

Dominican-American author Junot Díaz: the latest artist victimized by the #MeToo campaign

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Following a controversy that erupted in May involving charges of sexual misconduct against Junot Díaz, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where the Dominican-American writer teaches, launched an inquiry into his conduct.

On June 18, MIT, a private research university in Cambridge, Massachusetts, cleared Díaz to return to his teaching post in the fall. Its statement read, “To date, M.I.T. has not found or received information that would lead us to take any action to restrict Professor Díaz in his role as an M.I.T. faculty member, and we expect him to teach next academic year.”

While no one at the university had apparently made any accusations, officials felt obliged to “preemptively” investigate Díaz because of a series of unsubstantiated accusations on social media.

The *Boston Review* also recently announced that Díaz would continue to be the magazine’s fiction editor. “During his 15-year tenure as fiction editor, we have never received any complaints about Junot’s conduct, either from our staff or from writers,” two of the directing editors wrote. The decision caused the journal’s three poetry editors to resign.

Allegations against Díaz emerged in the wake of the publication of a piece he wrote for the *New Yorker* magazine in April, in which he detailed the sexual abuse he suffered as a child.

On May 4, at the Sydney [Australia] Writer’s Festival, during a panel called “Why We Read,” American novelist Zinzi Clemmons (*What We Lose*, 2017) took an open microphone and accused Díaz of forcibly kissing her some years earlier. Díaz withdrew from the festival and did not appear at a subsequent scheduled appearance. It is unclear if he was asked to withdraw or did so voluntarily. Clemmons then tweeted the same claim, alleging that he had done this to other women as well. The tweet gained a following and soon other women began alleging improprieties.

Then, as the *New York Times* noted, “The Cambridge Public Library and the Boston Children’s Museum canceled scheduled events with Mr. Díaz. The Pulitzer Prize board opened an independent review of the accusations against him, which has not yet been resolved, and Mr. Díaz voluntarily stepped down as the board’s chairman. Some independent booksellers said they would no longer carry his books.”

The floodgates were open, and bile and bitterness flowed through.

Novelist Carmen Maria Machado tweeted that several years ago she attended a public reading of Díaz’s collection of interrelated short stories, *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012): “When I made the mistake of asking him a question about his protagonist’s unhealthy, pathological relationship with women, he went off on me for twenty

minutes.”

She later tweeted, “Junot Díaz is a widely lauded, utterly beloved misogynist. His books are regressive and sexist. He has treated women horrifically in every way possible. And the #metoo stories are just starting,” and “His books are misogynist trash.” She provided no proof of this.

Also in May, science fiction author Monica Byrne tweeted that Díaz had, in reply to a comment she made, shouted “rape” in her face loudly at a dinner party, and then, “Every point I made—ABOUT issues women face in publishing—he made a point of talking over me, cutting me off, ignoring me.” Byrne, in her tweet, alleged there were many more women who Díaz had abused. If Díaz was rude or disagreed with her, how does that constitute “abuse”?

Writer Alisa Valdes then published a piece in which she said that Díaz, with whom she had had a consensual relationship, had asked her to clean up the dishes in his apartment. She had published an article over a decade ago detailing this, and a May 2018 piece on her blog claimed she had warned the world that Díaz was a “misogynist opportunistic liar” and that in reaction to that blog post, “The Latino power establishment was quick to slap me down.”

After having dinner with Díaz, “theorist and feminist” Marianella Belliard says that he made a pass at her, which she rebuffed. “I found his undeniable intent to hurt or degrade me alarming and even frightening,” she wrote. Shreerexha Subramanian, a poet who had been romantically involved with Díaz, wrote in a May 12 essay in the *Rumpus* that he broke up with her because she wasn’t brown enough.

Most of this is simply preposterous. Clemmons, for example, “broke silence” to claim that “As a grad student, I invited Junot Diaz to speak to a workshop on issues of representation in literature. I was an unknown wide-eyed 26 yo [-year-old], and he used it as an opportunity to corner and forcibly kiss me. I’m far from the only one he’s done this 2, I refuse to be silent anymore.” One simply wants to ask, “Is this really the most serious crime taking place in America today?”

But more than delicate middle-class sensibilities are at issue here. In fact, something quite ferocious is going on. In these circles, this is how scores are settled, personal and professional slights avenged, careers advanced. If American liberals joined enthusiastically in the McCarthyite purges in the 1940s and 1950s, it was in part to take over the jobs and positions of Communist Party members in the entertainment field, the media and academia. The campaign against “misogyny” has the same significance for a layer of female

professionals today.

There is nothing principled, progressive or democratic about this affair. Well-paid academics and aspiring academics and others, full of jealousy and spite in many cases, are dishonestly taking advantage of, twisting, amplifying an individual's difficulties and peccadilloes, and even perhaps missteps or misdeeds, to advance themselves and their careers.

In the first place, if every allegation is true, nothing Díaz did rose to the level of a crime or near-crime. What's more, the incidents are treated by the *New York Times*, other journalists and thousands of hysterics on social media as fact, when they are entirely unproven.

When one reviews the anti-Díaz blog posts and tweets in question, what strikes one immediately is their intense subjectivity and their careerism ("It'd be great to be credited for my work on your mobile platform"). These same twitter accounts seldom, if ever, express outrage over war, social inequality or the monstrous attacks on immigrants organized by the Trump administration. The politics are unwaveringly those of personal identity and the concerns are trivial and selfish.

The quantity of the accusations and the evident attempt to take down a significant writer such as Díaz elicited a reaction by dozens of academics, who published an open letter in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that read: "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. Within less than 24 hours after the tweets, scholars and writers called for a boycott of the Pulitzer Prize winner and for his withdrawal from Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation."

While the letter generally supports the #MeToo movement and does not raise the latter's attacks on due process and democratic rights, the signatories feel obliged to point out that the "issue at hand 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 cancelling out the possibility of disagreement about the facts at hand."

An op-ed in the *New York Times* by one of the signers, Linda Martin Alcoff, a professor at the City University of New York, expands on this: "We also need to reassess how we confer credibility on accusers. A blanket acceptance of all accusations simply avoids the difficult work of transforming our methods of judgment."

In reply, another group of academics published an open letter, "In Scholarly Debates on #MeToo, Survivor Support Should Take Precedence," which takes a stand with Díaz's accusers without the slightest regard for the truth or non-truth of the allegations. His "alleged abuse" simply becomes his "abuse." These are professional witch-hunters, without an ounce of shame.

"Díaz," they claim, "has been protected by the literary and academic world for decades. It is these institutions which have facilitated his abuse. The sensitive nature of survivors' stories mandates that we not rush to pillory survivors as vengeful social media users eager to castigate a fellow writer of color." The labeling of the various accusations against Díaz as "survivors' stories" is only slightly short of insane.

Socialist Worker, the publication of the International Socialist Organization, published an article ("Our Side Can Never Accept Silence About Abuse") by one of the signers of the second open letter, Akua Gyamerah, a postdoctoral scholar at the University of California San Francisco. Gyamerah labels the initial letter "victim-shaming,

masquerading in anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-violence language, that conflated speaking out against a perpetrator with being racist." "Perpetrator"!

The reactionary core of the argument is on display here in Gyamerah's restatement of the anti-Marxist doctrine of "intersectionality":

"Women and queer people of color, for example, are multiply oppressed by racism, sexism, homophobia and class. If we elevate any one of these oppressions over the other in the name of unity, we risk leaving the struggles of the most marginalized on the sidelines—an outcome I feared the open letter would perpetuate." This appears in a publication that laughingly calls itself the "Socialist Worker."

The attack on Díaz has another sinister feature: the association of an artist's allegedly bad behavior with the content of his work and the conduct of his characters. Junot Díaz is not an insignificant figure in American fiction. There is in his work a genuine freshness and honesty about immigrant and Dominican working class life that has rightfully found an audience.

The characters he depicts, men and women both, are often rude, abusive and even backward. There is a strain of machismo that runs through many of his Dominican-American men, who must, after all, face the violence of poor neighborhoods and low wages, i.e., of class oppression. The reader of Díaz's work often senses that the author, and even the characters themselves, regard their behavior uncomfortably and critically. They also, not incidentally, exhibit kindness, forgiveness and sensitivity.

"I'm not a bad guy," a character at the start of his story, "The Sun, the Moon and the Stars" says. "I'm like everyone else, weak, full of mistakes, but basically good. Magdalena disagrees though."

Frankly, as in the case of the denunciations of the late novelist Philip Roth, realism about life in art is under attack. Díaz's philistine critics don't seem to care for the fact that his chief concern is not to paint pretty pictures or to depict the type of behavior they approve of.

When Carmen Maria Machado tweets, "His books are regressive and sexist. He has treated women horrifically in every way possible," something deeply retrograde and censorious is at work.

The author has not treated women "horrifically" in his books. He is trying to be honest. His characters mistreat each other in a setting that wells up from the real world of Paterson, New Jersey, where much of Díaz's material is set.

"I asked Nilda [the narrator says to his brother's girl-friend in "Nilda"] about the group home." And she answers that the "food was bad but there were a lot of cute guys in the house with me. They all wanted me. She started chewing on a nail. Even the guys who worked there were calling me after I left, she said." Is this misogyny or the sincere depiction of the lot of working class youth in New Jersey?

The whole incident only underscores how far the #MeToo movement and the media, infected with an anti-democratic virus, are willing to go. The right to free artistic expression is now also under assault.



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