

Junot Díaz's “Aurora” and “Aguantando” as Minor Literature

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Abstract

Two short stories published in the collection Drown (1996) by the Dominican-American fiction writer Junot Díaz are analyzed in this contribution in part by applying the notion of “minor” literature expounded by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (1975). Díaz produces bi-cultural immigrant stories in a modernist narrative form, treating both the machismo culture and the post-colonial experience in the U.S. and Dominican Republic. As prolegomena to a thorough understanding of Díaz’s more recent work, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007), this study will underscore themes developed more extensively in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel.

Keywords: Junot Díaz, Dominican-American fiction, short stories, Drown, immigration, colonialism, post-colonialism

1 Introduction

Provocative and challenging, Junot Díaz’s short stories “Aurora” and “Aguantando” offer a bi-cultural engagement enhanced by loaded imagery which immediately catches the reader’s attention through the “I” narrative voice, a voice expressing the transnational perspective promoted by the protagonists’ own experiences of marginalization and disempowerment. These stories advance a new expression of the immigrant experience through the authentic vernacular English spoken by Hispanic Americans (i.e., slang terms and street vernacular) which *New York Times* literary critic Michiko Kakutani has called “a street-wise brand of Spanglish” (22) as well as a view of contemporary American culture.

“Aurora” and “Aguantando” first appeared in the short story collection *Drown* (1996), a collection which won the 27-year-old author critical acclaim from the very nascence of his career: “the cause célèbre of the New York literati” (Sengupta 3) according to *The New York Times*. He was celebrated in Great Britain as well: “You could not ask for a more dynamic representative of contemporary American literary culture [...]” (Linklater 15) as one critic for *The Herald* of Glasgow, Scotland summed it up. Twelve years after *Drown*, Díaz won the Pulitzer Prize for his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), a work focusing on a new imaginative intervention of the Dominican-American immigrant experience which questions the reliability of traditional immigrant narratives.

The stories in *Drown* share many of the salient features of his flagship work *Oscar Wao* although relatively little sustained scholarly attention has been given to assessing their literary value or examining their sophisticated features until very recently. In the story “Aurora” the narrative voice Díaz writes with, and the New Jersey urban setting and Dominican immigrant characters he describes, illuminates a realm of contemporary America that has remained, for the most part, not so well-known among critically-acclaimed, best-selling American fiction. The raw-edged poetic voice commands a deceptively simple immediacy from the streets of low-income urban enclaves seen through Dominican immigrant eyes. “Aurora,” like other stories in *Drown*, intersects the faint indications of an autobiographical work and principally the experiences of Junot Díaz’s extended Dominican family members, with whom the form and content render the inherent with the particular. One critic has noted that for Díaz (as well as Julia Alvarez, a fellow Dominican-born U.S. fiction writer) this fictional “autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition” (Anderson 104). Though the culture from which this voice springs is culturally wealthy and colorful, it is otherwise sad and tragic. In the story “Aguantando” Díaz depicts the aftermath of the 1965 U.S. military invasion, in particular the complex effects it had on the relationships within a Dominican family. Sharing many experiences with his stories’ characters, Junot Díaz immigrated with his family to the United States from a poor section of the capital city of the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo, and as he poignantly states, they were “a bunch of poor *campesinos* who were the kind of people that everybody was warned not to be” (Arce 44). As Díaz opens in “Aguantando”

I lived without a father for the first nine years of my life. He was in the States, working, and the only way I knew him was through the photographs my moms kept in a plastic sandwich bag under her bed. Since our zinc roof leaked almost everything we owned was water stained: our clothes, Mami’s Bible, her make up, whatever food we had, Abuelo’s tools, even our cheap wooden furniture. It was only because of that plastic bag that any pictures of my father survived. When I thought of Papi I thought of one shot specifically. Taken days before the U.S. invasion: 1965. I wasn’t even alive then. (69)

Poverty left an indelible mark on the characters in all the *Drown* stories, and the effects of colonialism did likewise. These Dominican characters do not enjoy the advantages Cubans have of refugee status nor can they obtain American citizenship as effortlessly as Puerto Ricans. The Dominican culture is evident in the description of the characters

although most immigrants avoid giving themselves away as people of foreign birth. They attempt to assimilate quickly. As one scholar has it, bicultural writers like Díaz as well as Alvarez "incorporate into their work a significant part of the 'cultural baggage' that they have brought over from their country of origin" (Ibarrola-Armendariz 216). This swing back and forth of immigrants trying their utmost to conceal their foreign origins (or 'baggage') and literary expression of this state of affairs was addressed by Díaz in an interview in 2000:

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 and the guidance, you immediately – when you realize it – begin to decolonize yourself. And in that process, you relearn names for yourself that you had forgotten. (Céspedes 894)

It is significant that, rather than dramatizing the post-colonial status that Dominicans experienced in the country of his birth, Díaz instead points to becoming "colonized" by America only after he has immigrated to New Jersey. In retrospect, Díaz shows how his Dominican culture had become "erased" but then returns "when you realize it." It is here, through the process Díaz himself calls "decolonizing" himself, that the insightful notion of "minor literature" gets articulated.

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define minor literature as writing "which a minority constructs within a major language" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 16). They argue that "minor" literature occurs in a language that is "deterritorialized" or displaced, for example through the process which a nation experiences when colonized. Through this displacement the language is fit "for strange and minor uses" (Deleuze and Guattari 17). The minor writer emphasizes and affirms this deterritorialization through various transgressive devices in his fiction as Kafka does with German while writing in Prague, Czechoslovakia where the influence (or "contamination") of German with Czech and Yiddish was put into service. "Minor" writing therefore abuses the discursive structures of the "major" language to its own creative ends. As Deleuze and Guattari put it,

[t]o make use of the polylingualism of one's own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or under-development, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play. How many styles, genres or literary movements, even very small ones, have only one single dream: to assume a major function in language, to offer themselves as a sort of state language, an official language [...]. Create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor. (26–7)

Whenever "minor" writing achieves the status of the majority, it will lose its revolutionary character and thereby become a meager imitation of the colonial-imperialist ideology. It must accordingly always remain within the cultural process of "becoming minor."

The intensely marginalized characters in “Aurora” undergo a process of “being colonized” (through public schools, the penitentiary system, or corporate institutions such as “Quick Check,” Díaz’s renaming of Payday¹) and subsequently decolonized (through the woman’s nonverbal artistic expression in her painting, love-making and occasionally even through violence). Living in squalid conditions just as penurious as those in the Dominican Republic from which they emigrated, Díaz’s characters do not secure a firm footing in the United States. Moreover, lacking any sympathy for the suffering and deprivation of their fellow countrymen, these characters, both ironically and maliciously, validate the notion of the American Dream by showing utter contempt for those who fail to “succeed” in America.

2 Narrative Style

The short story collection *Drown* consists of ten short vignettes or snapshots with a loose peripatetic writing style lacking the traditional formal distinctions made between narration and dialogue. The spare writing by Díaz is fragmented structurally to mirror the desolate streets as well as to echo the fragmented though multilayered experiences in the depressed neighborhood in a small town in New Jersey. While the plot of “Aguantando” takes place completely in the Dominican Republic, “Aurora” is the only New Jersey story in the collection without any of the narrator’s memories of an early Dominican childhood. More concerned with the mask of tough machismo, a stereotypically traditional Dominican masculinity necessary for pushing crack, the Dominican male hero eventually gets unmasked when he truly falls in love with his drug-addicted girlfriend, the titular Aurora.

Díaz skillfully employs a technique to intentionally obfuscate the reader with the confusing experience of his characters, writing a combination of Standard American English, street English – “Jewel luv it, he said” (47) and Spanish phrases. This code switching is no less a matter of drug terminology and street slang English than it is standard and slang Spanish. Many sentences commingle the two languages: “All her neighbors were administrators and hombres de negocios and you had to walk three blocks to find any sort of colmado” (75). Occasionally complete sentences are in Spanish, for example, when Aurora says, “You know me. Yo ando más que un perro” (49) appearing in the midst of standard English sentences.² While the conflating of street slang with Spanish may confuse the reader, it accurately reflects the taxing experience of new immigrants struggling to make sense of new phenomena in the United States and engages the reality of the polylingualism of “linguistic Third World zones” which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari espouse in “minor” literature.

In his stories, Díaz does not privilege any one of these discourses over another. With no “superior” language dominating over others, this collage of codes results in a disjointed fractured narrative. It includes cultural references in the New Jersey neighborhood vernacular of crack dealers and Spanish idioms. In his language usage and settings, Díaz does not lead the reader easily through the plot by explaining and quickly clearing away incomprehensible notions to the American reader to produce another “majority” point of view. Rather, Díaz requires readers to perform inductive dexterous inference work or, at worst, guessing, by piecing together unfamiliar foreign words, phrases or notions. The reader must attempt to decipher meaning from the unfamiliar discourse, the very sort of activity

newly-arrived immigrants regularly undertake in their new American environment. By narrating in this modernist manner, Díaz forces the reader to proactively process the narrative construction by disturbing linear expectations. This construction is then internalized by the reader, replicating the confusing discourse experienced by immigrants. Díaz's loose and fragmented narrative does not perceptibly lead the reader through his plot in a linear way.

3 Machismo in the New Jersey Barrio in "Aurora"

An access of masculinity, machismo is represented in Latino literature frequently and includes the centrality of sexual conquests, violence directed at weaker males and discourse masked in fearlessness. In "Aurora" these manifestations of the "macho" are lucidly depicted. To treat their girlfriends, tough neighborhood teens deal in drugs, and the narrator reveals the multiplicity of dangers. The machismo culture on display is rough with violence, sex and salacious scenes accompanying depictions of the consumption of narcotics that fulfills the addictive physical needs of the multitude of Dominican-born characters. "Aurora" is narrated in the first person: a petty drug – the narrator is named "Lucero" – accompanies his black Dominican drug-dealing partner, "Cut," and, with streetwise business acumen, pursues clients seeking to buy drugs while evading police and the menacing rival drug gangsters wishing to expand their turf. The ebullient style of Lucero narrating how he deals drugs for long hours in schools is effective and realistic, and usually his customers speak Spanish. Although "easy money" is made, Lucero feels the growing competition: "We're still making mad paper but it's harder now" (51).

In his natural form of blatant male chauvinism Lucero sleeps with other girls, for instance a wealthy college basketball player "with her own car, who came over right after her games, in her uniform" (52). She has sex with him whenever she was angry because of a bad basketball game. Nevertheless, Lucero is full of rancor, derogates and violently attacks any male interested in Aurora such as the much smaller and weaker "páto" Harry.

Aurora served six months in juvenile detention. During her incarceration the couple infrequently corresponded. The narrator does not tell the story chronologically but includes flashbacks to the time when they were "tighter" and saw each other more frequently and also flashes back to the moments when he received a few letters when she was incarcerated. When Aurora is released from prison, she has been "clean" from drugs for months but immediately returns to her habit.

Upon spotting Lucero, she calls out "Hey macho" and gets his attention. She dresses attractively but has lost weight while in "juvie" – to him she appears like a twelve year old girl, she is so emaciated. Moreover, her body shakes because of withdrawal symptoms and the effects of immediately returning to her inveterate drug abuse. Nevertheless, she wants a dress "that'll make my ass look good" (60). His drug-dealing partner Cut warns him about Aurora: "I'm surprised the AIDS ain't bit off your dick yet, he says. I'm immune, I tell him" (51). When they make love, he worries about her appearance. "She had mouth-sized bruises on her neck. Don't worry about them. They ain't contagious" (64). Lucero remains worried: the marks come either from another man or a contagious disease.

In "Aurora" the narrator's fear of authorities echoes the perennial fear of the police state in Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic referred to in other stories in *Drown*.

Drug dealers experience a similar fear of American police. In the absurdity of his situation, the petulant Lucero projects the brutality he knows from the Dominican authorities while waiting for Aurora outside a building. He sees an old man he simply does not like and stalks him, “an abuelo type, the sort who yells at you for spitting on his sidewalk” and Lucero viciously attacks him: “I grind down hard but he doesn’t make a sound” (62). He has an easy time torturing the old man, breaking his ankle. As Sandín argues regarding a different Díaz story, social crisis and a “lack of differentiation caused by mimetic rivalries” is resolved by choosing a scapegoat (Sandín 16). Lucero’s attack on this old man and Aurora’s younger friend Harry constitute violent assaults against weak vulnerable Latinos who are to be exploited and castigated essentially because of their weakness.

Compelled to wear a mask of machismo (toughness on the streets and promiscuity with women), Lucero succeeds as a dealer and receives the respect of his community. As one scholar points out:

The narrative often emphasizes the masks these characters must assume and maintain, to the point that maintaining the mask assumes the centrality of life and experience – a protection against life and living. (Paravisini-Gebert 170)

A fundamental means of survival among numerous rivals, the mask of toughness pervades many characters in the short story collection. Lucero alone occasionally reveals himself as a man of occasional sensitivity as it regards his junkie girlfriend. He really loves Aurora, whom he affectionately calls “nena” (even though he physically abuses her) and he admires her artistic paintings (Díaz 54). At the same time, there remains, as Paravisini-Gebert points out, the “paralysis of affect” in most characters who are “damaged and under siege” (169). Lucero himself has seen so much abysmal violence, poverty and overdosed junkies among young kids as well as adults that nothing fazes him any more, and he may become a menacing personality towards others without cause.

Still, he somehow remains sensitive to the experience and personality of Aurora who also dons a mask of her own. He valorizes her natural artistic abilities when praising paintings she makes on the walls inside abandoned buildings where they have had sex. When he gets lonely, he craves her and impetuously seeks her out at the Hacienda where all the other junkies hang out. At the end of the story Lucero expresses (only to himself) a longing for the illusionary life living with Aurora as his wife but without pernicious life of crime, “like we were normal people”; Aurora is likewise

[...] telling me all the good things we’d do [...] She looked at her drawings. I made up this whole new life in there. You should have seen it. The two of us had kids, a big blue house, hobbies, the whole fucking thing. (65)

Lucero attempts to express his desires but fails because he cannot let down his own mask, even though Aurora reveals through drawings her own desire to live elsewhere and have a family with him. Yet to Aurora he dissembles feelings of love and will not allow any expression of his own similar desires. He cannot adequately explain his feelings for her because showing loving feeling is an anomaly in his machismo subculture: he has never shown such feelings for anything or anyone in his life. He also knows that Aurora hardly

fits the image of a family matriarch in a traditional Hispanic sense. She invites him to her mother's wedding, but Lucero wonders about the image of the two of them together: "Why can't I see us there? Her smoking in the bathroom and me dealing to the groom. I don't know about that" (60). He is laughed at when he tries to reveal to his drug-dealing partner Cut his deep feelings for Aurora:

If I had half a brain I would have done what Cut told me to do. Dump her sorry ass. When I told him we were in love he laughed. I'm the King of Bullshit, he said, and you just hit me with some, my friend. (64)

Díaz places Lucero's thoughts of abandoning her immediately next to his confession of having fallen in love with her. The pattern of "Aurora," like many of Díaz's stories, is one of qualification or potential cancellation of what has earlier been claimed by the unreliable narrator of the story, a process of working backward from the accepted or assumed knowledge (machismo as the social norm and love as "bullshit" etc.) towards contradiction and uncertainty. Cut sardonically impugns Lucero's attempt to transcend societal expectations of Dominican machismo which forbids men from feelings like "falling in love." Cut treats Lucero's confession of love to one girl as frivolous rather than acknowledging how Lucero sees it, as an unconscious act of "stepping over the line" by overcoming his cultural "baggage". Non-conformity becomes a source of male anxiety, and the consequences of a true romance far outweigh the benefits. Losing face with Cut and the rest of his drug-dealing associates would moreover be dangerous. Lucero henceforth maintains this Hispanic form of the Du Boisian double consciousness –

this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity... [t]his twoness; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 5)

In Lucero's case, it is his form of the veil: an interior sensitivity and the outwardly-directed mask of machismo.

As Paravisini-Gebert remarks, the story "can be read as variations on the theme of masking and unmasking [...] the characters seek security in poses" (169–170). Yet the realistically portrayed contradictory nature of machismo culture never fully transcends violence through love in this pair's relationship, and leaves some critics dismayed and unsatisfied: "Díaz's most consistent attempt at portraying love and connection, "Aurora," the story of a small-town drug dealer whose passion for an elusive young addict deteriorates into violence, works only partially" (Paravisini-Gebert 170). This story, I would argue in contrast, does not deteriorate into violence, but simply carries on with violence and never escapes or transcends it. Lucero even refers to his early acts of violence with some nostalgia. Violence precedes the narrative, continues throughout the narrative and remains an unending fact of life. What develops in spite of violence, and quite unexpectedly, is love. His love and passion within the machismo culture is linked with violence which has its own erotic manifestations, and to impugn Díaz for audaciously describing this feature of their relationship is a misreading of his very point. There is no congenial,

ecumenical love in Lucero's world. The mask of machismo (including multiple sexual relationships, associated with Hispanic male virility) is never eliminated or replaced by love, for machismo remains Lucero's only protection in the concatenation of adventures within this dangerous environment and imperious machismo must be maintained. Díaz shows a complexity of contradictory emotions throughout the stories in *Drown* and these stories have been undervalued in spite of the initial enthusiasm shown among most critics at its publication.

At the end Lucero is again violent with Aurora, and so Díaz's narrator Lucero is not one readers will easily sympathize with. He is not cognizant of the mask he wears, nor does he show any fear of the unmasking of his streetwise ways. Why Aurora accepts the violence is best answered by the salient nature of machismo culture and Lucero's form of double consciousness. As Marjorie Garber explains, the object of desire remains potent only if veiled and therefore inaccessible (Garber 113). Yet his character is fleshed out and, except for the violence, Lucero explains his specific motives.

Unlike other stories by Díaz, "Aurora" does not end in death or conclusive tragedy, but little hope pervades when neither character displays fealty. The ending ambiguously leads one to imagine a continuation of the drug dealing and abuse (and possibly contraction of AIDS), though there may be a minute possibility of this couple changing their habits and pursuing their relationship in a way transcending their abusive hyper-masculine behavior. No syncretism is permitted at the end for Lucero. While the character names chosen by Díaz may signify hopeful possibilities (Aurora means "sunrise" or "dawn" while Lucero means "bright star"), the transnational upbringing inspiring the fragmented discourse and modernist narrative technique employed by Díaz inspires only a few instances anti-macho behavior but a stronger sense of fatalism, resulting in instances of what one critic views as "repetitive imagery and somewhat stultifying crudeness" (Paravisini-Gebert 170). There is a substantial benefit to analyzing the stories in *Drown* that serves as a genesis point to the further developed minor writing in Díaz's celebrated *Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao*.

4 Post-Colonial Dominican Childhood in "Aguantando"

Set in the Dominican Republic, this story's protagonist (as well as Díaz's *The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao*) is named "Yunior de las Casas." His impoverished youth, without the presence a father or a loving mother, appears as a direct consequence of the April, 1965, American invasion of the Dominican Republic. "Aguantando" essentially describes the deterioration of a mother-son relationship. Yunior as such embodies a wretched product of post-colonialism. Like Díaz himself, Yunior has an older brother named "Rafa," a mother named "Virtudes" and a half-brother Ramón. A weakling grandfather cannot make up for the absence of a strong father-figure.

Injured during the America military "intervention," "Mami had been pregnant with my first never-born brother" (Díaz 69) and suffered "across her stomach and back the scars from the rocket attack she'd survived in 1965" (71). While the lost baby and scars are direct physical suffering of that invasion, the psychological damage became evident only after the apparent loss of her husband. Yunior's father, Ramón de las Casas, left the Dominican Republic for "Nueva York" just as Díaz's father had done, promising but failing to send money or bring their children to the U.S. for years. Instead, his father married

a U.S. citizen in order to become legal (thereby committing polygamy). As Kevane points out, gender roles "follow the typical expectations for men and women in a patriarchal system, the male macho and the submissive Latina [...] Yunior's father is no exception to the cultural stereotypes of machismo" (Kevane 82). He briefly visits the Dominican Republic with his new wife but does not come inside the house and visit his first family. In the meantime, these Dominican children lived in a rat-infested home with virtually no income: "when the last colored bill flew out of Mami's purse, she packed us off to our relatives" (74). As a response, her teenage son Yunior violently refuses to leave his home and his mother in these difficult financial times: "Intuitively, I knew how easily distances could become permanent and harden" (75).

With Vertudes's husband absent, many "fulanos [...] were drawn to her. From my perch I'd watched more than one of these Porfirio Rubirosas say, See you tomorrow" (73). In spite of years without a husband, Vertudes de la Casas loyally waits. Anticipating abandonment when she receives a letter from her estranged husband after some years, again making false promises, Yunior's mother suffers a breakdown, apparently after learning that her husband had married an American citizen.

I remember the heaviness of that month, thicker than almost anything. When Abuelo tried to reach our father at the phone numbers he'd left none of the men who'd lived with him knew anything about where he had gone. It didn't help matters that me and Rafa kept asking her when we were leaving for the States, when Papi was coming. (83)

After this latest heartbreak, "she did not call me her Prieto or bring me chocolates from her work" (Díaz 1996: 84). The usual qualities of a Latina matriarch end. She disappears for weeks without a trace, leaving the children with their blind maternal grandfather: "She's gone, he said. So cry all you want, madcriado" (84). A shell of a man, Abuelo is no replacement for the masculinity of Yunior's father, an idolized, strong, authority-figure in photographs depicting him in the military uniform of the Guardia.

After returning, Vertudes – recovered from her breakdown as well as her illusions – rejects her sons and grows physically violent with Yunior for the first time. Aware of the cause of the breakdown and deterioration of family relationships, Yunior has poignant fantasies of his father coming to visit them, a dream hopelessly disconnected from reality, an escape from thinking about the daily humiliating poverty: "He'd have gold on his fingers, cologne on his neck, a silk shirt, good leather shoes. The whole barrio would come out to greet him" (87).

In many other stories in the *Drown* story collection, there are qualifications and even cancellations of the Dominican experience, showing the unreliability of the narrative requiring readers to undertake a process of working backward, to move along from accepted truth and assumed knowledge towards contradiction and uncertainty. Díaz does not seem to pursue displacement of one version of events by another, as an ideology promises, for that, to again employ Deleuze and Guattari's notions, is simply to produce another "majority" point of view, another structure of power and law. In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari state that "minor" literatures should not aspire to "assume a major function in language" for this aspiration would concede their radical status to the desire for

“power and law.” Díaz leaves the conflicts in his stories “Aurora” and “Aguantando” (as well as other stories in *Drown*) unresolved, ambiguous and provisional, thereby seeking out the interrogative in the human economy neglected by the “major” cultural narratives. His narrative style along with his commingling of two languages, chiasmic structure as well as the phantasmagoria of form and sensation, all reflect the post-colonial immigrant perspectives in which assimilation and Latino machismo depict fatherless males embodying aspects of the oppressed and the oppressors alike.

Notes

¹ Payday is a financial service located in U.S. low-income neighborhoods where hourly wage earners write a pre-dated check for the amount that they are to be paid and get 15 percent less in cash immediately. When their paycheck comes in a week or two later, this predatory financial service makes a quick killing from the ignorant working poor.

² Literally *Yo ando más que un perro* means “I walk more than a dog” but idiomatically, “I’m always on the move.”

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