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Rift among scholars over treatment of Junot Díaz as he faces harassment and misconduct allegations

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Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Díaz has long hinted in his fiction at secret trauma. But he only revealed that he was the victim of child rape in a recent *New Yorker* [essay](#),^[1] which reads as a “me too” story (he uses those words, literally, at one point) and an acknowledgment of the disordered relationships he’s had with women since.

The essay also feels, at times, like an implicit apology for those relationships. “I think about the hurt I caused,” he wrote. But if Díaz was trying to apologize, it didn’t work. Soon after the essay’s April publication, a small group of female writers publicly accused Díaz of unwanted physical contact, sexual harassment and bullying behavior throughout his career. Those writers say they’ve since been contacted by others with similar stories. Several of the allegations concern Díaz’s conduct on campus visits, interacting with graduate students and others.

The debate might have remained one for literary circles, but feminist academics have weighed in, both in support of Díaz and, alternatively, his accusers. And while many see the dialogue as divisive, some see it as evidence of the complexity of feminist thought and how it intersects with race, in particular.

The Allegations

In brief, Zinzi Clemmons, an acclaimed writer who teaches writing part-time at Occidental College, in person at an Australian writers festival and on Twitter [accused Díaz](#)^[2] of forcibly kissing her after she invited him to come speak at Columbia University when she was a graduate student there. A National Book Award finalist, Carmen Maria Machado, also [tweeted](#)^[3] that Díaz belittled her and implied that she was a “prude” for 20 minutes after she asked him about the fraught relationships with women depicted in his work, during a talk at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, from which she’d just graduated. Author Monica Byrne [said](#)^[4] on social media that Díaz shouted “rape” in her face during a conversation at a dinner party to prove a point, and continued to cut her off and talk over her throughout the evening.

Writer Alisa Valdes [rehashed an account](#)^[5] of Díaz she’d blogged about a decade earlier. She said that when she was a reporter in her 20s, she interviewed Díaz, who allegedly insisted on finishing the interview at her apartment. Valdes said he feigned interest in her burgeoning literary career, saying he could help her get her manuscript to the “right people” before suggesting that they have sex. They began a relationship that Valdes thought was based on mutual admiration, she said, but the romance soon faded: Díaz allegedly told her he had a girlfriend before asking her to clean up his kitchen, strewn with hundreds of iced tea bottles. You can take the man out of the Dominican Republic, he allegedly told her, but you can’t take it out of the man.

The poet Shreerekha Subramanian, an associate professor of humanities at the University of Houston at Clear Lake, also outed herself ^[6] as the lover “S” in Díaz’s *New Yorker* piece, saying (without naming Díaz explicitly) that he swore her to silence during their relationship, when she was a graduate student at Rutgers University. She said he loved her because she identified as black, but eventually dumped her because she wasn’t black enough (Subramanian is of South Asian descent).

Theorist Marianella Belliard wrote ^[7] about how she had introduced herself to Díaz during a talk, when she was scholar in residence at Wellesley College. Initially warm and friendly, Belliard said that Díaz grew agitated when she later rebuffed his sexual advances. She said he proceeded to talk about her skin color and her hair in racialized ways, in what she interpreted as an attempt to make her feel uncomfortable.

Other stories -- especially about Díaz’s alleged rudeness to, if not harassment of, women -- continue to emerge.

Backlash and Support

In an order now familiar, there soon came canceled readings and public appearances, and questions about Díaz’s professional future. He resigned as chair of the Pulitzer Prize board, which opened an investigation into his conduct. Díaz eventually released a statement, saying he takes “responsibility for my past. That is the reason I made the decision to tell the truth of my rape and its damaging aftermath.”

He also said he’s “listening to and learning from women’s stories in this essential and overdue cultural movement. We must continue to teach all men about consent and boundaries.”

Díaz is the Rudge and Nancy Allen Professor of Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which has said it’s “looking into” the allegations; no word on whether that’s a formal investigation or something else. Yet Díaz’s Me Too moment remained a mostly literary story until mid-May. That’s when a group of well-known, mostly senior feminist scholars began to offer their public support for him -- at least in the context of how he’d been portrayed in social and news media.

“We write in deep concern over the ways in which the press and those on social media have turned tweets made against Junot Díaz into trending topics and headlines in major newspapers both inside and outside the U.S.,” reads a letter to the editor ^[8] of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* signed by some two dozen scholars. “The (at times uncritical) reception and repetition of the charges have created what amounts to a full-blown media-harassment campaign. They have led to the characterization of the writer as a bizarre person, a sexual predator, a virulent misogynist, an abuser and an aggressor.”

The issue is “not whether or not one believes Díaz, or his accusers, but whether one approves the use of media to violently make a spectacle out of a single person while at the same time canceling out the possibility of disagreement about the facts at hand,” the letter says, “or erasing a sustained attention to how the violence of racial hatred, structural poverty and histories of colonialism extend into the most intimate spaces.”

One of the letter’s signatories, Linda Martín Alcoff, a professor of philosophy at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, followed up with an op-ed ^[9] in *The New York Times* distinguishing between repentant and unrepentant misogynists, and situating individual perpetrators within larger political systems.

“Clearly, we need to go beyond easy binaries,” Alcoff wrote. “The letter I signed calls on all of us to think through the important issue of how to demand individual responsibility from abusers while also being vigilant about our collective and institutional responsibility, to develop critiques of the conventions of sexual behavior that produce systemic sexual abuse. While individuals can never be

absolved of responsibility by blaming structural conditions, those conditions do create opportunities, excuses, even training in the ways of domination, and these have to be radically transformed.”

Sexist behavior, whether slight or severe, “is never acceptable or excusable,” she added. “But sexist behavior is sometimes enacted by individuals who are making otherwise important contributions to the [liberation] movement, even contributions against the oppression of women.”

These pieces do not call out Díaz’s accusers, but rather the conversations surrounding their accusations -- including immediate calls to boycott Díaz and attempts to intimidate on social media or otherwise “silence” those who might defend him. And if MIT is indeed investigating the allegations against Díaz, due process has not run its course.

The Rift

Feminist scholarship is not monolithic. Feminist academe is as ideologically diverse as the individual scholars who comprise it. Still, the support for Díaz was interpreted by many feminists as putting a successful Afro-Latino writer ahead of his female accusers -- most of them also people of color -- and, thus, violating a fundamental tenet of feminism: accusers in sexual misconduct cases should be given the benefit of the doubt that the law and, historically, patriarchal society affords to the accused.

Alcoff said via email that “our letter was not in any way meant to silence any accusers. We just hoped to advance the conversation further.”

But Clemmons in a [tweet](#) ^[10] called Alcoff’s essay “garbage” and a “transparent attempt to defend your own hypocrisy. Sanjam Ahluwalia, a professor women’s and gender studies and history at Northern Arizona University, said in an interview that she was confused -- Alcoff’s essay acknowledges how race is sometimes used to coerce women into silence in the name of group solidarity. But it also seems to be doing just that, she said.

“I don’t understand why we have to jump to the rescue of this man,” Ahluwalia said. “There are lots of conversations about race happening, but whose race really matters, given there are raced victims and perpetrators? While there is a racialized script about masculinity, what about the women of color he has been targeting?”

Ahluwalia engages closely with feminist debates on India in her research and teaching. She mentioned a somewhat similar move by a few senior feminist scholars there, who were urging due process for some prominent male figures accused of misconduct in a crowd-sourced document. But due process does not seem to be the focus of Díaz’s defenders in academe, she said.

She also noted that [Sherman Alexie](#) ^[11], a Native American writer accused of harassing Native American women writers, has not seen such support.

Some of Díaz’s accusers have made similar statements. Byrne told [The Cut](#) ^[12] that Díaz has long been protected by the literary “establishment.” She said that it’s “tricky because he’s a really successful Latinx writer and that’s really precious. But he built that by hurting women, women of color. And he’s received a lot of help in doing that.” Valdes has said she was aggressively criticized by both Díaz and his supporters when she tried to sound an alarm on him 10 years ago.

At the same time, some have contrasted the media’s treatment of Díaz with that of white authors accused of even worse transgressions against women. After the Díaz news broke, for example, poet Mary Karr took to [Twitter](#) ^[13] to remind her followers that late (and white) David Foster Wallace -- still a celebrated literary figure -- stalked, threatened and physically assaulted her.

In any case, a group of scholars who skew, perhaps significantly, more junior than the signers of the first letter published [a rebuttal](#)^[14] of sorts, on *Medium*. They said they don't reject the idea of transformative justice for Díaz, but that he has more work to do first. And they said that in scholarly debates about Me Too, "survivor support should take precedence."

"As BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of color) academics and as members of the communities to which both our colleagues and Díaz belong, we must work to build a culture in which all survivors feel that they will be protected by us even if their stories make us uncomfortable," the letter says.

"We are concerned that the open letter published last week has sent the message that these highly respected members of the academic community prefer silence when the accused belongs to our communities. The structures of institutional power and access are central to what enables Díaz and so many others to perpetrate abuse, and ignoring these questions of power is to the detriment of the most vulnerable in our communities," the scholars added.

Camille Goodison, an associate professor of English at New York City College of Technology of the City University of New York, also wrote a [letter](#)^[15] to the *Chronicle*, saying that she believes Díaz has been treated fairly by the media.

"The accusations, spanning a 20-year period, are serious, and speak to a calculated targeting of young women writers of color who simply wanted a place in the publishing industry," she wrote. "The accusations range from unprofessional conduct regarding a sexual relationship with a student, to emotional and psychological abuse. I hope the signers of this open letter, many of them women of color, recognize how women of color have been traditionally disbelieved or dismissed when they speak of their abuse at the hands of the powerful."

Díaz did not respond to a request for comment through his agent.

Two Sides of the Same Coin?

Women who signed both letters have faced harsh criticism on social media. Coco Fusco, Andrew Banks Endowed Chair in Art at the University of Florida, and a Díaz supporter, is among them.

"Some of the accusers are operating as trolls on social media, hounding people who have expressed concern about the way that Díaz is being treated," she said via email, adding that accounts of Díaz talking harshly in public debates don't meet the legal standard of sexual misconduct. Instead of an online campaign, she said, sexual misconduct claims within academe should be handled through a legally informed process based on facts.

"I signed the original letter because I believe in the rule of law," Fusco said. "People accused of wrongdoing are innocent until proven guilty. And in the moral universe I seek to uphold, people who were victims of rape when they were children, whether they are male or female, deserve understanding and compassion -- especially when they themselves have reckoned with the long-term effects of such trauma on their behavior."

Beyond that, Fusco said she, too, is a survivor of sexual assault (a number of Díaz's supporters and detractors have identified themselves as survivors). And as a mother of teenage son, she's also "painfully aware of the ways that men of color are hypersexualized and demonized in American culture, and the history of how scores of men of color were hanged because of false accusations of rape made by white women."

Public intellectuals of color bear "impossible burdens because of the wild expectations thrust upon us by members of our own communities," she added.

Saida Grundy, an assistant professor of African-American studies at Boston University who signed the second letter supporting Díaz's accusers, said she did so with the understanding that the two documents did not stand in opposition to each other.

The women who signed the first letter "are not the kinds of scholars who need convincing about this issue of toxic masculinity in the academy being problematic -- these are women whose gender theories I cite. I understood part of what they were saying," she said. "When you are a woman of color academic, as nearly all the undersigned on either letter are, Me Too has multitudes of layers that are enmeshed in the other types of 'isms' our communities face."

Grundy said it's well-known within academe that women of color are the most vulnerable to assault, and women of color working within the academy often occupy the most vulnerable positions, for example. At the same time, she said, "we are extremely cognizant of the way there seems to be an insatiable media appetite for casting black and brown communities as sexually deviant, including the ways in which black men like Díaz are cast as rapacious predators."

Ultimately, Grundy signed the second letter because she put herself in the place of women "who have had to watch the men go on to be belles of academia and the literary world -- the same men who humiliated them, embarrassed them, and left them feeling infuriatingly impotent in their ability to be heard or believed, and who did things this side of legal but no more this side of OK."

Saying she knows "how that feels," Grundy described it as "a fire fanned every time you see the toxic man who hurt you publish, win an accolade or be celebrated by your own profession." And in her own "personal math," she said, that "suppressed fury" is a "bit more enduring and suffocating than being knocked around in a racist media cycle -- and I have had both points of comparison to make that call."

Indeed, paradoxes abound in the Díaz debate. Among them: while some have described his essay about being raped as a pre-emptive defense against those women who would accuse him of abuse, Díaz has, in a sense, been punished as a result of his disclosure. He is both a victim and an alleged perpetrator of harm. He comes from a historically marginalized background but now has an enormous amount of personal power. And while he writes deeply misogynistic characters, those characters aren't often rewarded for their attitudes and behaviors.

Ahluwalia, of Northern Arizona, signed the second letter critical of her colleagues supporting Díaz. She said still viewed the first letter as "fumbling and enabling," but that the Díaz and broader Me Too debates are opening important conversations. The effects of "toxic masculinity" have never before been so clearly on display -- for men and women alike, she said.

"I'm still processing a lot of this," she said. "But I see that we need room for a multiplicity of perspectives. We'll see where this goes."

Díaz in the Classroom

What about teaching Díaz in the classroom? Marilyn Edelstein, an associate professor of English at Santa Clara University, did not sign either letter but has been following the Díaz case -- in part to know how to treat his work now, or whether to put it on the syllabus at all. Of course, she said, the question of art versus artist is nothing new in narrative theory. And Díaz has spoken openly over the years about sexism in his work and his life, demonstrating that "we are all, to widely varying degrees, products of our own upbringing and culture, including internalizing sexism and racism," she said. Yet to think that Díaz allegedly "primarily mistreated women of color, especially Latina women writers, is especially disturbing."

In the midst of the Me Too and Time's Up movements, Edelstein added, "and with the omnipresence and speed of social media, I'm afraid that there will be more revelations about talented, multi-award-

winning male writers and artists, and possibly even a woman writer or two." So many teachers and professors, especially feminists, "will have to decide whether to start leaving these writers out of our courses and curricula, or keeping the writers in but discussing the connection between the authors' lives -- and violations of others' lives -- and their work."

Edelstein said she'll leave Díaz's fiction out of her feminist literary and cultural theory classes, and may not teach his work for "a while" in other literature courses.

"I really am interested in what other feminist faculty, male and female, are going to decide about whether or not to include Díaz -- and Alexie -- in future courses."

Diversity ^[16]

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Links:

- [1] <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/16/the-silence-the-legacy-of-childhood-trauma>
- [2] <https://twitter.com/zinziclemmons/status/992299032562229248>
- [3] <https://twitter.com/carmenmmachado/status/992318598398992384>
- [4] <https://twitter.com/monicabyrne13/status/992301359180333056>
- [5] <https://oshuncreative.wordpress.com/2018/05/04/i-tried-to-warn-you-about-junot-diaz/>
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- [10] <https://twitter.com/zinziclemmons/status/997026477450260480>
- [11] <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/sherman-alexie-apologizes-amid-allegations-of-sexual-misconduct>
- [12] <https://www.thecut.com/2018/05/author-junot-diaz-accused-of-sexual-misconduct-verbal-abuse.html>
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