

## INTRODUCTION

Junot Díaz has become representative of a younger generation of authors that has produced significant literary fiction in the United States in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is a group whose writings, for Ramón Saldívar, marks “the inauguration of a new stage in the history of the novel by twenty-first-century US ethnic writers.”<sup>1</sup> Díaz has become an influential voice even among other notable writers such as Jonathan Lethem, Colson Whitehead, Karen Tei Yamashita, Sheshu Foster, Charles Yu, Marlon James, Edwidge Danticat, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Gary Shteyngart, to name but a few. He is the first Dominican American and only the second Latino ever to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction: Oscar Hijuelos (Cuban American) won in 1992 for *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. In short, Junot Díaz is currently recognized as one of the most prominent living Latino/a authors in the United States. With two story collections, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, and a couple of uncollected short stories to his credit, Díaz’s fiction has proven to be a pivotal development not only for Latino/a writings but, perhaps more importantly, for American fiction in general.

Born on December 31, 1968, in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, Díaz immigrated to the United States in 1975, when he was six years old. He grew up in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and would

receive his BA from Rutgers University in New Brunswick in 1992 and his MFA from Cornell University in 1995. His first book of stories, *Drown* (1996), would effectively herald him as a new talent in American literature. A decade later his follow-up, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), would earn him career-changing awards and launch Díaz as a major figure in American literature and culture. His second short story collection, *This Is How You Lose Her*, published in 2012, was a finalist for the National Book Award. Díaz would also become a creative writing professor, first at Syracuse University and then at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His fiction has won him numerous prestigious awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship; the Eugene McDermott Award; the Lila Wallace–Reader’s Digest Writers’ Award; the PEN/Malamud Award (2002); a National Endowment for the Arts grant (2003); the John Sargent, Sr. First Novel Prize; the National Book Critics Circle Award (2007); a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” (2012); and the *Sunday Times* EFG Private Bank Short Story Award (2013).

Díaz’s turn to writing evolved over several years: “I had plans to be a teacher when I was in college, but my most secret desire . . . was really to be a writer. But I was so afraid to admit it because I thought the dreams would be smashed or I would be cheated yet again of another thing that I cared about. I think it grew so secretively.”<sup>2</sup> 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. That’s how I felt [publishing “Ysrael”], like I grabbed a branch.”<sup>3</sup>

In *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, shorter eighth edition, volume two, published in 2013, the editors include for the first time a story by Díaz, “Drown.” As professors view the publisher

W. W. Norton as one of the arbiters of the literature that appears in their university classrooms, Díaz's inclusion is an important and notable decision. Perhaps less a surprise is Díaz's presence in *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2011), edited by Ilan Stavans. As this essential anthology notes, "Junot Díaz was the first Dominican American man to write and publish a book-length work of fiction in English."<sup>4</sup> Many of Díaz's stories continue to appear in anthologies—for example, *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*, second edition; *The Art of the Story: An International Anthology of Contemporary Short Stories*; and several editions of *The Best American Short Stories*, most recently in the 2013 edition, edited by Elizabeth Strout. As editors select his stories for inclusion in more and more anthologies, his importance in considering and reevaluating conceptions of American fiction increases all the more.

Díaz's fiction has helped reset how audiences think of fiction by and about Latinos. The literary and scholarly communities have been quick to recognize Díaz's artistry. With every Díaz publication that is shortlisted and with every prize committee on which Díaz is asked to sit (such as being one of the twenty jurors for the Pulitzer Prize in 2008, the first Latino juror in the Pulitzer Prize's history), Díaz's sway in American literature grows.

This volume in the Latino and Latin American Profiles series is an opening effort to change the lack of sustained critical engagement with the entirety of Díaz's fiction. My orienting compass originates from the question of why Díaz's fiction has managed to attain such notoriety despite his use of relatively quotidian content. The substance of Díaz's stories appears unremarkable in Latino/a fiction: cheating lovers, immigration to what is believed to be a land of opportunity, escape from oppressive dictators, assimilation into white America, the clash of languages, and more. And yet Díaz can use the elements of a Latino/a narrative, say, and, through creative artistry and technique, render stories about and by Latinos in new, unexpected ways.

Indeed, it is the artful *mezcla*, or mix, of narrative design and Latino culture that makes Díaz's fiction so potent, as well as his ability to "change our perspective on the Americas by offering a narrative from a 'periphery' which becomes the center."<sup>5</sup> At the level of storytelling convention, Díaz's is often guided by the principle of rule breaking in creating his fiction.

This is not to say that his stories are amorphous or somehow lack a purposeful storyworld design. On the contrary, Díaz has stated that his ability to publish quickly is blunted by his careful and deliberate approach to writing:

I'm a slow writer. Which is bad enough but given that I'm in a world where it's considered abnormal if a writer *doesn't* produce a book every year or two—it makes me look even worse. Ultimately [*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*] wouldn't have it any other way. This book wanted x number of years out of my life. Perhaps I could have written a book in a shorter time but it wouldn't have been this book and this was the book I wanted to write. Other reasons? I'm a crazy perfectionist. I suffer from crippling bouts of depression. I write two score pages for every one I keep.<sup>6</sup>

When Díaz deploys his narrator of choice, Yunior de Las Casas, there is an apparent free-flowing nature to his fiction that seems like someone speaking to an interlocutor. But there is also precision in Díaz's creation of story as well. His stories often rely on the sort of precise timing one finds in a stand-up comedy routine, a skill evinced by many authors writing in the early twenty-first century such as Gary Shteyngart and Colson Whitehead, whose works of fiction are also examples of the resplendent and exquisite timing of humor in recent ethnic American fiction. In short, this book pays critical attention to Díaz's fiction with the aim of illuminating its purposeful storyworld designs (formal features), its engagement with audiences (on emotional and cognitive levels), and contexts within American culture (broadly defined).

One final caveat before delving into Díaz's carefully crafted storyworlds. Scholars of Latino/a literature often approach their subject by concentrating on the ideopolitical valences that bear out in such writings. Indeed, this critical stance is a valuable contribution to our understanding of what we call Latino/a literature and the authors who belong to that highly diverse group identified as Latinos. Latino/a literature often apprises readers regarding matters of Latino/a culture—from family dynamics, to religious practices, to the significance of particular foods, to political issues of immigration, to the “whitening” of Latinos in the United States—even if that is not its overt agenda. However, the narrative design of Latino/a fiction works as a delivery system for these important ideopolitical matters. Thus, this book seeks to give equal consideration to form and design as a means of better understanding the cultural and thematic concerns that resonate within Díaz's fiction. The thematics of his fiction are not novel; rather, it is the way in which he structures his storyworlds that elevates Díaz's fiction. It seems that what makes Junot Díaz “Junot Díaz” is less a matter of what issues he deals with and more a matter of how he articulates the design of his respective storyworlds. Indeed, readers are challenged, and at times are confronted, by narrative issues that arise precisely as a result of creative decisions Díaz makes. Rather than consider the elements of narrative in his fiction as secondary to Díaz's artistry, this book adopts the position that, in the case of Díaz's fiction in particular, it is valuable to give equitable consideration to formal matters of design in a scholarly examination of his work as a means of elucidating the thematic content.

#### THE CHANGING LATINO DEMOGRAPHIC

Junot Díaz belongs to a group of Latino/a writers whose dates and places of birth distinguish them from earlier groundbreaking authors in the field. This younger group of writers includes Daniel Alarcón, Salvador Plascencia, Reyna Grande, Loida Maritza Pérez, and others who were both born around or after the US Civil Rights Movement

and outside of the United States. Unlike Latinos who were writing of the experience of a second- or third-generation Latino or Latina during a national push for civil rights—writers such as Rudolfo Anaya and Oscar “Zeta” Acosta in the early 1970s and Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros in the 1980s—Díaz is an immigrant from the Dominican Republic who brings with him a global, geopolitical sensibility to his craft. His transnational worldview is a critical detail to understanding his fiction, one that I will explore in depth below but will preview briefly here. Works of the so-called Chicano Renaissance often showcase a storyworld that unfolds in a precise geographic location and concentrates on issues of cultural tradition, language, and social hegemony. Even authors such as Julia Alvarez, Achy Obejas, and Cristina García—authors who, like Díaz, were born outside of the United States and emigrated as young children—craft narratives that penetrate matters of history and cultural identity by unifying the American experience with the Latin American experience. They reveal a Latino/a sensibility intimately connected with the fatherlands and motherlands of their past, what José David Saldivar identifies as “trans-Americanity.”<sup>7</sup>

In short, the Latino/a community of today is not the homogenized group of brown people envisioned by the Eisenhower-era “Operation Wetback.” The rapid expansion of the Latino population in border states such as Texas, California, and Arizona as well as in the midwestern states of Michigan, Nebraska, and Ohio and the southern states of Alabama and North Carolina suggests a community that is growing not simply in number but in diversity as well. The *guatemaltecos* of LA are meeting the Cuban Americans of Miami and the Dominicans of Paterson, New Jersey, in the heartland of America. Just as the Latino/a demographic demonstrates the varied nature of this expansion of people and culture, the literature now being produced by this younger generation of Latinos further underscores the plurality of Latino/a experience. What is more, Latino/a authors themselves are pushing against simple categorizations of their work

by diversifying the kinds of narratives they write and the structures their stories take. Coupled with a readership that is receptive to these recent Latino/a stories as never before, the expansion of Latino/a literature is poised to mirror the increase of Latinos themselves.

Unlike the majority of Latino/a writers who were either self-taught or learned to write in other disciplines such as law (Oscar “Zeta” Acosta), education (Tomás Rivera), or folkloric studies (Américo Paredes), Díaz is the product of the MFA system of writing in the United States. His culminating project in the MFA program at Cornell University would ultimately become his pathbreaking collection of stories, *Drown*. Although this is now a conventional route writers take to becoming published authors, such a path to publication is relatively recent among Latino/a writers. One early notable Latino/a writer to rise through the MFA system is Sandra Cisneros, who received her MFA from the University of Iowa in 1978. But take stock of Latino/a authors since 1978 and you will find relatively few Latinos that have gone the route of the MFA. I take particular note of this issue because, for many American writers who end up as career authors, the MFA is the de facto path for becoming this sort of writer. For Latinos, the MFA has only recently become such a viable option. Díaz himself has noted the nearly accidental manner in which he entered the MFA program at Cornell, how he applied “blindly and not very widely” to “six programs, and out of some blind pocket of luck that the Universe reserves for total fools I got into one: Cornell.”<sup>8</sup> Though his talent is not accidental, his taking the writing path via an MFA is an outlier in more ways than one.

Despite what such an opportunity might indicate to the layperson, Díaz’s time in the MFA program at Cornell was not the sort of creative flowering writing workshops are often imagined to be. Díaz is highly, severely critical of his experience at Cornell, which he now recounts as exalting white male experience as a default narrative setting, where it was unproblematic for a white writer to write of diverse characters. Meanwhile, writers of color were discouraged

from creating distinct worlds in their writing. Díaz recalls with a tone of regret how several excellent writers of color ultimately left the program because of the hostility they faced. He laments one particular writer whom he identifies as “Athena” who had had enough and left the program.<sup>9</sup> Her writing has left an indelible mark on his memory.

Such criticisms of MFA programs by writers of color—and Latino/a writers especially, is not new. For years Sandra Cisneros, the prizewinning author of *The House on Mango Street*, *Woman Hollering Creek*, and *Caramelo* has lambasted the Iowa Writers’ Workshop for many of the same reasons Díaz excoriates his experience at Cornell. For Cisneros, not only were the students pressured to consider the white American experience as the default, normal position, her identity status as a Chicana with empowered notions of feminism were unwelcome in her program. Regarding the prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she states, “It wasn’t so prestigious to me. It was rather horrible. I like to tell people that I’m a writer despite the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop. It taught me what I didn’t want to be as a writer and how I didn’t want to teach.” When the interviewer says, “It sounds like you absolutely hated it,” Cisneros responds, “Well, that’s putting it mildly, yes.”<sup>10</sup> Díaz has expressed a similar view regarding his MFA experience.

Indeed, one criticism of the MFA system of writing is that it homogenizes writers too stringently, that it doesn’t leave enough room for conceiving of and nurturing a type of writing that lies outside of that *New Yorker* style of narrative. In Díaz’s case, he blends the highbrow aspirations of “literature” with so-called lowbrow forms of popular culture such as comic books and the rhythmic yet gritty vernacular of the inner city. Unlike those Chicano/a writers who have danced with folklore, mysticism, and magical realism for decades, Díaz arises nearly *ex nihilo* as a Latino/a writer. That is to say, one is more apt to find antecedents for his style of fiction in the works of David Foster Wallace or Michael Chabon than of Rudolfo Anaya or even fellow Pulitzer Prize-winner Oscar Hijuelos. This point is most



easily grasped when considering Díaz's ideal audience—an audience that understands the dynamics of a Dominican family as quickly as it understands the science fictions of Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, and Gene Wolfe.

That is not to say that Díaz does not owe a literary debt of gratitude to Latino/a writers who have come before him. For example, he has on several occasions praised Cisneros, whose works he came to know during his college years.<sup>11</sup> But in addition to Cisneros, Díaz also acknowledges how the works of Leslie Marmon Silko, and especially those of Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler, proved to be a monumental influence on him and his work. These profound works not only were evidence of the technical craft of literature but were also, for Díaz, proof positive that writers of color could create influential works, and that those works could hold sway over a younger generation of writers. Call it the literary version of paying it forward. His stories have already made a lasting impact on Latino/a literature as well as American literature. Perhaps most importantly, however, his works have managed to bridge the chasm between Latino/a culture and the American pop cultural imagination.

At least two defining traits in Díaz's fiction distinguish it from other exemplars of Latino/a literature. The first is his use of language. Code-switching and the problems inherent in its use in fiction have long been a part of world literature, and, in this case, Latino/a literature. For many early writers of Latino/a heritage, Spanish was often the language of the home, of familial interaction. Spanish, as spoken in the homes of Hispanic American families, was and continues to be a living thing. It is quite often slangy and colloquial—including certain words not to be found in Spanish dictionaries overseen by the Real Academia Español, the organization that declares official Spanish words. On the contrary, Spanish in the United States has taken on a life of its own, as one would expect from living languages. And with Spanish speakers working and living in a predominantly English-speaking culture in America, we also see “Spanglish,” which

Ilan Stavans has written about extensively. He provides a pithy but fruitful definition for this blending of the two languages that indicates a fusion of culture: "*Spanglish*, n. The verbal encounter between Anglo and Hispano civilizations."<sup>12</sup> For Díaz, his refusal to designate the Spanish words in his fiction as somehow different via italics or quotation marks is a political decision: "Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world inside my head. So why treat it like one? Why 'other' it? Why denormalize it? . . . I want 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."<sup>13</sup>

Díaz is certainly not the first to code-switch or use many linguistic codes alternately in his fiction. Even in what is often called the first Latino/a novel, *Pocho*, by José Antonio Villarreal, published in 1959, there is a great deal of code-switching and alternating use of the English and Spanish languages. However, *Pocho* and many other code-switching narratives like it almost always use Spanish with an English-only reader in mind. That is to say, whenever an author uses Spanish, there follows an immediate translation into English. In the case of *Pocho*, Villarreal translates Spanish spoken by the characters in an English that, in its attempts to be faithful to the source, comes across as stilted and awkward to an English-language reader. Or, as in Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets*, sometimes a glossary is appended to the narrative proper. In short, Díaz's use of Spanish is not in and of itself a novel innovation. Rather, his decision to use Spanish without much consideration for a reader that does not understand Spanish is key. Instead of providing a glossary or translating the Spanish he uses, Díaz allows the Spanish to stand for itself. As Rune Graulund asserts, "Díaz implements a politics of exclusion [in *Oscar Wao*], actively forcing his readers to accept that parts of his text will likely remain indecipherable to them."<sup>14</sup> To be sure, a reader can correctly deduce a lot of the Spanish by using contextual clues,

but not all of it, creating a potentially volatile relationship between reader and text.

The second defining trait is related to the first. Díaz brings together Latino/a culture, and specifically Dominican American culture, with many aspects of popular culture. Because speculative fiction, film, and television—science fiction, fantasy, and superhero comics—so profoundly influenced him as they have many other American authors such as Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem, it is hardly a wonder that such references and allusions appear within Díaz's fiction. But these allusions, often dropped in without citation or explanation, can create a distancing effect for the reader similar to that which is caused by Spanish that may not be understood.

Taken together, these defining traits, as I have called them, have several important implications for Latino/a literature. To begin with, it shows what many Latino/a authors have argued all along; that is, that readers, and, in this case, *willing* readers, will find that a sprinkling of untranslated Spanish will not hinder them. Historically, authors make concessions to publishers no matter their heritage or identity. But Latino/a writers have often been forced to make many more concessions in their writings, and those concessions often have to do with language and how writers use it. The success of Díaz's writings is proof that readers are far more capable than many publishers give them credit for. It is also evidence of a burgeoning audience that is hungry for sophisticated fiction by and about Latinos.

In addition, because Díaz's fiction weaves the gritty realism of urban Latinidad together with the fantastical worldviews of speculative fiction, it has the effect of uncoupling Latino/a culture from the powerful influence of the stereotype. As William Anthony Nericcio has shown, the appropriation of the Mexican stereotype in America—to sell tacos (Taco Bell), to entertain children (*Looney Tunes's* Speedy Gonzales), to entice and enthrall audiences (e.g., Rita Hayworth, Mexican *bandidos*, etc.)—continues with little abatement.

Such stereotypes are so powerful and damaging because they become entrenched in the psyche of mainstream America.<sup>15</sup> So, when Díaz opens his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* with an epigraph quoting Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *The Fantastic Four* comic book, it breaks new ground for where Latino/a literature can go. It also fights the simplistic conceptions that pervade discussions of Latinos in the United States as well. As Stavans states in *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* regarding *Oscar Wao*, "Díaz's vision represents a break not only from the traditional acculturation story, but also from the ethnic novel. . . . Díaz reflects on the way popular culture defines youth in the United States."<sup>16</sup> In short, Díaz's rise as a prominent literary figure in America is indicative of and coincides with the changing Latino/a demographic in the United States. In what follows, I examine Díaz's fiction within the three books he has published to date, in the order of their publication, as well as some of his selected uncollected fiction and nonfiction.