

Racism and classism
in modern america:
"how to date a
browngirl"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Racism in Modern America “ How to date a brown girl (black girl, white girl, or halfie)” by Junot Diaz is a short story narrated by Yunior, a teen of Latino descent. In this short narrative, Yunior walks the reader through the steps to date and engage in sexual relations with different types of girls, changing his strategy based on the girl’s race. While on the surface the narrator appears to be experienced and content with picking up girls by his methods, as the story progresses it becomes obvious that Yunior is forced to mask his personality and his origins in order to get dates. Diaz uses specific rules depending on the date, making Yunior change everything from his race, language, and home in order to have a chance at winning a date. Yunior’s desperate chase for physical intimacy at the expense of his own identity and origin ultimately is what Diaz points out is occurring all throughout America. In Junot Diaz’s “ How to date a browngirl (black girl, white girl, or halfie)”, the narrator Yunior is used as a symbol of the stereotypes and deference towards authority typical of minorities, which highlights the disparity between race and class that Yunior is a victim of.

While the narrator puts on the airs of a macho guy, his fear of authority is exposed in his interactions with white and upper class figures. When he describes his date’s father picking up the telephone, Yunior immediately tells the reader “ He’ll ask, Who is this? Hang up. He sounds like a principal or a police chief, the sort of dude with a big neck, who never has to watch his back”(1). Diaz highlights the fear of authority that the young, poor and Dominican Yunior has towards authority. The choices of principal or police chief are used as examples of figures feared primarily by minorities. The police have always been viewed as a white organization by minorities and

are treated by Yuniors with disrespect, who hangs up simply because of what the father sounds like. Before the narrator can interact with this powerful authority figure from the upper class neighborhood, his fear of what the father's powers represents prompts him to hang up, Yuniors assuming that the father would dislike and look down on him. He is unable to connect with the father because of the racial disparity that is evident in the striking contrast with Yuniors's living conditions and that of his dates. While white girls or halfies usually drive Jeeps or Hondas and "grew up with ballet and Girl Scouts, who have three cars in their driveways"(2), Yuniors is stuck in poverty, relying on government cheese in order to survive. Yuniors's observations of the father also highlight his own fears. He remarks that the father sounds like a man who never has to watch himself, unlike Yuniors, who grows up in "the Terrace-people get stabbed in the terrace"(1). Yuniors is conscientious of his lower status and tries to hide his humble upbringing in different ways, such as by hiding the government cheese in different places depending on his date's race, and stashing away the pictures of his identity are all an attempt to undermine his own identity and culture.

Yuniors tries to hide his identity in order to appear more like his dates-upper class and white. As Yuniors confesses to the reader, "Tell her that you love her[the white girl's] hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because, in truth, you love them more than you love your own"(3). Yuniors desperately wishes to be white Diaz is using the narrator as a lens to examine the upbringing of poor minorities as a whole. Yuniors is shown as a typical impoverished minority kid-reduced to just another kid from the Terrace by his richer dates: "Neither of them[the parents] want her seeing any boys from the Terrace...

but she's strong headed and this time will get her way"(1). Yunior's date doesn't care particularly for him, but merely wants some adventure and a thrill from dating someone from outside her world. Her parents view Yunior not as an individual, but as part of a society that is a threat. Even before Yunior has met his date's parents, they have formed a negative opinion of Yunior, just like how he defers to authority figures or white people. But even Yunior falls into the belief that he is the stereotypical minority, evidenced in his interactions with his date's mother: " If she's a halfie don't be surprised that her mother is white. Say, Hi. Her moms will say hi and you'll see that you don't scare her, not really. She will say that she needs easier directions to get out and even though she has the best directions in her lap give her new ones. Make her happy"(2). Unlike when interacting with the fathers of his dates, Yunior seems much more willing to talk to white women, although his deference towards whites is still obvious. Yunior seems genuinely surprised that the mom isn't frightened by him. Yunior expects to be viewed as the gangster from the Terrace, because of all the expectations given by the upper class.

As a result of these expectations, Yunior attempts to mask his identity and act as a " whiteboy", as evidenced in his idea of how to interact with the parents: " Don't panic...Run a hand through your hair like the whiteboys do even though the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa"(2). When the narrator hears that the mom wants to meet him, his instinctive reaction is to panic, and then to alter his appearance to match those of the whiteboys. How others view his race and appearance ultimately affect how he views himself and what he strives to be. While Yunior attempts to mask

his personality with one more like that of his dates, his inability to accept himself makes him unable to achieve true intimacy. Yuniór's goal on all of his dates is ultimately to achieve personal intimacy only, with sex as the crowning achievement of any date. Yuniór is unable to empathize or connect with his dates because of his mask. When detailing how dinner with his date will go, Yuniór mentions that he has a hard time talking to new people, and states that " A halfie will tell you that her parents met in the Movement...that sounds like...Uncle Tomming to me. Don't repeat this.... Black people, she will say, treat me real bad. That's why I don't like them. You'll wonder how she feels about Dominicans. Don't ask"(2). Yuniór hides his personality throughout his interaction with his date. This forced interaction between a poor Latino and the higher class halfie emphasizes the gap between Yuniór and his dates-the narrator is unable to connect with the struggles of someone he views as rich and free of problems. Despite himself being a minority, his brother uses the term ' Uncle Tommin', referring Uncle Tom's Cabin and the subservient way the enslaved Tom acted towards his white peers. Yuniór thinks of this while engaging in conversation with the halfie, and only refrains from mentioning it because he wants to have sex with the girl.

Similarly, Yuniór chooses not to reveal his Dominican heritage to his date, allowing the halfie to think that he is black. On the other hand, when talking about the white girl, Yuniór says " She'll say, I like Spanish guys, and even though you've never been to Spain, say, I like you. You'll sound smooth"(3) Yuniór allows himself to change based on the whims of his date, and it is his lack of a true identity that makes him unable to identify with any girl that he

dates. This is a message of the disparity between race and wealth. Yuniors sees all of the girls as rich and privileged, even if they are black. This class boundary removes Yuniors from the world of his dates and forces him into the position of the "bad boy" from the Terrace in order for him to get dates. On a larger level it connects Yuniors to the whole of his kind. Diaz is saying that racism, stereotypes, and inequality are still prevalent in the world.