

# Reading Junot Díaz and filling the void of Latinx writers in US Literature

*Michelle F. Ramos Pellicia*

California State University San Marcos

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In *Reading Junot Díaz*, Christopher González presents us an analysis of the new image of the Latino man in the USA through Junot Díaz's work. It is with very detailed oriented descriptions that González argues this new image, although modern and challenging the stereotypes of the Latino man, is not in line with the image of the sexist womanizer that Díaz explains in detail in each one of its works. That is to say, this image raises the idea of the overweight ghetto nerd who is interested in super heroes, comics, Alderaan, and Lord of the Rings, but who contrasts with this being who delights in its sexual exploits in and out of the bed, in spite of hurting in the process that who appears to be "the one".

González book is divided in an introductory chapter followed by three chapters, each one dedicated to each one of Díaz's work: *Drown*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *This Is How You Lose Her*. The fourth chapter discusses "Uncollected Fiction and Nonfiction". The last chapter is dedicated to the "Epilogue".

The face of US Latinxs has changed dramatically in the last decades. Regions that were commonly thought of as predominantly Mexican or Cuban or Puerto Rican and Dominican have expanded their boundaries and have become more mixed with individuals from other Spanish-speaking ancestries. Hand in hand with this change, it is inevitable to also think of the Spanish-speaking communities as only listening to *salsa*, *merengue*, *cumbias*, *rancheras*, and only watching *telenovelas* and *Sábado Gigante* on tv stations such as *Univisión* or *Telemundo*. Latinxs, who now constitute 17% of the total US population (Census 2015), are the largest ethnic or racial minority of the United States are learning English more than ever (Krogstad, Stepler & Lopez 2015) and, because of this linguistic exposure, are fangirls of a variety of different characters of pop culture. Not only that, but also their language is a mix that reflects their inevitable cultural hybridity. It is in this context that González sets his work:

I was so intrigued by the idea of a Latino author who wrote so freely about sci-fi and comics that I had to work extra hard to focus on the road, as I was driving

at the time. The novel seemed like a strange brew that was at once so personal and yet so foreign to me. I grew up a Latino kid in the Llano Estacado region of Texas and New Mexico, pretending I was a Jedi in training on Dagobah in my spare time. That was all well and good, but I knew Luke Skywalker wasn't Latino. (ix)

In the Introduction, González situates Junot Díaz in his corresponding background. Born in Dominican Republic, immigrated at age six to New Jersey, attended Rutgers and Cornell University. Yet, despite this impressive résumé, knowing how much Díaz has written, and the relevance of his work, “he is the first Dominican American man to write and publish a book-length work of fiction in English” (Stavans 2011), González is able to bring his human most vulnerable side of this author:

Upon nearing the completion of his MFA, the publication of his first story, “Ysrael”, in *Story* came at a time when he began to doubt his future as a writer: I felt I was leaving graduate school with nothing: no stories, no agents, no interest, no confidence.... It was like in a movie when the hero is falling down to a certain death and suddenly reaches out and holds a branch that saves his life.

González main goal for this text is to understand the motivation behind the level of notoriety Díaz's work has attained given that the author uses “relatively quotidian content” (3).

Among the qualities that González identifies in Díaz's narratives are the mix of Latino fiction and using those elements in his narrative to tell stories of Latinxs in unanticipated ways that, in more ways than one, break narrative rules. Díaz's work, González argues, is juxtaposed to the work of Chicano Renaissance writers. Díaz presents a transnational experience that combines with his geopolitical concerns.

Chicano Renaissance writers, on the other hand, González posits, are crafted in a local geographical location, concentrating on issues related to culture, traditions, language, social hegemony, a history and cultural identity that unifies the American and Latin American experiences. Similarly, and perhaps just as relevant, Díaz was formed in an MFA program, while other Latino writers had to learn to write for other disciplines (e.g. law, education, folkloric studies, etc.), with Sandra Cisneros being an exception here. Despite the formation of both Cisneros and Díaz in MFA programs, both writers also share the common experience of white supremacy in academic and in writing, e.g. these authors were discouraged to create alternate worlds in their narratives, these alternate worlds were invariable to relive their past lives in their ancestral homes or their current lives within a household and/or a community that speaks Spanish.

Similar to the cohabiting of two different cultures, we see in Díaz's work the edgy use of language, not only one variety of a standard language, but a mix of English, Black English, Spanish, Dominican/Caribbean Spanish, and code switching. The use of all the different linguistic codes is not helter skelter, haphazard or erratic. His choices of linguistic varieties are strategic as they signal linguistic identity, membership and show a sense of belonging to a multiplexity of groups that inhabit New Jersey. Regretfully, González makes

reference to Ilan Stavans' work on code switching, which for some of us, does more harm than good. Instead, he could have chosen to include here works of linguists, particularly, anthropological linguists like Ana Celia Zentella who describe the masterfully hopscotch work that bilingual children do in *el bloque* in New York City. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that Díaz work is relevant to both Spanish-speaking, English-speaking and bilingual Latinxs alike because of the linguistic varieties used. Furthermore, he uses a combination of Latinx reality, Dominican American culture, with sci-fi and the realism of urban Latinidad sprinkled with Spanish words that do not interfere in the understanding of his narratives.

In the chapter dedicated to *Drown*, González organizes its stories into groups with common characteristics. This organizational strategy helps to see common topics, and characters that are repeated in different stories and that have different roles. Without this organization, it would have been difficult to see the commonalities, say, for instance between the first and last stories in *Drown*. *Drown* is Díaz first piece of work and, as such, establishes the themes that we have come accustomed to read in his writings:

(t)he troubled relationship between brothers, the compulsion and consequences of adhering to machismo scripts, the poignancy of being an outcast in your own community, the lack of an engaging father in a boy's life, and the hard realities faced by so many children... (14)

And while we see all these themes, we do not see in *Drown*, or in any of Díaz's writings, the love between two men. However, we see that all the stories in *Drown*, according to González, have in common the dominant Dominican male personality up and center that deal with the struggles associated with a female-male relationship. Women are included in the stories, but they do not have a voice, they are objects whose actions and motivations can never be understood by the main male characters. Infidelity is another important theme addressed in these short stories. Infidelity is the default setting for Dominican men. Even when the male characters are aware that their infidelity is the cause of all their emotional turmoil, they cannot learn their lesson. Instead, it seems as if the recognition of their infidelities, González argues, "... keeps them from being despicable human beings..." (39). In closing, the whole chapter dedicated to *Drown* explains with great detail the different characters, backgrounds and motivations within each story.

In Díaz's first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to which González dedicates his third chapter of his book, the writer explains that Díaz's "impetus for the narrative progression that comes out of Africa" (50). The *fukú* connects Africa to the Dominican Republic and here I add, that the culprit for all the flaws and misfortunes, not only of Oscar, but his family and Dominicans in general, it is traced back to Africa, and the slavery enabled by the colonizers. One important theme that González emphasizes in this chapter is precisely how race is constructed in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. While many Dominicans had sought to ignore and eliminate any trace of African ancestry, González clearly points out how Díaz continuously acknowledges the self-evident presence of the African ancestry in costumes and in language even as much as it is denied in their daily lives. Not often do we see an Afro-Latino Dominican narrator that discusses issues of

Afro-Latinidad. González emphasizes how this had its inception in *Drown*, but was much more developed in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in Díaz's creation of a fictional Afro-Latino who writes what the historical record has been intentionally silenced.

Another important aspect of Dominican history that has been effectively suppressed is the predominance of blackness as it relates to Haitian immigration. A negation, a setback, in the collective/national process of whitening or *blanqueamiento* (Bonilla-Silva 2010), consequences such as the genocide of Haitian and Haitian-descended people who live in the Dominican Republic in 1917 are included in the text. González clearly explains how the lens of the Dominican narrator who used to languishingly look at Spain for its roots and as its model, in Díaz's narrative, he becomes an Afro-Latino Dominican narrator who now looks at Africa for his ancestry and culture.

The Dominican history is full of contradictions as explained above. Thus, this contradiction needs to also be present in Díaz's work. González identifies it on Yunior's narrative in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Very often, Yunior, the Afro-Latino narrator in this novel, describes in derogatory terms the African ancestry in his own people. González emphatically reminds us, the readers, that this is not Díaz's purpose, that the fact that a character who acknowledges this fact is in itself a "major achievement" (64) because the painful history of blackness is not often reflected in Latin American narratives. González argues that Díaz's fiction is a reminder that the understanding of US Latinxs needs to be reconsidered through the race lens. It is through the incorporation of sci-fi, comic books and fantasy literature that Díaz strategically explains the difficult engagement of history and race in the Dominican experience here in the US and abroad. Precisely through the use of sci-fi, comic books and fantasy literature, Díaz gives voice to a history that was never written, but was systematically silenced.

In the chapter dedicated to *This Is How You Lose Her*, González examines how Díaz portrays Yunior's vulnerability in nine short stories. González organizes the stories' analysis according to common themes; the same way he organized his chapter on *Drown*. Through Yunior's introspection, we can experience his vulnerabilities. All but one story are told by Yunior. Yazmín is the narrator in the one story not told by Yunior. This is a strategy rarely used by Díaz, as González points out, that allows us to see the same experience through a woman's eyes, a woman who was Rafael's lover (Yunior's father). While the story-telling encourages us to empathize with Yazmín, it also tells us a complex description of her lover, going far beyond the "simplistic vilification of Ramón's infidelities and shortcomings". (91).

Another vulnerable side of Yunior that we learn is his love for his brother Rafa, and the lack of connection between the two after Rafa discovers he has cancer and undergoes radiation. Even before the discovery of his cancer, the relationship between the two brothers was distant, with Rafa always overshadowing Yunior and being his parents' favorite son. The rift between the two brothers only increases as Rafa decides to ignore that anything is happening to him and moves on to live his life as best as he can without any acknowledgment of his cancer. He proceeds to marry Pura, a woman he met at a local shop where he found a job, albeit briefly due to the side effects of the radiation. The rift is also present in the relationship with his mother, who does not approve of Pura.

The amalgamation of all the stories in *This Is How You Lose Her* can perfectly be described by the title of one of its short stories: "The cheater's guide to love". It only adds

more evidence to the “inability of young men to express deep-felt emotions” (89). The stories contained in *This Is How You Lose Her* show Yuniór’s “emotional development...” (89) providing insights “to what drives Yuniór’s capacity for and expression of love” (89), but during the process of narrating all his stories, he describes his sexual exploitations, his cheating, his heartbreaks, while on the meantime, using writing as a healing process.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to “Uncollected Fiction and Nonfiction” and presents an analysis of twelve of his works published in magazines such as: *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *GQ: Gentleman’s Quaterly*, *Gourmet*, *More*, *The New Yorker Online*, *O*, *The Oprah Magazine*, and *Dismantle: an Anthology of Writing from the VONA/Voices Writing Workshop*. In these works, González explains how Díaz uses post-apocalyptic fiction in which the end of the world spreads in Haiti and the Dominican Republic by a virus called “La Negrura”, “The Darkness” in the short story “Monstro” (originally appeared in *The New Yorker’s* science fiction issue on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012). While all the strategies he uses for science fiction are here, he still helps readers to see the humanity in all his characters. Other works include autobiographical non-fiction and works on food and relocating to New York. In “My First Year in New York” (published in *New York Times* on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2000), González suggests that Díaz gives us an insight into the important role that his relationship with his father plays in shaping him as a writer. In “Introduction” (to *Dismantle: an Anthology of Writing from the VONA/Voices Writing Workshop* published in 2014), González gives us an insight into Díaz’s life prior to his awards and numerous publications, that is, when he was an MFA student at Cornell. In this essay, Díaz explains his naiveté at the expectations of an MFA program. These issues along with the issues that González points out, namely, before the inception of the MFA programs, and now, the difficulty in nurturing Latino/a writers, the challenges in nurturing the multifaceted storytelling that these writers brought, the difficulty in convincing publishers that Latino/a would have a positive reception among readers, the MFA programs were advocating for a narrative that did not allow for the diverse voices of the writers, and in turn, of its readers. This is, as González, argues, a reflection of comments found on good reads and amazon.com, where Spanish and the US Latinx experience are questioned. If seasoned readers such as the ones found in MFA programs “... cannot see the value in the diverse life experiences that motivate certain types of storytelling, and thereby invalidate those diverse life experiences themselves, what chance do such writers as Díaz have with the average reader who reifies so-called American writing as that of, say, Jonathan Franzen?” (152). Díaz implies that a change from within over time is the only means of addressing the problem. In other words, more writers of color need to apply for MFA programs, more need to be on the pipeline towards obtaining an MFA degree so that more universities and workshops hire faculty of color. This is certainly, “...a blistering appraisal of MFA programs and should cause the system to reconsider further how it does or does not recognize, validate, or otherwise engage with the life experiences of people of color” (153).

Lastly, in the “Epilogue”, González argues how Yuniór de las Casas is Díaz’s greatest achievement, growing more complex in his narrative and in his construction as a character. Díaz shapes his narrative with the language that people use in their everyday lives, and that is another unique characteristic of his speech “like flashes of light” (156) breaking new ground, but following already established literary traditions. In closing, González also

emphasizes that Díaz's works has started the writing on a *página en blanco*, a space that has remained silent and dormant for long and that emphasizes "... the problem of invisibility and blankness with which Latino/a authors have struggled" (154). This is a ghost that haunts us all in American literature, and one that we hope will be exorcised when "... Latino/a authors can freely adopt and employ any technique of narrative form and select the thematic content of their choosing..." (157).