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BOOK FORUM

An Adolescent's Explosive Crossing

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The amazing freedom that Junot Díaz's writing expresses, in both its narrative richness and the explosiveness of a language that eludes any scrutiny imposed by formal decorum, owes much to the boy/adolescent involved in the scrutinizing, from his inexperienced young age and the events around him, to trace a personal reconnaissance of the psycho-geographical territory in which he moves. When in the essay "The Adolescent Novel" (1990) the psycholinguist Julia Kristeva juxtaposed adolescence and novel writing as both *open* systems, she recalled that the boy/adolescent figure has played a leading role in shaping the novel genre in the West as a metaphor of openness to all possibilities, a symbol of what is not yet completely formed. However, for Kristeva, the term "adolescent" does not mean so much a specific age as an "open" psychic dimension, the transitional quality of adolescence.[1] The very concepts of adventure and travel have taken on a wealth of new nuances in their tempos, thanks to the presence of enterprising kids who, more or less innocent, have endowed the modern novel with an irresistible picaresqueness. The boy/adolescent figure has continued to provide a privileged perspective even in much European and non-European postcolonial literary output, since it starkly portrays the innocence of the underdog. In the various collections of stories and in the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), the modern *pícaros* that Junot Díaz's imagination creates inhabit degraded urban environments, among the squalor of the "Caribbean City of Ruins" in Santo Domingo and the deadly slums of the "monumental garbage heaps and toxic landfills" in Parlin, New Jersey.[2] However, these spaces are dramatically amplified under Diaz's watchful eye as an extraordinary "anatomist of coloniality in the Américas"[3] who broadens the smallest details into the extraordinary

[1] Julia Kristeva, "The Adolescent Novel," in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love. The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1990).

[2] José David Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022), 13; 17.

[3] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, xiv.

geographies of an alternative history of the Américas, which embraces encounters and interactions between the United States and the Hispanic Caribbean that have always been "historically fluid, multidimensional, multidirectional, and imperially intertwined."[4] These kids, abandoned and alone, are in fact orphans, since even if they still have a father and a mother, these are both "remote"—the fathers because they have emigrated in search for fortune and have forgotten their families, and the uprooted and depressed mothers because they are incapable of providing a reference point and a safe haven. Junot Díaz's boy/adolescent is solitary and reflective, with the behavioral quirks of a "doomed ghetto nerd"[5] who ventures into the real world with all the inventiveness and curiosity of a *pícaro*, but also with the peculiar outsider status of a "foreigner," a sort of unrecognizable alien creature who comes from other worlds, such as those science fiction creatures in the novels and comic books that the boy devours in his room ("in the closet"). But this boy is endowed with the extraordinary power of a strong, volcanic language, whose unsettling *carnivalesque*—in Bachtin's sense of the word—polyphony overwhelms, upturns, and transfigures the world. This "alien" actually contains in himself the history of a gigantic disorientation, complex worlds, and imaginaries steeped in the languages of popular culture, from comic books and science fiction novels to TV programs. But there is also the fantastic world of the heroes of sagas, where good and evil collide with clearly opposite and recognizable stances. The way in which the saga of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* portrays a childhood world where it seems possible to neatly separate good from evil, where you can even imagine that once the Dark Lord Sauron has been defeated a happy world without Evil can be restored, is one of the narrative plots that powerfully capture a boy's imagination, perhaps because it manages to keep his trauma at bay, or at least to some degree to exorcise it. What trauma? Above all, the trauma of power and the subtle, unimaginable ways in which it takes shape. The boy/adolescent discovers in his wandering as an underdog that there is always a moment, a place, a face where Power is on the prowl with its sneaky weapons. The boy/adolescent discovers that there is no place free of the sadism that is the perverse expression of Power. In this sense, the nerdy language with which he expresses himself conveys the sense of condemnation to a tragic fate, the doom inscribed since birth in the path of his existence. In the touching description of the short story *Ysrael* (1995), Rafa and his brother Yunior suddenly find themselves torturing a boy their age, disfigured by a pig that devoured part of his face when he was still in the cradle, and who wears a cloth mask his father has sewn to hide his dreadful disfigurement. Thus, José Saldívar leads us into the world of sadism, that psychophysical dimension in which even the most imperceptible difference between two people or positions turns into an irresistible invitation to take advantage of that momentary advantage. Rafa sneakily strikes the boy, breaking a glass bottle on his head. While the boy is unconscious, Rafa unscrupulously scrutinizes the network of nerves, muscles, and tendons that lies under the mask on the face,

[4] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 48.
[5] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 32.

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pitilessly, as children do when they can overpower a small animal, an insect, any defenseless creature. Children who are not "good," but do not even know they are "bad." Their innocence lies totally in the absolute gratuity of their actions. Bearing this truth means undoing centuries of rhetoric on the sweet innocence of childhood. Junot Díaz does it by destroying in a few lines the myth of the pristine childlike goodness on which the European Enlightenment lavished so much theorization. And one does not need to come from the slums of Santo Domingo or Parlin, New Jersey. Sadism sooner or later rears its ugly head in our daily actions, which nail us to our dark motivations as much as to our many omissions. Junot Díaz exposes it in the crudest way, indifferent to our offended sense of propriety. On the contrary, he toys with it, provoking bursts of laughter, while at the same time, we feel great pity for these stories of abandoned kids who narrate a modernity produced by congenital violence. In their stories, a *colonial unconscious* emerges that drags itself into bodies whose subordination is stratified over long stretches of time and place. It is the history of coloniality, "the transgenerational history of rape of the New World, or what Díaz ingeniously called the 'fukú americanus' in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*."[6] For this reason, the narratives of Nordic epic sagas or those of other past civilizations, such as the classicism that shaped the myths of Prometheus and other transgressors of boundaries imposed on men by the gods of the Greek-Asian-Mediterranean Empyreum, offer a mass of material to draw upon in order to range easily among huge temporal stretches of unknown and only imagined dimensions. They certainly offer a useful reference grid to a boy who seeks to define the oddities, irreconcilability, discrepancies, and strangeness that arise when one is forced to leave one's place of origin, one's language, the familiarity of a home, of faces and voices of people with whom one shared one's childhood years, and then to adapt to frightening, traumatizing, disturbing new lands. Because of this, the epic of sagas enters into continuous dialogue with those new spaces that the boy must decipher, providing the raw material of a road epic, and also, in subtler form, of subordination. The disorientation of a child who leaves his home to move to another neighborhood or simply to another school already provides important material to halt the narrative of his existential adventure with intervals, discontinuity, fears, impossible mendings, uneasiness, and small daily triumphs. But if instead we have moved to a completely new space, where streets, houses, faces, mannerisms, and accents are no longer familiar, and the language itself is a foreign world, this modern epic of the disoriented boy turns into a road epic full of questions, curiosities, fantasies, hollows, holes, and silences that should cast an imaginary bridge between their previous self and the self found after the "crossing," which, in fact, in the psyche of a boy stands out like a biblical enterprise. When the kids finally reach that father who had abandoned his children and wife in Santo Domingo several years earlier in order to build a life for them in New Jersey, their life as "orphans" abandoned by their father finds it difficult to redeem itself as a sheltering family. This crossing that will never close the gaps between the before and the after coalesces like a lump—in the psyche of

[6] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, xvi.

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Yunior de las Casas as in that of Oscar de León, and of the many like them—in the vulnerability of the translated peoples forced to constantly struggle in the mesh of a cultural translation that will always be an imperfect, unfinished undertaking, an impossible undertaking.[7] The utopia of a perfect translation shatters against the impossibility of a perfect adaptation to the dictates of the destination country, which does not admit too much *alien* baggage onto its territory.[8] There is nothing that truly remains behind. Everything that has happened is always imprinted within us, perhaps buried, but always ready to break out, as in the ventriloquism that populates Junot Díaz's imaginary world full of voices that debate simultaneously within it. The journey that leads Yunior, Oscar, and other characters to reconstruct themselves in the "new" is emblematic of the great migration that has pushed thousands of inhabitants to leave Santo Domingo and remake a life for themselves in the United States, from as far back as the 1960s. And if Yunior's existential *undertaking* becomes a matter of "mak[ing] sense of his diasporic belonging, adolescence, and survival in the elsewhere spaces of Parlin, New Jersey,"[9] this undertaking is also what led Díaz as a writer to always identify himself as "a singular Afro-Atlantic Dominican authorial person."[10] The history of modern migrations clearly exposes the colonial nature of these movements. Díaz does not fail to trace this back to Christopher Columbus' endeavors when he came from Europe to the then Hispaniola (Santo Domingo and Haiti), a history that Díaz rewrites from that moment of modernity. What this history meant for the Dominican Republic was a long sequence of colonial violence, from its beginnings to the US military occupations that alternated with the horrors of the Trujillo era. These unexpected trajectories, which from 1492 gained momentum over the centuries, redesigned modernity, which became a space–time warp in which hegemonic forces were able to experience at will, and above all with unbridled sadism, the whole gamut of power games. Above all, in the colonized body, a polyglot pattern is inscribed, a tentacular language made up of negotiations, exchanges, oddments, loans, and blends that create a sparkling accumulation of meaning, ready at every turn to unleash the power of the *carnivalesque.* Junot Díaz's characters upturn the normal order of words and phrases, planting in the reader a displacement that triggers laughter, and that in his 1966 work, *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault identified in the famous Chinese encyclopedia that Borges wrote of, an overflowing combination of words and images that trigger irrepressible laughter. This laughter arises from a specific combination that Michail Bachtin, in his famous 1965 study *Rabelais and His World*, on the obscene, the grotesque, and laughter, condensed in the term *carnivalesque.* The *carnivalesque* upturns everything, triggering disorder, disorganization, and misunderstanding, a confusion of languages and bodies in a theater of practical and real life. Díaz himself defines his stories as "strange pieces that do not assemble into anything coherent."[11] Laughter that suddenly bursts forth, invading the

[7] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1992).
[8] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).
[9] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 50.
[10] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 66.
[11] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 53.

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creases of modesty, rejects both masters and servants, because a grin reverses everything, mixes, ruptures, undoes all the usual correspondences between *words and things*, giving birth to new possible orders and systems. This effect of Junot Díaz's writing is what seems to me most precious, in its lighting a flame stolen from the gods: "You are here to steal fire," Díaz reminded the students who listened to him at the Presidential Lecture of the University of Stanford in May 2017.[12] A body that violates the boundaries of what has been "normalized" and can be displayed is carnivalesque; a body with its drives and repulsions, whose secret teenagers always love to discover inside the closed space of a room; a body groped by molesters; a body that throws itself into its first discoveries of pleasure, even that of homoeroticism; the defeated and corrupt body of teenagers who go in and out of reformatories, while they dash their brains and souls with all kinds of drugs; and of course the racialized bodies, those whose color already bears the mark of a colonial destiny. Junot Díaz recognizes all these bodies as extremely present in his *Oscar Wao*, where Díaz suggests that at the root of *carnality* there is the word *carne*: "What I do think is very present in [my novel] is the root of the word *carnality*, which is *carne*. Bodies are extremely present in this book. Because there is no Caribbean-African diasporic experience that doesn't in some ways revolve around the questions of these bodies."[13] As a Dominican writer, Díaz sees himself as an already marked body and does not hesitate to identify himself as a "writer of African Descent,"[14] who encountered the molestations and humiliations reserved for first generation Latinx students, not only in his social interactions but also on university campuses.[15] The boy with his perspective "from below" deciphers the world through his personal interpretive grids of reality. He is not yet completely "subjected" to the "interpellations" to which an adult must respond. This "open" subject incorporates the languages of the many continents that over the centuries have crisscrossed the Caribbean ever since Columbus landed in Hispaniola: "The Dominican Republic's Santo Domingo is thus the oldest of the 'Old World' societies chiseled in the Américas. The transculturation of all materially Indigenous, European, and African things, which is largely the history of the Américas, began with Díaz's Caribbean nation."[16] The weight is truly ponderous. The history of coloniality is inscribed in the boy's language, which resonates with "powerful, creatively wrought Dominican Afro-Atlantic vernaculars,"[17] hip-hop idiolects, Spanglish and English swear words, nerdy student jargon, and popular culture gleaned from TV, radio, and newspapers. If a subject's unconscious is structured as a language (Jacques Lacan), what is hiding in the boy's unconscious? Certainly the language of *trans-Americanity*, the unique language of "hemispheric madness" that coloniality produced.[18] This amazing 'intimacy of

[12] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 42.
[13] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 37.
[14] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 40.
[15] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 41.
[16] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 49.
[17] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 20.
[18] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 31.

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continents'[19] emerges from Yunior's speech as it does from Oscar's, free of any adult *bon ton* inhibition. The boy can speak *ad libitum.* A spectacular freedom to ignite phrases like fireworks. Language provides the greatest shock in the world that Junot Díaz creates. In 2017, Toni Morrison, whom Saldívar mentions in the book's epigraph, stresses the magnetism of Díaz's language: "So real and intelligent and wild. [...] so human in the nostalgia and in the knowing of human beings." A language devoid of censorship, a language that makes us laugh even when aimed at Rafa, now reduced to a human larva on his deathbed. No rhetoric to embellish or, at the very least, to mitigate what reality is. Reality is not at all politically correct, and a boy sees reality as it presents itself, without any finesse. It is the adult who will have to see it through the polite lens of political correctness. Yunior's expressive freedom, like Oscar's, regenerates the world with a primal roar ... like a belly laugh. It is the boundless freedom of adolescence, that long span of time, the *half-life* before adulthood, which has always been the feverish period of falling in love and *intimacy*. If intimacy is too fancy a word in colonial times—"when you live in a world that tells you to think of yourself as somehow out of order already always," Díaz writes[20]—falling in love too is a ponderous word. Falling in love with what? Above all, when? This *half-life* of love, which is a complex expression playing on the ambiguity between the idea of transition to adulthood and the idea of duration (and end-date), is largely a question of how long it takes for love to die, that is, how long it continues to circulate within itself, as much as it is a question of what kind of love belongs to middle-age. But it also instills the doubt that love may never "expire," as opposed to the temporally circumscribed effect (half-life) of Rafa's radioactive treatments for the leukemia that is killing him. This half-life remains unanswered, and yet open to all interpretations, while it gently sways between love and death, with a porosity that belongs to the adolescent imagination, an essentially amorous imagination, and therefore always played out on a depressive tension, because its love object is likely to be lost. This porosity is also an integral part of the novel, which, as Kristeva writes, is an open form *par excellence*, since it is an incomplete, fluid system, without definite boundaries. It is, like an adolescent, proteiform. The novel is in itself always "adolescent writing," as Kristeva writes, and as such is always "love-intoxicated writing." Meanwhile, the masterful intertwining of critical theory of the decolonial trans-Americanity with the detailed reconstruction of Junot Díaz's biographical and creative path, through a passionate, superfine, precise analysis of everything that Díaz has written and theorized thus far, leaves no doubts: what José Saldívar has written is an extraordinary document of the magical, transfiguring power of literature.

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[19] See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015).

[20] Saldívar, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*, 20.

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