

Trying to swim, or at
least float



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Sexuality does matter. It does not matter according to the theoretical, the moral, the logical and sensible definitions of meaning, but it does matter. For those who do not identify as heterosexual, and sometimes even for those who do, liberation of the self is an ideal that many people would hold for them just out of reach. No matter how comfortable an individual can be with his or her sexuality, there have always been and will always be those who view such with ignorance and reprehensible vile, who make no secret of it, who try to minimize and belittle and dehumanize a person because of their sexuality. This is what occurs in Junot Díaz's short story *Drown*. A tale of two friends and a relationship gone awry because of sexuality, *Drown* strikes a particularly melancholic tone with its sense of futility and loss and lack of understanding. In his story, Díaz puts forth the notion that sexuality truly does make a difference, even in the face of supreme love, and that claiming it does not matter is in its own right a form of ignorance.

Throughout *Drown*, Díaz works to establish that even the strongest and most beloved of relationships can turn fickle. While love in and of itself may be unconditional, its manifestation and means of being shared with others certainly are not. Díaz's character Yunior dearly loves his best friend Beto, but he nevertheless betrays this friendship and everything it means when Beto reveals himself to be gay. After Yunior and Beto's first sexual encounter, Yunior says that "[Beto] was [his] best friend and back then that mattered to [him] more than anything," and that is why he goes to see him again (Díaz 104). What Yunior makes obvious is that something much more sinister ultimately means the most to him, more to him than Beto, as he ends up throwing their friendship away because he cannot accept Beto's

homosexuality. Yunior's abandonment of Beto, whatever his reluctance, is ingrained in him to be only a natural reaction to such a revelation as the one Beto delivers; raised in a culture where gay men are referred to as " fags" and " patos", where it is acceptable to drive to a gay bar to point a plastic gun at someone just to see their reaction, Yunior is not trained to recognize or understand homosexuality as perfectly fine. Consequently, Yunior does not defy his culture and surroundings. He says that when talking to his mother about why he and Beto are no longer friends, he " tried to explain, all wise-like, that everything changes, but she thinks that sort of saying is only around so [he] can prove it wrong," (Díaz 95). Yunior proves his mother right when he chooses to believe what he has been taught and told and cuts Beto out of his life, engaging in the cyclical perpetuation of homosexuality as a matter of great importance.

Yunior's abandonment of his friend relates not just to Beto's sexuality, but Yunior's as well. Díaz implies in *Drown* that before his first encounter with Beto, Yunior has no sexual experience. He says that when Beto reaches into his shorts (with a dry hand, indicating that Beto is not nervous, and therefore probably familiar with what he is doing) he comes immediately. Whatever love exists between Yunior and Beto is far from apparent in their first encounter. There is no emotion, just carnal physicality. Afterwards, he says that he is " terrified that [he] would end up abnormal, a fucking pato," (Díaz 104). Yunior does not know who he is, but he knows, or at least thinks he knows, that homosexuality is not allowed, and he is afraid. Yunior's fear of the implications of sexuality is far from unfounded. As Allan G. Johnson says in his book *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, " of all human needs, few are as

powerful as the need to be seen, included, and accepted by other people. This is why being shunned or banished is among the most painful punishments to endure, a social death. It[is] not surprising, then, that inclusion and acceptance are key aspects of privilege,” (Johnson 55). Yuniors knows all of this, and it is the source of his proclaimed terror. Regardless of whether he is gay or straight or even bisexual, Yuniors does not want such a punishment for himself, and he therefore sees his only recourse to be imposing it upon Beto. He does not even pause to truly analyze his own thoughts and feelings, what he believes to be right and wrong. He acts only in self-defense, exemplifying the tragic truth that sexuality is not a matter of no consequence. Díaz, while establishing the unfortunate yet undeniable relevance of sexuality, also comments in *Drown* upon the line friendship walks in terms of intimacy.

In his book *The Transformation of Sexuality: Gender and Identity in Contemporary Youth Culture*, Thomas Johansson says that “ male fellowship may be discussed and analysed in terms of homosociality. This form of sociality constitutes a mixture of a desire for intimacy...and a need for maintaining fixed boundaries in relation to the surrounding world...this apparently strong male fellowship originates both in a longing for and a fear of intimacy, and is characterized by...considerable homophobia. Hugs, kisses and other intimate behaviors are enveloped in careful rules and norms,” (Johansson 28). Johansson asserts that male interaction often consists of very rigidly defined pre-determined parameters made up of conflicting desires. This is certainly the case for Yuniors and Beto.

Even before any sex acts occur between them, there is an explicitly sexual element to their relationship. Watching porn together, even if it is heterosexual porn, has extremely homosexual overtones that neither Yunior nor Beto acknowledge, or even seem to recognize as existing. This, however, is fine in Yunior's eyes, as long as no definitive action is taken to make their interactions explicitly homosexual. It is a fine line they walk, between friendship and something more, between heterosexuality and homosociality and homosexuality, between what is acceptable and what is not, but as soon as it is crossed there is no way of stepping back. There is no analysis in *Drown* of morality, of what Yunior or Beto should or should not have done, what choices they should or should not have made, who they should or should not be. In his book *What's Wrong With Homosexuality?* John Corvino says "morality is about how [people] treat one another...it[is] about ideals we hold up for ourselves and one another. It[is] about the kind of society [people] want to be: what [they] will embrace, what [they] will tolerate, and what [they] will forbid," (Corvino 6).

While the trademarks of morality, as explained by Corvino, are highly prevalent in *Drown*, there is no actual discussion of it. *Drown* is simply a relation of a story, told without remorse or sorrow, or at least not enough to be truly relevant, and it tells of no hope for reconciliation or understanding and catharsis. Instead, it implies that there is a need for forgiveness, that Yunior would have to forgive Beto for him being gay in order for them to have any kind of a relationship again. This is one of the main tragedies of the situation, that homosexuality has to be forgiven when it ought not have to make a difference at all. There are many who like to say that it does not

matter if a person is gay or straight or bisexual or anything else, and intrinsically speaking, this is plenty true. Morally speaking, in regards to how people treat one another as Corvino says, sexual orientation should not matter, should not be a reason to treat a person better or worse than anyone else; a person is a person, no matter their sexual orientation.

However, something that should not matter is far different than something that does not matter. Certainly there are plenty of individuals who do not regard sexual orientation as particularly important to their interactions with others, but there are also far too many individuals for whom the opposite is true, individuals who embrace heterosexuality, tolerate homosociality, and forbid homosexuality, or at least its practice. It is the existence of both of these types of people that creates the reality of sexuality as a matter of great consequence, one way or another. Yunior is one of the individuals of the former category, regardless of what he himself actually identifies, or will come to identify, as.

The argument put forth by Junot Díaz in *Drown* is that sexual orientation does indeed matter, despite whatever claims, as accurate as they should be, to the contrary. It is a tragic story he relates through the voice of Yunior, one of friendship and possibly even something more lost because of lack of understanding. Sexuality is a cause for contention, is a case of morality, is something with the power to divide. Though Díaz does not discuss morality, by relating the story as he does he does portray the devastation that not understanding it can relate. Beto goes from being Yunior's best friend, the person he states matters to him more than anything, to being nothing more

than a “pato,” a “fag.” This does not, nor should it, have to be the case but it irrevocably is.