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BOOK FORUM

Loving Atomically: On Díaz's Migrant Aesthetics[1]

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Abstract

This essay offers an ecocritical reading of decolonial love. It traces how, in Díaz's fiction, people introject (post)colonial violence, redeploying its misogynist, masculinist, and sometimes violently hypersexual and racialized dynamics in their most intimate relationships. Díaz shows the connection between this kind of toxicity and the historical and economic forces that are laying waste to the planet.

Keywords: Anthropocene; decolonial love; enviromental injustice; migration; sexual violence; Superfund sites; the Great Dying; toxicity

The recurrence of breakups in Junot Díaz's fiction recalls the fact that, in American immigrant literature, marriage, infidelity, and divorce have long served as tropes for the ruptures and new beginnings of migrant life. Specifically, in Werner Sollors's words, they have signaled the tension between "contractual and hereditary, self-made and ancestral definitions of American identity."[2] *The Melting Pot* (1909), by British-born playwright Israel Zangwill, is a prime example.[3] One of the most successful productions in the history of Broadway, and a play that gave us an enduring if problematic metaphor for acculturation in America, *The Melting Pot* involves two star-crossed lovers: Jewish David Quixano, a survivor of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, and Christian Vera Revendal, daughter of the Russian officer responsible for the pogrom. Quixano, whose name invokes his quixotic aspirations,

[1] This article is adapted from Glenda R. Carpio, *Migrant Aesthetics: Contemporary Fiction, Global Migration, and the Limits of Empathy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

[2] Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 5–6.

[3] The play opened in Washington in 1908 but was published in 1909.

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writes a great symphony called "The Crucible" that expresses his hope for a world in which ethnic hatred can be melted away. At the end of the play, Vera's father repents while David and Vera decide to wed. As Sollors argues, "The past may be anchored in old-world hardness, but the future in America is identified with the melting pot," where "the severe wounds of the past" can be overcome to forge a new life.[4]

Díaz, whose focus is *not* American identity but rather the afterlives of (neo) colonialism in contemporary migration, uses the breakup plot to dramatize how migrants lose but still crave the fiction of a stable identity, of belonging to one nation.[5] In his fiction, Díaz engages intimately with desire, longing, and infidelity as parallel states of migrant (un)belonging. But he applies pressure on the analogy he raises between romantic love and love of the nation through a recurrence of toxic gender dynamics, in which sexual violence replicates historically constituted oppression, and breakup plots evince the intimate repercussions of that oppression. In "Homecoming, with Turtle" (*New Yorker*, 2004), for example, a nameless young man goes back to visit the Dominican Republic for the first time in twenty years; he and his family migrated to New Jersey when he was six. As a return narrative, the story describes the difficulties that the young man encounters because he no longer fits into Dominican culture: his "busted-up Spanish" gives him away, so that people call him "americano" to his face and overcharge him.[6] The story also includes a plotline about the narrator's impending breakup with his girlfriend, who finds out that he has been cheating on her shortly before the trip. "How did I feel?" he asks rhetorically of his trip back to the Dominican Republic. "All I will say is that if you fused the instant when heartbreak occurs to the instant when one falls in love and shot that concoction straight into your brain stem you might have a sense of what it felt like for me to be back 'home.'"[7] His twin desires to be forgiven for his infidelity and to be recognized as Dominican fuse in his language of romantic longing and loss. "What I wanted more than anything," he writes, "was to be recognized as the long-lost son I was, but that wasn't going to happen. Not after nearly twenty years. Nobody believed I was Dominican!"[8] His girlfriend, meanwhile, does not believe he can ever be faithful. Unsurprisingly, the couple breaks up soon after the trip, but the narrator, who is recounting the split eleven years later, identifies the trip with a beginning as well as an ending—the start of his reconciliation with his native land. After that first trip back, he returns often, improves his Spanish, and receives at least partial recognition from his countrymen that he is—at least partly—Dominican.

The first story in *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," which is an extended revision of "Homecoming, with Turtle," identifies Yunior as the narrator and elaborates the analogy between romantic desire and rupture on the one hand and the Dominican migrant experience on the other.

[4] Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 71–72.

[5] See, Glenda R. Carpio, ""Am I Dead?": Slapstick Antics and Dark Humor in Contemporary Immigrant Fiction," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 341–60.

[6] Junot Díaz, "Homecoming, with Turtle," *New Yorker*, June 14, 2004 (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/06/14/homecoming-with-turtle).

[7] Díaz, "Homecoming, with Turtle."

[8] Díaz, "Homecoming, with Turtle."

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"Let me confess: I love Santo Domingo," Yunior writes, like a man admitting to a love affair.[9] This version of the story, however, does not pursue the equation between inauthenticity and infidelity. Instead, it begins with a loaded declaration: "I am not a bad guy. I know how that sounds—defensive, unscrupulous—but it's true." This statement is prompted by the cheated-on girlfriend's view of Yunior as a "typical Dominican man: a sucio, an asshole" (*TH*, 3). "Sucio" literally means dirty; in Dominican slang, it refers to someone whose promiscuous sexual nature renders them filthy, unclean.[10] Díaz's revision of "Homecoming, with Turtle" shows him moving away from equating infidelity with inauthenticity and toward the use of infidelity as a trope connecting sexual violence to broader histories of colonial violence.

In the eight years between the publication of "Homecoming, with Turtle" and that of "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," Díaz expanded and deepened his vision of colonial power, as is clear from the now famous first line of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). The Curse or the "Fukú Americanus," which was unleashed by "the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola," has taken on vast structural economic, political, and social forms, but, as Yunior reminds, it "doesn't always strike like lightning."[11] For Oscar, his family, and indeed most of the people he knows, especially Yunior, it manifests as a thwarted desire for love, specifically for what Díaz calls "decolonial love," "the only kind of love that could liberate them from that horrible legacy of colonial violence"—and yet they cannot achieve it.[12] The Curse is not only anti-Black, but it is also born out of the "rape culture of the European colonization of the New World—which becomes the rape culture of the Trujillato (Trujillo just took that very old record and remixed it)." And it is this "rape culture that stops [Oscar and his] family from achieving decolonial intimacy, from achieving decolonial love."[13] The Curse is the reason that Beli loves the Gangster "atomically" even though it is also her love of him that nearly kills her.[14]

When we read "Homecoming, with Turtle" in the context of Díaz's novel, we can see that Yunior eventually identifies his Dominicanness with his experience of the Curse, rather than with migrant longing for authenticity, and that his compulsive promiscuity is a legacy of a long history of colonial misogyny and violence. This is what the revised version of the story makes explicit. *Oscar Wao* allows us to see how Díaz expands his vision from "Homecoming, with Turtle," through *This Is How You Lose Her*, which culminates with the story, "A Cheater's

[9] Junot Díaz, *This Is How You Lose Her* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 9. All subsequent references to this work will be made parenthetically in the main text, with the reference *TH.*

[10] See Deborah R. Vargas, "Sucia Love: Losing, Lying, and Leaving in This Is How You Lose Her," in *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, eds. Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldívar (New York, USA: Duke University Press), 351–76.

[11] Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 1,4. All subsequent references to this work will be made parenthetically in the main text, with the reference *OW.*

[12] Paula Moya, "The Search for Decolonial Love: A Conversation Between Junot Díaz and Paula M. L. Moya," in *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, eds. Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldívar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 396–97.

[13] Moya, "The Search for Decolonial Love", 397.

[14] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 126.

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Guide to Love." This story, as José David Saldívar argues, features Díaz's "literary signature": the staging of a "dialectic encounter of radioactively decaying heartbreak," in the search and failure to find decolonial love, and the "potential reciprocity and freedom" it might bring if achieved.[15] In the story, Yunior takes inventory of his failed relationships across a six-year period, exploring, as Saldívar argues, his "sucio love and masculinist self-formation" but, in so doing, also expressing his desire for decolonial love (177).

It is no secret that Yunior's self-inventory refracts Díaz's own well-publicized struggles with sucio love and toxic masculinity, both of which Díaz puts up for critique. In his novel and short stories, Díaz traces how people can introject (post) colonial violence, redeploying its misogynist, masculinist, and sometimes violently hypersexual and racialized dynamics in their most intimate relationships. What has been less clear is that Yunior's particular curse as the victim-perpetrator of toxicity connects the small scale of the bedroom, where this toxicity manifests as sexual violence to the self and others, to the largest scale of the Anthropocene, where we experience the Curse as violence to the planet and to ourselves as a species. Toxicity is the nexus at which Díaz connects Yunior's emotional and sexual violence to the historical and economic forces that are laying waste to the planet and our lives on it.

Díaz depicts the arrival of Europeans in the New World in apocalyptic terms: one world perishes in the screams of the enslaved and the "death bane" of native people, as another world begins (*OW*, 1). What this perishing engenders is nothing less than the beginning of the Anthropocene and the environmental disasters in places like the Dominican Republic and what Díaz calls the "tedious and unromantic corridors" of central New Jersey, a state that currently has the most Superfund sites in the United States (locations requiring a long-term response to clean up hazardous-material contaminations).[16]

For Díaz, the Curse brought on what climate scientists call the Great Dying, a phrase most often used to describe the Permian–Triassic extinction event, "a series of extinction pulses" that occurred over fifteen million years and "contributed to the greatest mass extinction in Earth's history."[17] The phrase is also used to denote the mass extinction that followed the arrival of Europeans in 1492 to the New World. According to recent research, 90 percent of the native population (fifty-six million people) died, not only from the waves of diseases

[15] José David Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 158.

[16] Glenda R. Carpio, "Voyaging Across Arcs: A Conversation with Junot Díaz," *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 3 (2017): 499 (https://muse.jhu.edu/article/676913/pdf). Designated under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) of 1980, Superfund sites are part of a program that has had more success in raising environmental awareness than in "cleaning up toxic sites and making corporate polluters pay." See Jon Hurdle, "After 40 Years, Superfund Program in NJ Is Still Work in Progress," *NJ Spotlight News*, April 22, 2020 (https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2020/04/after-40-years-superfund-program-in-nj-is-still-work-in-progress/).

[17] Alexander Koch, Chris Brierley, Mark Maslin, and Simon Lewis, "European Colonisation of the Americas Killed 10% of World Population and Caused Global Cooling," in *The Conversation*, January 31, 2019 (https://theconversation.com/european-colonisation-of-the-americas-killed-10-of-world-population-and-caused-global-cooling-110549).

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that Europeans brought across the Atlantic but also from war, famine, and enslavement.[18] The devastation resulted in the collapse of farming in the Americas, which in turn cooled the global climate. Meanwhile, the networks of trade resulting from the arrival of Europeans to the New World "led to a rapid, repeated, cross-ocean exchange of species, which [was] without precedent in Earth's history" and resulted in a significant loss of biodiversity and the acceleration of species extinction rates.[19] The Atlantic slave trade, which took place concurrently with the Great Dying, was itself another "great dying," as millions of people perished in the Middle Passage—the largest forced movement of people in history—and millions more fell to the brutality of plantation slavery. Geographic and ecological researchers have argued that chattel slavery and the genocide of native peoples constituted the twin epicenters of the Anthropocene's origin and have traced the legacy of that colonial violence through the Industrial Revolution and the Atomic Age to the current, catastrophic climate change.[20]

In the stories in *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*, Díaz refracts his own experience of "growing up super poor in a crumbling fucking neighborhood near a burning landfill, where people just seemed to appear and disappear without reason," because it left him with a nagging question: "I felt that I was in a dress rehearsal for the apocalypse. Or perhaps the apocalypse had already happened. This was the question that haunted me and still haunts me.[21] The temporal suspension produced by toxic wastelands is, for Díaz, analogous to the distortion of time of migration, and the analogy hinges on the word "apocalypse." "In the classic apocalyptic pattern," Díaz told me, "there is the pre-apocalyptic world; there is the eschaton, which destroys the world; and there is the post-apocalypse, or the New World … The eschaton, [for me, is] of course immigration." Both experiences entail suspension of time, but in the apocalyptic scenario, this leads to a transposition of frames: the present looks like both the past and a foreshadowing of the future. In migration too, the suspension of time has to do with destruction and creation—the past has been transformed by the present time of migration while the future, if it is to come, has yet to arise.

[18] Koch et al., "European Colonisation."

[19] Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, "Anthropocene Began with Species Exchange Between Old and New Worlds," in *The Conversation*, March 11, 2015 (https://theconversation.com/anthropocene-began-with-species-exchange-between-old-and-new-worlds-38674). See also Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature* 519 (2015): 171–80.

[20] There has been a vibrant debate not only over how to date the beginning of the Anthropocene but over the adequacy of the term itself. As Dana Luciano argues, "Anthropocene is clearly not the product of 'human nature,' or humanity as a whole, but rather interrelated historical processes set in motion by a small minority." Dana Luciano, "The Inhuman Anthropocene," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 22, 2015 (https://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2015/03/22/the-inhuman-anthropocene/). See also Janae Davis, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant, and Brian Williams, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, … Plantationocene? A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises," *Geography Compass* 13, no. 5 (May 2019) (https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438).

[21] Carpio, "Voyaging Across Arcs," 506.

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In his essay "Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal" (2011), about the earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010, Díaz makes explicit the connections between colonialism, climate change, and migration as they are playing out in our contemporary world. He dissects the concept of apocalypse and reminds us that the term comes from the "Greek *apocalypsis*, meaning to uncover and unveil," implying "a disruptive event that provokes revelation." Taking his cue from James Berger's book *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (1999), Díaz further defines apocalypse as both "the actual imagined end of the world, whether in Revelation or in Hollywood blockbusters" and as "catastrophes, personal or historical, that are said to resemble that imagined final ending—the Chernobyl meltdown or the Holocaust or the [March 11, 2011] earthquake and tsunami in Japan."[22] Focusing on the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Díaz demonstrates how these categories bleed into each other at a sociopolitical level. To do so, Díaz grounds large-scale stories of migrations and environmental disasters in contemporary, local landscapes, namely the Dominican Republic and central New Jersey. The latter landscape recalls Robert Smithson's photo-essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," in its focus on a neighborhood under construction that looks, even before it is finished, like a ruined metropolis. By analyzing Smithson's influence on Díaz—which Díaz has explicitly acknowledged—we can perceive an abiding if subtle focus in his fiction on environmental toxicity within the lived environment, a phenomenon that relates to his vision of our common future.[23]

Díaz centers the earth-shattering violence of New World slavery and the genocide of Native peoples as apocalyptic historical events that ushered in a new stage of capitalism and exploitation, the effects of which are still reverberating within the various waves of migration and dispossession left in their wake. This is central to what I call Díaz's migrant aesthetics, a set of formal strategies, including but not limited to the genre hybridity of his oeuvre, to his narratorial slipperiness and complicit characters, his intertextuality, and his metafictional structures, through which he represents a vast scale, ranging from the intimacy of sexual relationships in the now to the long centuries of New World colonialism. In this context, migration is no longer tethered to tropes of romance, marriage, and (in)fedility as tropes for national (un) belonging, as we see in *The Melting Pot*, but to the search and failure to achieve decolonial love. Examining Díaz's short fiction with his novel's wide-angle frame in mind—as José David Saldívar does through his incisive and soulful scholarship on decolonial love—we can contextualize the toxic behaviors that Díaz both depicts and embodies, while also focusing on how environmental injustice and migration intertwine.[24]

[22] Junot Díaz, "Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal," *Boston Review*, May 1, 2011.

[23] In my conversation with Díaz, he described "Central Jersey," where he grew up, as "very Smithson" and identified Smithson's essay specifically as an influence. See Carpio, "Voyaging Across Arcs," 499, 497.

[24] For a full explication of this point, see chapter five of Carpio, *Migrant Aesthetics.*

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