategizing to get what he wants, especially in relation to the girls he wants to date."[11] Though Yunior's mother views his feigned sickness as a selfish act, and clearly his desire to use the apartment as a bachelor pad to be alone with his date(s) is evidence of his libido in control of his decision making, Yunior's drive may have as much to do with psychological disincentives as much as incentives, as well as a confidence that masks a deep sense of shame. In many ways, this is a story of a young man's desperate attempt to compensate for a profound lack of self-esteem.

In the article "'Doing It' for the Right Reason: Validation of a Measurement of Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, and Amotivation for Sexual Relationships," intrinsic motivation is defined by expressions like "Because sex is fun," or "Because sex is exciting," while extrinsic motivation includes expressions like "Because I don't want to be criticized by my partner."[12] While it is clear Yunior is intrinsically motivated, the story retains the mournful tone resonant in the extrinsic articulation.

On the last page of the story, Yunior imagines watching a girl "button her shirt, let her comb her hair, the sound of it stretching like a sheet of fire between you," but when she is gone he advises himself, "During the next hour the phone will ring. You will be tempted to pick it up. Don't. […] Don't go downstairs. Don't fall asleep. It won't help."[13] There is something mournful in the story's closure.[14] The authors of "'Doing it' for the Right Reason," suggest another motivational category, "introjected," which can be expressed with the sentiments "To prove that I am sexually attractive," "To show to myself I am sexually competent," and "To prove to myself that I have sex-appeal." These desires are as important as Yunior's intrinsic motivation, though "introjected"

10 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 111.

11 Daniel Bautista, "In and Out of the Mainstream: Dominican-American Identity in Junot Díaz's 'How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie,'" *Romance Notes* 49, no. 1 (2009): 84.

12 Emilie Eve Gravel, Luc G. Pelletier, Elke Doris Reissing, "'Doing It' for the Right Reason: Validation of a Measurement of Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, and Amotivation for Sexual Relationships," *Personality and Individual Differences* 92 (2016): 164–173.

13 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 116.

14 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 116

motivations are by definition subconscious rather than conscious.[15] Yunior's lack of confidence as a person, as a man, may explain his insecurities concerning sex.

Knowledge

CQ knowledge may be enhanced by thinking about Livermore's seven *cultural values dimensions*, which are an excellent rubric for exploring any work of intercultural fiction. Two of these cultural values are Power Distance (authority ranking) and Individualism/Collectivism. For instance, we can see that "Latin America is paternalistic, and this comes through in the High Power Distance that exists across the region"; and this sentiment is intertwined with Livermore's description of Latin America as a "Collectivist" culture, "[to] many Latin Americans, the family is everything. There's fairly low trust of those outside one's family network."[16] High Power Distance/Collectivism accounts for much of the familial conflict in Yunior's background, as he was abused and then abandoned by an overbearing father, but born into a culture where families are supposed to cleave to one another, which begs the question, would Yunior's father have left the family if they had stayed in the Dominican Republic? This adds another layer of sadness to the dissolution of Yunior's family. Yunior's refusal to accompany his mother on a family visit (whatever the reason) must make her wonder how long she can expect her son to stay with the family as well.

Livermore also rates Latin American cultures to be cooperative rather than competitive as is typical for the US, but since Yunior came to the US as a child his natural cooperativeness leaves him open to bullies and the rejection of white children whose families are fleeing the neighborhood. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Díaz says the first thing upon arrival that struck him about the US was its competitiveness, which he associates with his tormented childhood: "I was a child. I didn't speak English, and I experienced the competitiveness of America, and its profoundly cruel childhood culture."[17] If Yunior can't depend on his father, what about his older brother: does Rafa protect him from bullies and America's Darwinian aspects? Though only mentioned once in "How to Date a Browngirl," Yunior's brother in the rest of *Drown* fits more snuggly into their father shoes as *Tigeure* and proves to be at once a smooth talking-womanizer and a powerfully violent brute who trains as a boxer, a sport he often practices by beating his younger brother. Yunior and Rafa's relationship takes sibling rivalry to a whole new level, and Yunior seems to fear and distrust him, so in this regard, he is more bully than protector.

Beyond what can be gleaned from Livermore's *cultural value dimensions*, "How to Date a Brown Girl," is mostly about racial stereotypes, and specifically the status of blackness in both the US and the Dominican Republic. Perhaps we could list this under the label "cultural systems."[18] While often it is tempting to read a protagonist, especially in this bildungsroman-style literature, to physically resemble the author, Yunior is described as having more African features than the author

15 Gravel, et al. "'Doing It' for the Right Reason," 166.

16 Livermore, *Expand Your Borders*, 53.

17 Ruby Cutolo, "Guns and Roses: Junot Díaz," *Publisher's Weekly*, July 27, 2012, available at: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/profiles/article/53274-guns-and-roses-junot-diaz.html>.

18 Livermore, *Leading with Cultural Intelligence*, 25.

himself. Though Díaz has admitted in numerous interviews that the family in *Drown* resembles his own, he is also quick to point out that though he is not considered black, some members of his family are, as in this *Fresh Air* interview with Terry Gross, "[M]y family's of African descent, I mean, I'm what they would call mulatto back on the island. But I had siblings who were phenotypically black. So [if] you hated black people, we fit into that little category."[19] Yunior wants to dissociate himself with blackness in the story. One of his instructions to himself in preparing the apartment for female company is to "Hide the pictures of yourself with an Afro," and then in sad juxtaposition to this, he reminds himself to hide "the basket with all the crapped-on toilet paper under the sink," to cover the evidence of a poorly functioning toilet, both efforts to cover up an unseemly reality. In one of the most heartbreaking sentences of the story, he advises himself before kissing a "whitegirl" to, "[t]ell her you love her hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because in truth, you love them more than you love your own."[20]

When the "halfie" in the story laments that "Blacks treat her real bad," the protagonist wonders to himself how "she feels about Dominicans."[21] According to Morano, "The juxtaposition black/Dominican effectively blurs the lines between racial and ethnic distinctions. While the 'halfie's' comments suggest a distinction between Dominicans and black people […] [Yunior's response] reflects an awareness of both the racialization of Dominicans in the US, who are considered black, and the often denied African heritage of the Dominican people," whose white nationalists often define their identity as superior to Haitians.[22] But Yunior's negative feeling about his hair is something he has picked up since immigrating, "a direct result of his racialization in the U.S. Since an Afro in the Dominican Republic does not carry the same cultural/racial baggage."[23] Yunior understands that class and ethnicity "marginalize him in the U.S." in ways he is not in the Dominican Republic: "In hiding the picture, Yunior erases the racial difference that marks him as 'Other' in the U.S. And threatens to jeopardize his potential conquests."[24]

The word conquest conjures up images of a new world explorer, perhaps a *conquistador*, an adventurer/exploiter, sailing around the world, planting his flag on virgin territory. But Yunior is much more passive in his seductions; indeed, he waits patiently for the girls to come to him. He categorizes them not only in terms of racial stereotypes but also in terms of how far they travel to see him, and whether the girl in question resides inside the borders of, or from the frontiers of suburbia, or beyond: "The potential conquest of the browngirl, the blackgirl, the whitegirl, and the halfie, is determined in every case by the experiential proximity (i.e. familiarity) or distance of each girl to the Terrace and what it represents."[25] When his date is a "whitegirl," Yunior will sometimes "[get] up from the couch and check the parking lot;" if she arrives chauffeured in a Honda or Jeep, standard suburban class markers, he reminds himself to walk into the parking lot to greet the girl's

19 Terry Gross, "Junot Díaz Discusses His 'Wondrous' Debut Novel," *Fresh Air*, NPR, May 2, 2008, available at: <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/90111248>.

20 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 115.

21 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 115.

22 Moreno, "Debunking Myths, Destabilizing Identities," 15.

23 Moreno, "Debunking Myths, Destabilizing Identities," 16.

24 Moreno, "Debunking Myths, Destabilizing Identities," 16.

25 Moreno, "Debunking Myths, Destabilizing Identities," 14.

mom, "Don't panic," he tells himself, "Run a hand through your hair like the whiteboys do even though the only thing that runs through your hair is Africa."[26]

The whitegirl does not think of him as black, "She'll say, I like Spanish guys, and even though you've never been to Spain, you say, I like you. You'll sound smooth."[27] This rejoinder is not smooth, and barely even counts as conversation, much less seduction; yet Yunior seems to be able to convert this tongue-tied banter into intimacy. Despite the whitegirl's proclamation that he is "Spanish," we can detect that something rubs him the wrong way about this moniker. Spanish is the language he speaks, but it is not his nationality nor even ethnicity. Livermore warns in his chapter on the Latin American Culture Cluster that it is "better to avoid using 'America' to refer to the United States" as Central and South Americans consider themselves to be living in America."[28] Conversely, "Latinos in the US are consistently frustrated by being talked about as if they are one unified culture group."[29] Again, if Yunior uses stereotypes to strategize his seductions, it is clear the girls, because of their limited cultural knowledge, see him through broad generalizations as well; his ethnicity is malleable and constructed by the beholder's own stereotypes and cultural context.

Strategy

Junot Díaz has described "How to Date a Browngirl" as a "sort of a deranged and deeply flawed how-to guide."[30] Critic Daniel Bautista says the story is:

> Presented as a step-by-step instruction manual for dating different races or ethnicities of "girls," [...] a young Dominican-American's attempts to negotiate a confusing landscape of racial, ethnic, and sexual stereotypes and expectations. The narrator's efforts to effectively "package" himself for the girls he pursues offer an interesting perspective on Dominican-American identity politics […]. Despite the baldly provocative title, Díaz subversively reveals the limits of stereotypes by treating race and ethnicity as performative, provisional, and even strategic roles that individuals assume or take off according to the demands of the moment.[31]

This description of "How to Date a Browngirl" not only suits Díaz's fiction in general, but could also serve as a description for a concept like cultural intelligence which Livermore defines as "an overall repertoire and perspective that can be applied to a myriad of cultural situations."[32] That is to say, cultural intelligence is "performative, provisional, and strategic" as well.

If the repertoire of skills acquired through CQ drive and CQ knowledge is to be transferable from one culture to the next, or if the subject is truly able to act with confidence in a "myriad of cultural situations," then CQ strategy is key in enabling the power to pivot. Of course metacognition

26 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 112.

27 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 115.

28 Livermore, *Expand Your Borders*, 55.

29 Livermore, *Expand Your Borders*, 54.

30 Michel Martin, "Author Explains New Vision, New Life," *Tell Me More*, NPR, June 10, 2009, available at: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=105193110>.

31 Bautista, "In and Out of the Mainstream," 83.

32 Livermore, *Leading with Cultural Intelligence*, 4.

is thinking about thinking, and the meditative ability to reflect is what is remarkable about not only the theme of "How to Date a Browngirl," but also the narrative structure. To expand upon Livermore's observations on metacognition in real-world decision making and in order to make CQ strategy empowering for understanding intercultural fiction, the article will turn to Lisa Zunshines's *Why We Read Fiction* for three reasons: one, Zunshine works directly with the metacognitive psychological concept of Theory of Mind to read literature; two, like Díaz, she is a bilingual immigrant and addresses how Theory of Mind functions as a bridge from one language to another, especially via literature; and three, she can explain the narrative/psychological technique Díaz uses to embody/deconstruct stereotypes, i.e. the typical browngirl, balckgirl, whitegirl, and/or "halfie."[33]

In the introduction to *Why We Read Fiction*, Zunshine explains that Theory of Mind is the term cognitive psychologists use to describe our capacity to "read minds": "The emergence of the Theory of Mind 'module' was evolution's answer to the staggeringly complex challenge faced by our ancestors, who needed to make sense of the behavior of other people in a group,"; in observing behavior we learned to project "underlying mental states" and that our "evolved cognitive architecture 'prods' us toward learning and practicing mind reading daily, from the beginning of awareness."[34] Furthermore, "cognitive anthropologists are increasingly aware that our ability to attribute states of mind to ourselves and other people is intensely context dependent."[35] Zunshine goes on to say that "Theory of Mind appears to be our key cognitive endowment as a *social species*," but "works of fiction manage to 'cheat' these mechanisms into 'believing that they are in the presence of material that they were 'designed' to process."[36] Therefore, "ToM […] makes literature as we know it possible" as the "flimsy verbal constructions we generously call 'characters' with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires […] allow us to guess their feelings and thus predict their actions. Literature pervasively capitalizes on and stimulates the Theory of Mind mechanism that had evolved to deal with real people, even as on some level readers do remain aware that fictive characters are not real people at all."[37] It might also be possible to say that advocates of CQ like David Livermore have somewhat codified Theory of Mind mechanisms as they function in the real world. When we say an author like Díaz is guilty of reducing his characters to stereotypes, it is no more than we do in real life when we engage interculturally with a person or group we somehow perceive as strange or other. The fact that Díaz can give voice and pathos to these unnamed, faceless girls is part of his narrative strategy, a strategy made possible by Theory of Mind.

Certainly, the rhetorical "you," the second-person narrator is part of the narrative architecture of this particular story, and it is one Díaz uses often when writing in Yunior's voice. Over half of Díaz's novel *This Is How You Lose Her* (2013) is written in the second-person.[38] When questioned in *The Atlantic* about this, Díaz replied: "There is something about the second-person – maybe simultaneous distance and cloying familiarity – that I needed. I don't know what it was.

33 Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), Kindle.

34 Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, (Section 2 of Part I).

35 Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, (Section 2 of Part I).

36 Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, (Section 2 of Part I).

37 Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, (Section 2 of Part I).

38 Junot Díaz, *This Is How You Lose Her* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013).

It was as if I just couldn't tell the story without this point of view. I couldn't tell the story without that kind of distance […]. It's almost like it wouldn't work without it."[39]

The second person POV of course facilities the convention of the "deranged and deeply flawed how-to guide," but the circularity of the story is reminiscent of other interviews where the author discusses the "trauma" of having to learn English at the age of six, and how much more difficult it was for him to acquire the language than his siblings: "It was torturous […] I do think my obsession with language stems partially from my lack of any kind of control or comfort around English in my first years."[40] Díaz admits, "For me, the trauma of English acquisition hangs over me, but also just the fact that I'm in two languages a lot of the time […]. I live in a life where both English and Spanish are in italics in my brain. [T]here are people who don't pick over their language the way I do, who aren't so self-conscious of what they are saying."[41] This habit of reflecting on language simultaneously in both English and Spanish is a use of Díaz's metacognitive CQ, specifically what Livermore would categorize as "checking."[42]

Lisa Zunshine on the other hand uses the word "testing" rather than "checking," and asserts that one of the pleasures of fiction is that it acts as a stress test to make sure our Theory of Mind is still working properly: "it is possible, then, that certain cultural artifacts, such as novels, test the functioning of our cognitive adaptations for mind-reading while keeping us pleasantly aware that the 'test" is proceeding quite smoothly."[43]As an immigrant from Russia, Zunshine explains how Theory of Mind can add an extra metacognitive layer of reflection to a nonnative speaker's cultural immersion as well as a "test" of the nonnative speaker's ability to master English and to recalibrate ToM to a new cultural context:

> [W]hen I came to this country [US], about fifteen years ago, I went through one of those periods of reading fiction voraciously, going through a wild mix of novels by authors ranging from Belva Plain to Nabokov and from Muriel Spark to Philip Roth. That battery of "tests" must have been offering me a "guarantee" (illusory, perhaps, but still pleasing) that eventually I would be all right in the English speaking social world, whose overwhelming difference I could only guess at from the self-encapsulated enclave of San Francisco's Russian Jewish community. […] [T]he awareness of the personal identification must have been somehow less important than the awareness of my mind-reading wellbeing. The latter was crucial for me, the way I thought of myself, particularly at a time when I could not express myself, much less discuss complex states of mind, in coherent English.[44]

Díaz describes a similar period in his young life where his spoken English was imperfect, embarrassing, and left him feeling vulnerable though reading English gave him the ability to contemplate complex states of mind as well as a feeling of control: "I think that's part of my compensation for the difficulties I was having with speaking English. I learned how to read English very quickly. […]

39 Joe Fassler, "'The Base Line Is You Suck': Junot Díaz on Men Who Write About Women," *The Atlantic*, September 12, 2012, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/the-baseline-is-you-suck-junot-diaz-on-men-who-write-about-women/262163/>.

40 Joe Fassler, "'The Base Line Is You Suck.'"

41 Henry Ace Knight, "An Interview with Junot Díaz," *ASYPMTOTE,* January 2016, available at: <https://www.asymptote-journal.com/interview/an-interview-junot-diaz/>.

42 Livermore, *Leading with Cultural Intelligence*, 25.

43 Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, (Section 4 of Part I).

44 Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, (Section 4 of Part I).

I buried myself in literary worlds. […] I fell in love with books that transported me far away from my world, which for me was very stressful."[45] This period of intense reading acted not only as an escape for the young Díaz, facing urban poverty and discrimination in a strange country, but also a "checking" (in Livermore's terminology) or "testing" (in Zunshine's) of his ability to function in this new English environment.

Yunior is similarly testing his attractiveness or even his self-worth with the numerous girls he invites into his apartment. In order to prepare for his dates, he uses some basic strategies to erase his African roots, i.e. "remove any photos with an Afro," but he also erases his Dominican roots as well, "Take down any embarrassing photos of your family in the campo, especially the one of the half-naked kids dragging a goat on a rope leash," and even any evidence that he is part of the American underclass, "Clear the government cheese from the refrigerator."[46] But his opportunity to interact with a date, as portrayed in the first paragraph, logically should be a singular experience, that is, the day when Yunior's mom went to visit his *tia*, and he feigned an illness and stayed home. Which of the four (kinds of) girls did he seduce? Of course, all four (kinds of) girls are visualized as inhabiting this role. Borrowing from Zunshine, the girls in the story, are not only "flimsy verbal constructions," i.e. characters, but they are "metarepresentational" ideas that exist in more than one reality at the same time:

> Austen's famous opening sentence, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in a want of a wife," derives at least some of its ironic punch from the play between its status both as representation and as metarepresentation. This sentence activates in its readers two rather different information processing strategies, for it is framed *simultaneously* as an "architecturally true" statement *and* a statement to be processed under advisement. On the one hand, the tag phrase, "It is a truth universally acknowledged," literally pressures us to let the idea that "a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in a want of a wife" circulate completely freely among our other knowledge stores, thus influencing our future behaviors in a broad variety of ways (and, we assume, influencing with equal intensity the behavior of the novel's characters). On the other hand, phrases such as, "It is a truth universally acknowledged," or "as everybody says," or "as everybody knows," are generally a peculiar lot, for they also tend to alert us to the possible metarepresentational nature of the information that they introduce.[47]

Certainly, Yunior is not wanting a wife, and one suspects he would not want one even if he were white and in possession of a good fortune. Paradoxically metarepresentation is a representation that always works on two or more levels, and so society, as represented by women like Elizabeth Bennett's mother, attests to one "universal truth" while society as represented by Elizabeth's father, and perhaps Elizabeth herself, ironically winks at such sentiments. Each girl Yunior wants to seduce has an "Everybody knows" sort of persona he must unravel, which means each date has a metarepresentational character, a condition highlighted by her facelessness and namelessness. She is a stereotype that exists on two or more levels. For instance, in a reversal of stereotypes concerning female promiscuity, everybody knows that white girls readily jump into bed, "a whitegirl might give

45 Fassler, "'The Base Line Is You Suck.'"

46 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 111. Partly as a result of large dairy surpluses since the end of World War II, "government cheese" was until the mid-1990s a commodity subsidy issued to US welfare recipients in food banks, i.e. centers where packages of food were given directly to recipients.

47 Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, (Section 2 of Part II).

it up right then," but a local girl, a black or browngirl, "has to live in the same neighbourhood as you do, has to deal with you being all up in her business."[48] In Yunior's understanding of the way the world works, "[i]f she's a whitegirl you'll at least get a handjob," but neighborhood girls meet socially conservative conventions, girls whose reputations follow them inside London Terrace. Livermore attests that stereotypes are a vehicle for making "short cuts" in our decision-making process, and we use them as a kind of "best first guess" when we engage with members of a culture we do not know well.[49]

We can see this dynamic at work when we read that Yunior takes his stereotypical date(s) to metarepresentational restaurants as well, representing the kind of strategic thinking Livermore would encourage in preparing for a real-world intercultural meeting: "You have choices. If the girl's from around the way, take her to El Cibao for dinner. Order everything in your busted up Spanish. Let her correct you if she's Latina and amaze her if she's black."[50] Again, El Cibao is metarepresentational, as it serves as the environment for two different language strategies, depending upon the race of Yunior's date, but "if the girl is not from around the way" (i.e. white or "halfie") "Wendy's will do."[51] According to Moreno, "Given the importance of food as a symbol of ethnic, cultural identity" Yunior "flaunts" his ethnic identity with girls who live in London Terrace, he understands his "Spanish can be a seduction technique" whether the date in question speaks Spanish herself or not. In the case of girls who live outside London Terrace, "Yunior's decision to eat at Wendy's symbolically erases the difference between 'us' (Dominicans) and 'them' (Anglo-Americans)" and ultimately "Yunior's preferences regarding food and language are symbolic gestures" that allow him to exchange one cultural context for the next, thus "he manages to fashion his identity according to who sits across the table."[52] Our ability to imagine these multiples dates, as well as Yunior's shifting identity, is possible because of our own metacognitive facility.

Action

While of course, cultural intelligence all comes down to the actions one takes to realize cultural success in business, diplomacy, or love, "How to Date a Browngirl" is long on CQ strategy but short on CQ action. Much like James Joyce's *Dubliners,* most of the stories in *Drown* end on a note of muted paralysis, that is to say, "nonverbal" retreats from cultural interactions rather than culturally intelligent "speech acts." Even Yunior's "busted up" Spanish seems indicative of his inability to use

48 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 114–115.

49 David Livermore, "Weird, Rude, or Different?! Awkward Cross-Cultural Moments," *Cultural Intelligence Center*, November 14, 2016, available at: <https://culturalq.com/blog/rude/>.

50 In his interview with the Kelli Ebensberger, Díaz said, "When I was growing up in New Jersey every immigrant I knew was under enormous pressure to jettison all connections to their former homes and become as American as possible stat. The fact that I held onto any Spanish at all was a miracle given how much hostility was directed at all things 'Spanish.' By the time I was an adult I had lost so much of my Spanish that I had to re-learn it. Talk about irony." Kelli Ebensberger, "Interview: Pulitzer Prize Winning Author Talks Immigration Civic Responsibility Ahead of Visit," *Little Village*, January 31, 2017, available at: <https://littlevillagemag.com/interview-pulitzer-prize-winning-author-junot-diaz-talks-immigration-civic-responsibility-ahead-of-visit/>.

51 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 113.

52 Moreno, "Debunking Myths, Destabilizing Identities," 18.

language to his advantage. When the "halfie" forbids Yunior to touch her hair, even as she stands naked before him, Yunior doesn't know how to respond: "I don't like anybody touching my hair, she will say. She will act like somebody you don't know. In school she is known for her attention-grabbing laugh, as high and far-ranging as a gull, but here she will worry you. You will not know what to say."[53] Similarly, Yunior would rather hang up the phone without a word rather than speak to a date's father: "Call her house and when the girl's father picks up ask if she's there. He'll ask who is this. Hang up. He sounds like a principal or police chief, the sort of dude with a big neck who has never had to watch his back."[54]

Why does Yunior feel he has to watch his back? As a resident of London Terrace, Yunior has grown up in an environment of insecurity, with little in the way of male support from either his father or brother. When escorting his stereotypical date to the metarepresentational restaurant, Yunior's physical cowardice is emphasized as he fears running into "your nemesis, Howie, the Puerto Rican kid with two killer mutts," as Howie will surely try to humiliate him by asking, "Hey, Yunior, is that your new fuckbuddy?"[55]

Depending upon whether the girl is local or not, she will have different responses: "if the girl's an outsider she will hiss now and say, What a fucking asshole. A homegirl would have been yelling back at him the whole time […]. Either way don't feel bad that you didn't do anything. Never lose a fight on the first date or that will be the end of it." [56] Yunior's reticence, passivity, and lack of physical courage are in marked contrast to the Dominican *Tiguere* macho exhibited by his father and brother in the rest of the collection, and though he does not have their confidence, brute physicality, or even their way with words, Yunior feels the need to prove himself over and over again sexually to compensate for his lack of power in the world, to confirm his attractiveness to women – if not his very existence.

We are informed that no matter what restaurant Yunior takes his date, "[d]inner will be tense. You are not good at talking to people you don't know."[57] On the other hand, Yunior is a good listener. At Wendy's, we can see Yunior use his Theory of Mind metacognitive powers when the "halfie" informs him that growing up with mixed-race parents who met in "The Movement" is difficult. In his head, Yunior hears Rafa say, "Man, that sounds like a whole lot of Uncle Tomming to me. Don't repeat this."[58] Instead, Yunior instructs himself to "Put down your hamburger and say, it must have been hard."[59] Through Theory of Mind, Yunior has learned to fake sincerity, and his lack of "action," his verbal paralysis, perhaps works to his advantage as he is perceived to be a good listener. Paradoxically, he will not answer the phone when his "date" calls after their tryst.

53 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 115.

54 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 112.

55 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 113.

56 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 114.

57 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 114.

58 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 114. Uncle Tom is a reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Though Uncle Tom in the novel is depicted as a compassionate, enslaved saint, the character's name Uncle Tom has come to refer to a subservient and obsequious black person, one who is aware of his lower-class racial status and accepts it.

59 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 114.

To be fair, Yunior's end goal is not always sex, and he certainly ends up getting hurt as often as he hurts others. Take this passage for instance: "[i]f the girl's local, don't sweat. She'll flow over when she's good and ready. Sometimes she'll run into her friends and a whole crowd will show up, and even though that means you ain't getting shit it will be fun anyway and you'll wish these people would come over more often. Sometimes the girl won't flow over at all and the next day in school she'll say, Sorry, and smile, and you'll believe her and be stupid enough to ask her out again."[60] The second-person POV is a very effective method of portraiture: it is the rhetorical version of talking to oneself in the mirror. By the end of the story, Díaz's portrait of the narrator is complete, we see Yunior for who he is, an insecure teenager. Yunior is a cad, but by no means the pervert or sexual predator he has been depicted by some reviewers and critics. Rather, he is an adolescent: one who seems lonely, emotionally stunted, but whose cultural intelligence, especially CQ strategy, seems preternaturally keen, perhaps because his exposure to different cultures, his CQ Knowledge, gives him insights into the different ethnic and national identities available to him in the U.S. Even though he is marginalized economically and racially, he has strategies for minimizing these perceived disadvantages. At the same time, his rather broad cultural exposure enables him to observe the blindness of those whose cultural experiences are more limited than his own; unfortunately, he chooses to exploit this blindness for sexual gratification rather than communicating honestly with his dates. We cannot admire Yunior at the end of the story, but maybe we can sympathize with him, as it seems he is suffering from some kind of melancholy or even anxiety brought on by his behavior, or perhaps some deeper trauma in his past.[61] If David Livermore is correct, cultural intelligence is forever improving as the four CQ Steps – Motivation, Knowledge, Strategy, and Action – create a kind of feedback loop that helps intellectual development. Ideally, Yunior would not only become more culturally intelligent as he matures but simply a better person. (This process will certainly continue through *This Is How You Lose Her*.) CQ Strategy is especially important for the evolution process, as it allows Yunior to pivot his CQ knowledge from one cultural context to the next, and hopefully, with improvements to his metacognition and especially his Theory of Mind powers, he will learn to understand himself as well as he can read the minds of the various women that come into his orbit.

Cultural intelligence and Theory of Mind cognitive psychology both have many tools to help students and teachers who study English as a second language, read literature, and help use literature to navigate the cultural gap between such a reader and the text. Conversely, the field of cultural intelligence has yet to fully utilize literature as a tool or incorporate fiction into its methodology, though Lisa Zunshine and other such critics have glimpsed the opportunities available to those who understand that fiction is a mind-mapping project, and these cognitive maps can be used to "read minds," to understand the thoughts and feelings of others, as well as reflect upon our own thoughts and feelings.

60 Díaz, "How to Date a Browngirl," 112.

61 Paula M. L. Moya, "The Search for Decolonial Love," *Boston Review,* June 26, 2012, available at: <http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/paula-ml-moya-decolonial-love-interview-junot-d%C3%ADaz>. Díaz intimates Yunior is a victim of sexual abuse in this interview.

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