

## **Shattered Father Images, Split Identities, and Hybridity in Multicultural America**

### **Father – Son Relationships in Sherman Alexie’s “Every Little Hurricane” and Junot Díaz’s “Fiesta, 1980”**

Sherman Alexie’s short story, “Every Little Hurricane” and Junot Díaz’s “Fiesta, 1980” depict two different cultural spheres within the United States: the former gives us insight into the plight of Native Americans and the question of Indianness, while in the latter we learn about the situation of Spanish speaking (Hispanic), more precisely, Dominican families in the Dominican diaspora. Despite this cultural difference, the two stories share several common themes which are relevant in order to understand what it means when one has to split one’s identity, trying to adapt to two different cultures. Both the Native American and the Dominican communities living in the United States are characterised by cultural hybridity, and this hybrid state has various effects on the old and the young generation as well.<sup>1</sup> This hybridity is caused by the fact that Dominican and Native American people in the United States have to belong to two different cultures, but none of these two spheres accepts them entirely, and therefore, they appear to have two identities and no identity at the same time. According to Homi Bhabha, “hybridity is a new cultural and privileged third place” which is “neither the one nor the other” (qtd. in. Fernando Valerio-Holguín 2). Therefore, this hybrid state is rightly referred to also as “split state” and “plurality” by Román de la Campa.

Both stories portray the situation of a non-white family within American culture from a child’s point of view, and both begin with a party even though the underlying themes give no reason for any festivity. Both short stories are part of short story collections, and the protagonist children—both in Alexie’s and in Díaz’s short stories (Victor and Yunior)—

appear in other novels of the authors as well.<sup>1</sup> Thus, they are permanent, recurring child characters for both authors. In this paper, I intend to examine the presence and the consequences of coming of age in a multicultural society with special focus on the relationship between son and father, and the consequences of these communities' hybridity. In both stories, the coming of age of the protagonist child is reached through a disappointment in the father figure who—in a normal family—should set a good example for his son, but in these stories, the fathers serve as bad examples, which leads to a sense of loss of identity and cultural rootlessness in the children. I will also illustrate how the fathers' defects and disagreeable behaviour (alcoholism for Victor's father, aggression and infidelity for Yuniór's) turn a distorted mirror towards their sons. Thus, the fathers' conduct mirrors what these children might become in the future if they follow the fathers' example. I will, therefore, consider the question whether this satirical, distorted mirror brings the children into a negative or a positive direction as regards their future.

Before going into details of textual investigation, I feel it necessary to clarify what “split state” means in Victor's and Yuniór's stories. As Román de la Campa rightly observes, the Hispanic people's split state<sup>2</sup> “is not [...] a simple reference to a bilingual or bicultural condition, nor a call for a new twist in the melting-pot process of assimilation formerly bound to the history of European immigrants in the United States. It is rather a recognition of an unusual and persistent duality [...]” (377). This persistent duality will be manifested in various aspects of the stories: in the sons' attitude to their fathers, in the way they approach the American culture, and also in their notion of identity. In these stories, there is a permanent

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<sup>1</sup> “Every Little Hurricane” belongs to the collection entitled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, while Díaz's “Fiesta, 1980” appears in *Drown*. From the short stories of these collections I am going to rely primarily on “Every Little Hurricane” and “Fiesta, 1980”. However, from *The Lone Ranger*, I will also make short references to another story as well (“Because my Father Always Said”) in order to further illustrate the development of father-son relationships.

<sup>2</sup> De la Campa refers to the situation of Hispanic people in the United States both with the term “split state” and “plurality”.

oscillation in the quality of father-son relationships, and also in the question whether the child protagonist appertains to the Dominicans/Native Americans or the American culture.

Valerio-Holguín believes “that there persists within the hybrid a heartbreaking ambivalence, often expressed as love/hate and manifested in the binary oppositions here/now and there/then” (3). This ambivalence is nicely marked in the father-son relationships. Both Victor and Yuniór have a strong connection to their fathers, but this connection is accompanied by fear and confusion. In “Every Little Hurricane,” the problems between father and son are not entirely explicit, because the story is part of a series of short stories, and it is only in other stories that the conflicts between Victor and his father become more visible. Even though these problems also lurk behind the lines of “Every Little Hurricane” as well in the way Victor depicts his father’s aggressive behaviour and alcoholism, the son-father conflict culminates in the third short story of the collection.<sup>3</sup> In that story, Victor describes his bitter feelings about his father’s leaving him and his mother: “On a reservation, Indian men who abandon their children are treated worse than white fathers who do the same thing. It’s because white men have been doing that forever and Indian men have just learned how. That’s how assimilation can work” (Alexie, “Because my Father Always Said” 3). This passage suggests that American customs have had a destructive effect on their otherwise good relationship: before his parents’ marriage went wrong, he and his father spent a lot of time together, listening to Jimi Hendrix’s “The Star-Spangled Banner” together in the car and at home in the evenings (Cf. Alexie, “Because my Father Always Said” 26). Despite his growing disappointment in his father, Victor has a permanent longing for the head of the family. In “Every Little Hurricane,” Victor is searching for his parents in their house in the midst of a New Year’s Eve party, and in the meantime we get insight into the time when he was only five years old. We learn that he witnessed his father’s crying and being miserable. The

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<sup>3</sup> The third short story from *The Lone Ranger* is entitled “Because my Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ at Woodstock”.

narrator says that it was only in his nightmares that he saw his father as an “exclamation point” (when the father was drunk), otherwise he was like a question mark, and accordingly a vague, unstable figure for him (Cf. Alexie, “Every Little Hurricane” 6).

Yunior’s image of his father in “Fiesta, 1980” is, however, much stronger than Victor’s, as Yunior’s father appears to be very decisive, violent and aggressive—surely he would have been an “exclamation point” in Yunior’s nightmares. Yunior’s father image was strong but only physically—his father image in terms of morality was destroyed forever when Yunior first met the Puerto Rican woman and sensed his father’s infidelity. Due to the father’s unfaithfulness to Yunior’s mother, his father image—similar to Victor’s—remains equally unstable. Yunior condemns his father for his unfaithfulness to his mother, but if we examine more thoroughly Yunior’s thoughts, we can easily notice his longing for his father’s affection and care in this story as well. When he refers to those occasions when his father was trying to make him get accustomed to travelling in the new van, he adds that “[those] were the only times [he] and Papi did anything together. When [they] were alone he treated [him] much better, like maybe [he] was his son or something” (Díaz 35). Yunior also adds that “[their] fights didn’t bother [him] too much. [He] still wanted [his father] to love [him]” (27). In *The Lone Ranger*, there is a similar passage by Victor after his father has left the family: “Then on the night I missed my father most, [...] I imagined his motorcycle pulling up outside. I knew I was dreaming it all but I let it be real for a moment” (Alexie, “Because my Father Always Said” 35). Therefore, despite Victor’s disappointment in the head of the family, he still wants his father to love him.

In Victor’s case, however, the disillusion stems not primarily from his father’s treatment of his mother, but from his way of life, especially alcoholism, poverty, violent fights, hopelessness and loss of traditions. It follows that in Yunior’s case the connection is oriented directly towards his father, while in Victor’s story, his adherence to his father is, in fact, a

connection to the tribe and its male members, as for Native Americans, the tribe proves to be more important than the family. What is more, it is the tribe that means the family to them.

The children's fear and confusion are represented in both stories by a metaphor (a hurricane in Victor's story; a van and car sickness in Yunior's). These metaphors serve to express the consequences of concrete defects of the Native American reservation community (alcoholism, use of drugs, aggression, commodity food, and their incapability of tolerating the bicultural fragmentation), and those of the Latino diaspora (violence, oppression, and Latin American masculine privilege), both represented by the father figure. It is these self-destructive shortcomings that frighten and hurt Victor and Yunior in the two stories. In "Every Little Hurricane" there is a very detailed description of a hurricane which disturbs the party, the Spokane Reservation, and most importantly, Victor's emotions, even though in 1976 there was no hurricane there at all. But in this story it turns into a real phenomenon for Victor, since he can feel this hurricane, as it symbolizes the turbulence, the sense of instability, fear and confusion in his heart and mind. These feelings are generated in him by witnessing his uncles' continuous fights and his alcoholic parents, but mainly his father. The behaviour of these male figures is important to Victor, as they represent for him the tribe itself, and it is through the tribe that he (and Native Americans in general) can identify himself. He cannot see a strong and stable father (or an uncle) because the father (along with the other male members of the Spokane reservation) already lacks the sense of belonging to the tribe, and does not find his origins any more. As a consequence, Victor begins to feel an increasing fear and confusion regarding his identity. It follows that these are personal hurricanes to which Victor cannot not put an end yet, as he faces day after day the way alcoholism is gradually destroying his father, family, and tribe. Not only does he see this destruction, but he also feels its smell while lying "between his parents, his alcoholic and dreamless parents, his mother and father" (10). What is more, when he climbed up on the bed

of his parents, he “thought that the alcohol seeping through their skin might get him drunk, might help him sleep” (9).

Alcoholism and its self-destructive effect exemplify in this story Luis Owens’s observation that “white people no longer have to shoot or hang the Native, who is quite willing to do the job him- or herself” (qtd. in Stephen F. Evans 47). Owens also points out that Alexie’s “bleakly absurd and aimless Indians are imploding in a passion of self-destructiveness and self-loathing; there is no family or community center toward which his characters [...] might turn for coherence” (qtd. in Matthew Smith, slide 5). Therefore, what we face in this story is a kind of inner-colonisation of the Native Americans by themselves through alcohol, which might considerably affect the young generation as well. According to Fergus Bordewich, “[t]he cumulative effects of alcoholism on Indians is staggering, [and] [b]etween 5 percent and 25 percent of Indian babies may be born mentally and physically damaged by fatal alcohol syndrome” (qtd. in Evans 52). The alcoholism of Victor’s parent also puts him into this danger, because—as we learn from “Because my Father Always Said”—Victor was conceived while his parents were drunk: “I was born a goofy reservation mixed drink” (27). In addition, Victor cannot find stability and security in his family and tribe, because they are continually destroying themselves and, in such a way, their traditions as well. Therefore, the hurricane metaphor also symbolizes the effects of alcohol and the self-destruction of the Indians of the Spokane tribe, all of which is represented by the father figure for Victor.

In “Fiesta, 1980” Yuniors fear and confusion are communicated through his car sickness and vomiting in the new Volkswagen. Victor says that “[he] met the Puerto Rican woman right after Papi had gotten the van. He was taking [him] on short trips, trying to cure [him] of [his] vomiting” (34-5). This passage makes it clear that Yuniors had had car sickness even before he got to know the Puerto Rican woman. It follows that he probably sensed in the

behaviour of his father that he was not faithful to his mother, and therefore, he had started vomiting in the car before his father got him to the woman's house in his new van. Yuniór knows of his father's sexual intercourses with the Puerto Rican woman already at the beginning of the story, when he claims that "we [Rafa and Yuniór] both knew Papi had been with that Puerto Rican woman he was seeing and wanted to wash off the evidence quick" (23). It means that he despises his father, though, at the same time, he fears him very much. Unlike Victor, his fear seems not to be towards the fate of his father and the family, but directly towards the violent and relentless personality of his father.

Bound up with Yuniór's fear of his father, in "Fiesta, 1980" there is an emphasis on the importance of sights. Yuniór does not dare to look at his father, nor is he allowed to do so, as his father "had this one look, furious and sharp, that always left [him] feeling bruised" (28). Moreover, noises and sounds also communicate Yuniór's fear of the head of the family—the father's voice was "louder than most adults" (34), and, as Yuniór explains it, "you didn't have to be anywhere near him to catch his dift. And Mami, you had to put cups to your ear to hear hers" (33). Aggression through the father's voice appears in "Every Little Hurricane" as well: "'What the fuck's going on?' Victor's father yelled, his voice coming quickly and with force. It shook the walls of the house" (2). Thus, in both stories, looks, and loud voices serve to express the way the fathers terrorize their sons. Yuniór's fear is oriented towards a physically existing phenomenon (physical violence, bullying), whereas Victor is not insulted by his father physically—Victor, instead, perceives a constant tension by witnessing day after day the gradual self-destruction of his father and through him, that of his family and tribe as well. Both children appear to be inert in this situation which they are unable to change yet.

Still regarding the children's confusion, Yuniór's emotional turbulence derives primarily from the inconsistencies in his father's conduct with women. He is witnessing two opposing types of conduct on a regular basis: his father's longing for the Puerto Rican woman, and at

the same time, his humiliating and rough behaviour toward his beloved mother. For Yuniór, “[t]he affair was like a hole in a living room floor, one we’d gotten used to circumnavigating that we sometimes forgot it was there” (39-40). Despite the permanent sense of the existence of this extramarital affair in their family, Yuniór witnesses his mother and father dancing almost happily at the party. The gesture which induces the greatest confusion in Yuniór is a touch: “In the darkness, I saw that Papi had a hand on Mami’s knee and that the two of them were quiet and still” (43). As a result, Yuniór feels a constant ambiguity towards his father: he both fears his father and is longing for his love; he both hates him hardly bearing his presence and, at the same time, cannot imagine his family without him; moreover, he wants to humiliate his father expecting the moment when his mother would shout at her husband “[y]ou’re a cheater!” (40). It is these ambiguities that give rise to Yuniór’s mixed feelings, confusion, and his loss of stability and identity.

Dominican people (mainly children) generally identify themselves through their fathers who are representatives of Latin American masculinity: they should set a good example and behave like a respectable, decisive, and reliable head of the family, teaching their sons how to be men. As Riofrio explains it in his article on Latin American masculinity and Junot Díaz’s *Drown*, “[m]asculinity, like race, disability or sexuality, is [...] a component of identity” (24). Here, however, respect for and reliability of Yuniór’s father have vanished. Seeing the two sides of his father’s personality, his aggression, and how inconsistently he treats women, Yuniór is shown a confusing example about what it means to be a man, and therefore it is this disappointment in the head of the family that leads him to feel a sense of rootlessness. Yuniór’s relationship to his father, to some extent, reflects that of Díaz to his own father. As Díaz articulates the negative side of his father’s Latin American masculinity: “I had that military father who made us aggressive” (qtd. in Céspedes 894). In *Drown*, it is in the behaviour of Yuniór’s brother, Rafa, that this aggressive masculinity becomes manifested.



Riofrio points out that “Rafa demonstrates the way in which oppression over women and girls functions as a direct means towards the assumption of patriarchal privilege” (27). Yuniór, however, appears to be taken aback and confused by the aggressive behaviour of both his father and his brother.

Also, Yuniór's rootlessness is communicated through the choice of name and Díaz's use of Spanish words within the English text (Cf. Research Articles Digest, n. p.). In other stories of the same collection, Yuniór is sometimes called Junior, meaning that there exist two different spellings of his name: the Spanish (Yuniór) and the American one (Junior). It indicates that he has two identities: the Americans call him Junior, while to his family and friends he is Yuniór. It follows that there is a Junior who is attracted to American culture and its products, and who has to deal with the American world. And at the same time, there is the Yuniór who should remember his Dominican origins. In an interview, Díaz stresses that “you come to the United States and the United States begins immediately, systematically, to erase you in every way, to suppress those things which it considers not digestible. You spend a lot of time being colonized. Then, if you've got the opportunity and the breathing space, [...] you immediately [...] begin to decolonize yourself” (Díaz qtd. in Diógenes Céspedes 896). The latter part of this passage refers to the Dominican immigrants' attempts to recreate their own Dominican identity, in order to separate themselves from American influences. However, according to Ian Chambers, return to the original culture is impossible, a “discontinuity” persists, a discontinuity installed in them upon leaving the country [Dominican Republic] for the first time” (qtd. in Valerio-Holguín 9-10).

The question of identity finds manifestation in Díaz's language in *Drown* as well. Diógenes Céspedes addresses Junot Díaz by stating that Díaz “create[s] linguistic violence [by inserting Spanish words] that makes readers read that which they may not want to read” (904). Díaz's reaction to this statement is worth quoting here, as he explains that “[b]y

keeping the Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the fluidity of languages, the mutability of languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English” (qtd. in Céspedes 904). This passage suggests that Díaz’s intention is to strengthen Latino identity by using Spanish words as if those were parts of the English vocabulary. However, this does not alter the fact that Yunió (or Junior) has to live in a bicultural fragmentation, attempting to belong to two cultures at the same time. Both Yunió and Victor seem to be rootless, because they are neither Americans, nor do they belong entirely to their original culture any more. Díaz expresses this split by mixing the English text with Spanish words, while Alexie depicts this phenomenon by presenting objects which were formerly not part of the Native Americans’ way of life, such as alcohol, cigarettes, and diet Pepsi. Thus, Alexie does not express his characters’ Native American identity by means of language—it is instead marked by occasional references to the Native Americans’ customs, rites (like the Powow which is mentioned in “Every Little Hurricane as well), and their former way of life. In such a complex multicultural situation a stable father figure would be indispensable, but what these children witness instead is a constant sense of hopelessness, rootlessness and confusion even in their fathers’ conduct.

These stories do not show a complete journey from innocence to experience as most coming of age novels or other literary works of this genre generally do. These are not ordinary coming of age stories. It is because, on the one hand, these are short stories, and accordingly, the reader can only get a brief insight into a day or some days of the protagonist’s life, and therefore it cannot depict long processes. On the other hand, both Yunió and Victor are in the middle of their maturing process when we enter the stories—they are not entirely innocent and naive any more as regards their understanding of their situation—they perfectly see and feel what is wrong around them. Both Yunió and Victor are presented as attentive observers

and witnesses to the older generation's gradual degeneration. Despite their young age (both are under ten years of age), their observations and behaviour appear to be much more grown up than their fathers' conduct. Furthermore, these children prove to be the most reliable, prudent, and wise characters of the two stories. For example, Yuniór senses his father's infidelity right at the beginning of the relationship with the Puerto Rican woman, and he endeavours to understand this situation, trying to protect his mother from the effects of his father's behaviour. In a similar manner, Alexie's Victor in "Every Little Hurricane" equally wants to understand his father's and the Indians' recourse to alcoholism: "Victor watched his father cry huge, gasping tears. Indian tears. [...] Victor imagined that he held an empty box beneath his father's eyes and collected the tears, held that box until it was full" (5). This passage suggests Victor's immense sympathy for and understanding of their miserable situation. Moreover, the narrator continues that "[e]ven at five Victor understood what that meant, how it defined nearly everything. Fronts. Highs and lows. Thermals and undercurrents. Tragedy." (7) As the narrator recounts in the story, "[w]hen the hurricane descended on the reservation in 1976, Victor was there to record it" (7). In addition, not only was he the recorder of a tragedy, but he was also there to care for his parents. For instance, at the end of "Every Little Hurricane," as Victor was lying between his parents, he "closed his eyes tightly. He said his prayers just in case his parents had been wrong about God all those years" (10). Therefore, both Yuniór and Victor understood, or at least tried to understand their fathers and the situation brought about by them. However, this mirror reflecting the fathers' distorted image seems to help them drift away from their fathers' example, and possibly improve their communities' situation in the future.

From their perceptions, descriptions, and reflections the reader can, to some extent, foresee their probable future, and sometimes also the end of their coming of age stories. Both are brave and strong children having a remarkable self-awareness and also a consciousness of

their unstable situation. Depending on the way we interpret the children's reflections, this future might be either depressing or promising. After reading the two stories, it might appear to the reader that the behaviour of the fathers the children witness at this young age will leave a considerable mark on their future, and that they will follow the bad example they are shown every single day.

However, a closer examination of the children's reflections refers to the opposite outcome. What we can see in the two stories is that the young generation can react to the bicultural fragmentation and its effects more easily and flexibly than the representatives of the old generation, who are continuously destroying themselves. In my view, the fact that Yuniór and Victor hold on, and are seriously thinking about how to solve the situation, visibly worrying about their and their family's predicament, allows us to be more optimistic about their future. Their strength suggests that they might choose another way and would not follow their fathers' example. The satiric mirror turned towards them by the fathers creates in them a fear of the possibility of inheriting their fathers' defects. Stephen F. Evans also points out in connection with Alexie's stories that "a number of his Indian characters themselves fear a genetic inheritance that may include the propensity towards alcoholism" (57). Both Victor and Yuniór are taken aback by their fathers' way of life, and this repugnance towards the father figure's conduct pushes them into another direction, different from that of their fathers. In Victor's case, for instance, his fate is written in his nightmares: "And of course, Victor dreamed of whiskey, vodka, tequila, those fluids swallowing him just as easily as he swallowed them" ("Every Little Hurricane" 7). Therefore, Victor sees himself drinking various kinds of alcohol just like his father, and he is swallowed by those fluids, which means that alcohol will entirely ruin his father, his family, the tribe and with all these it will drown Victor himself as well. Victor, however, does not want to drown, and this is why he is

thinking about how to alter the situation, and wonders “if memories of his personal hurricanes would be better if he could change them. Or if he just forgot about all of it” (4).

Furthermore, it appears that for the young generation of Latino immigrants and Native Americans, their hybridity brought about by the cultural fragmentation of their communities in the United States proves to be a possibility rather than a tragedy. As de la Campa articulates, “a split state implies a permanently severed entity, a loss in many respects; but perhaps it could also suggest a postnational symptom that has many possibilities” (376). For Victor and Yunior, this possibility lies in the chance for them to remodel their family’s or tribe’s plight among Americans. In these stories, Alexie illustrates contemporary reality of the reservation through alcohol, while Díaz calls attention to the reality of the Dominican diaspora through male violence and masculine privilege over women and children. By emphasising these defects of the old generation, the authors seem to shift the responsibility to the young generation. It is only by facing the defects of their own culture of origin that Victor and Yunior can have the possibility for remodelling and healing their predicament (Cf. Evans 51).

In conclusion, we have seen that in multicultural space coming of age has different meanings and attributes from, for instance, those in a more or less culturally homogeneous society. Both Dominicans and Native Americans share a sense of rootlessness and instability as a result of their split identities brought about by a constant sense of American supremacy. This divided identity could be avoided if there was a strong father figure, but in both stories what give grounds for the children’s loss of identity is the fact that they cannot find consolation and a good example to follow either in the dominant male figures of their lives. This is the reason why they have no stable image of their future, and why Victor imagines himself as someone swallowed by alcoholic drinks. However, we have also seen that the distorted mirror turned towards the children by their fathers helps them to adapt to their

bicultural fragmentation, and not to drown in their tragic, seemingly helpless situation. The foregoing examples might have also demonstrated that being part of the American multicultural sphere and hybridity is both destructive (if we consider its colonising effects) and constructive in the sense that the children's split identity makes them more flexible and tolerant in the face of American supremacy. This, however, does not mean that the young generation does not suffer from cultural rootlessness, as both Victor and Yuniór must recurrently face the fact that they can never be American, nor Dominican/Native American enough. Despite the fact that their cultural rootlessness remains part of their lives, we can conclude that, all in all, this hybrid state is a privileged state—as the sociologist Homi Bhabha and the Dominican writer, Julia Álvarez regard it (Cf. Valerio-Holguín 15)—for it helps them see the problems more clearly, and accordingly, prevents the new young bicultural generation from descending into self-destruction in the future. As Álvarez articulates the effects of hybridity, it “creates confusion, and conflicts that get worked into the writing, but my eyes see certain things because I am that mixture” (qtd. in Valerio-Holguín 14-15).

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