José David Saldivar discusses “Junot Díaz: A Symposium”

Could you describe the literary and cultural significance of Junot Díaz?

José David Saldivar: As I said in my welcoming comments, when Junot Díaz’s novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao was published in 2007, American literature changed forever.

Jennifer Harford Vargas: This was a process one could see happening with his first book. For example, with his first book of short fiction, Drown, published in 1997, he refused to italicize Spanish in the text; by placing English and Spanish on equal linguistic registers he negated the hierarchy of power in the United States that marginalizes Spanish and Spanish speakers. With his first novel, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, he brilliantly interwove urban vernaculars with references to science fiction, fantasy, comic books, role playing games, and Caribbean cultural theory. He transculturated or strategically combined Anglo-American and Latino/Latin American discourses such that each one enriched the other. Having won the most prestigious of U.S. literary prizes, the Pulitzer Prize, been frequently published in The New Yorker and The Boston Review, and countless interviews and readings, Díaz has established himself as a prominent Latino public intellectual. While he has been lauded by the literary establishment and academics, he has also been widely read in our barrios and by fans of genre fiction, giving him the broadest and most diverse reading audience of any Latina/o creative writer. We wanted to use the conference to bring together a wide range of scholars working in Latina/o, Caribbean, Latin America, and U.S. studies to discuss his work and develop a common critical vocabulary for analyzing Díaz’s significance for our various field imaginaries. The paradigm of a symposium focused on a single author has been widely used for Anglo American and European writers, but with the exception of Gloria Anzaldúa, it has not been used...

José David Saldivar, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and Monica Hanna discuss Junot Díaz: A Symposium.


The Symposium concluded with the CCSRE Kieve Distinguished Address given by Junot Díaz.

Recently José David Saldivar and his Symposium Co-Organizers, Professor Jennifer Harford Vargas (Bryn Mawr) and Professor Monica Hanna (California State University, Fullerton) responded to questions about the importance of Díaz’s work and the significance of the Stanford Symposium.

Why were you inspired to organize this symposium?

José David Saldivar: Professors Jennifer Harford Vargas, Monica Hanna, and I had all published some of the first articles in major literary journals on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, (2007), by Díaz, and after discussing our work with each other we simultaneously had the idea to organize a symposium on Junot’s work and his influence on post-contemporary American literature and culture. We were acutely cognizant of the fact that we were organizing the first major international discussion on this important writer’s body of work.
for Latina/o writers. Yet there is so much to be gained when you bring scholars in conversion around a single author, especially one who is currently reshaping the very field of American letters in the hemispheric sense of American. Our symposium then was both a form of canon formation and a means of generating a scholarly community.

What are some thoughts, comments and themes that came out of the roundtable discussions?

José David Saldívar. Some of the recurrent themes were:

- The place of Díaz’s fiction in 21st century American literatures and cultures.
- The global forces animating his literary texts, interviews, and journalistic reportages on the Dominican Republic and Haiti.
- The continued and perhaps resurgent significance of race, Latinidad, Spanglish, gender, sexuality, ability, and poverty, as analytic and experiential categories in his fiction and essays.
- The impact of JRR Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings on Díaz’s humanistic imagination.
- Politics as an aesthetic practice.
- How decolonial love and structures of feeling are thematized in literary works by US writers of color.

Jennifer Harford Vargas. The reason we decided to move away from the traditional format of a conference with panel presentations and instead have a symposium with roundtables was so that we could foster conversation and debate and really work together to produce knowledge. Junot himself became a co-collaborator in that process as he attended every part of the symposium and made rich contributions to our discussions by sharing insights into his creative choices and his intellectual and theoretical influences. We had an incredibly diverse set of discussions, including: the role of humor and jokes in his work, the figures of the ghetto nerd and the Dominican writer as well as their artistic developments, his hemispheric representations of Latinidad especially under the traumas of (neo) colonization, dictatorship, and diaspora; how his work interrogates heteropatriarchy and machismo and mobilizes the theoretical insights of women of color; how his work models empathy and imagines decolonial love; the power of aesthetics as a political act; and Díaz’s own personal activist and social justice work. We had immense gratitude for being able to think deeply with each other over the two very rich days.

What was the theme of Díaz’s CCSRE Kieve lecture? Can you comment on some of his most poignant observations?

José David Saldívar. In the first part of his talk, Junot Díaz spoke passionately about the pervasive force of race in his fiction, Drown, and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. He then moved away from the podium and in an often intensely funny, erudite, poetic, lyrical, and humane way, he talked about how JRR Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings was fundamentally about race. This is why the main antagonist of the novel, Dark Lord Sauron, had created the one ring to rule the other rings of power as the ultimate weapon in his campaign to conquer and rule all of the Middle Earth. Díaz then discussed how the hobbits, dwarfs, and elves were racialized by Tolkien in order to defeat the Dark Lord in power. Junot Díaz remained very accessible in the last part of his talk, when he answered questions primarily from the undergraduates in the audience about how race was so central to his reading of Tolkien’s work. He concluded with remarkable attention and focus on his audience, the undergraduates who had come to see this amazing contemporary writer, whose fiction many had read as entering freshmen four years earlier. By using a book known to almost all of the undergraduates in the standing-room only audience, he was able to engage and discuss difficult issues with them, issues that are present in our society today: race, power, and violence.

Finally, Junot Díaz revealed himself to be an expert in the ways that Tolkien’s work displays the issues of philology, myth, religion, and the deadly effects of industrialization on our planet. He has also been widely read in our barrios and by fans of genre fiction, giving him the broadest and most diverse reading audience of any Latina/o creative writer.

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How does Díaz’s literature contribute to bearing witness to contemporary issues of migration, borderlands and trans-Americanity?

Monica Hanna: Díaz writes Diasporic border-crossing texts. His work crosses borders between languages, genres, traditions, regions, and nations. This is one of the reasons that Díaz’s works are read so widely, taught in so many disciplines, and studied through such a wide range of theoretical lenses. Along with a trans-American genealogy, Díaz’s work embraces a wide-ranging Afro-Caribbean identity (not exclusively Afro-Latino or pan-Latino identity and reference points), which invokes Caribbean intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire, Fernando Ortiz, and Derek Walcott. While his work is often firmly located in US cities and towns, places like Paterson, New Jersey, his writing brings a trans-American language and experience to these locations.

What is the role of history and historical knowledge in his novel and his voice?

Monica Hanna: While much of Díaz’s writing bears witness to the contemporary history of urban United States spaces, in particular his geography of New Jersey cities and towns, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is, to date, his work which most explicitly tackles the subject of historical knowledge and representation. The novel focuses on the transnational history of the de León and Cabral family between the United States and the Dominican Republic, which becomes a way for the novel’s narrator also to reflect on national histories of both countries individually, their shared history resulting from US interventions in the DR, and a wider trans-American history that spans languages and borders. The novel’s narrator, Yunior, invokes the conventions of historical texts by using features such as the footnote and making references to particular historical events and figures. At the same time, the novel critiques the notion of historical authenticity by featuring a narrator who continually questions his own authority and the authority of his sources, while reminding readers that the history at stake is permeated by profound silences that cannot be recovered via traditional historiographic means. In this way, Díaz brilliantly sheds light on these histories while using the freedom of fiction to question our access to the truth of those histories and allowing his readers to adopt that same critical stance.

What is the connection between Díaz’s literature and social justice?

Monica Hanna: Junot Díaz spoke at length about his commitment to issues of social justice during his lecture. Spurred on in part by NYU Professor Arlene Davila’s discussion during the symposium about Díaz’s political activism, Junot spoke about his work in relation to the struggle for social justice. Specifically, he explained to the audience that he writes about race and the damage that white supremacy has done to society in general as well as the psyches and interpersonal relationships of people of color more specifically. Díaz’s work often confronts the reader with uncomfortable truths about the ways in which white supremacy functions; during his talk, he made a point to signal that white supremacy is perpetuated not just by white Americans, but also within communities of color, citing examples such as parents who favor a lighter child over a darker child, or men who date...
Díaz’s work forces readers, especially scholars, to reconsider how we categorize work in both the US American canon as well as the category of Latin American literature. This was an important focus of the symposium. On a generic level, Díaz elevates certain popular forms. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, many of the themes are related via references to comic books and science fiction, which Díaz consistently overlaps with historical and high literary references.

**What role does Díaz play in expanding the traditional canon?**

**Monica Hanna:** Díaz’s work forces readers, especially scholars, to reconsider how we categorize work in both the US American canon as well as the category of Latin American literature. This was an important focus of the symposium. On a generic level, Díaz elevates certain popular forms. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, many of the themes are related via references to comic books and science fiction, which Díaz consistently overlaps with historical and high literary references; for example, he uses *Lord of the Rings* references as one lens through which readers can understand the history of colonialism in the Americas. In this way, he elevates these popular genres to objects of study. On the linguistic level, there is of course a wide range of registers and also several languages that form the basis of all of his works. Along with the reexamination of US literary traditions that Díaz’s work necessitates, we have seen quite a bit of interest in Díaz’s work within Latin America. As one of our symposium participants, Professor Claudia Milian from Duke, asserted, Díaz’s work is gaining attention from intellectuals within Latin America considering *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in particular a Latin American novel written in English. It’s a sign of the strength of his work that it is causing a reexamination of multiple canons and traditions.

**José David, can you comment briefly about your upcoming book on Junot Díaz provisionally entitled *Junot Díaz: In Formation?***


I argue that Junot Díaz is the leading literary writer of his era, a man who not only captivates readers with his prose but also mesmerizes them with his brilliant mind.

*Interviewed by Dena Montague*