12. Junot Díaz’s Search for Decolonial Aesthetics and Love

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Decolonial aesthetics refers to ongoing artistic projects responding and delinking from the darker side of imperial globalization. Decolonial aesthetics seeks to recognize and open options for liberating the senses. This is the terrain where artists around the world are contesting the legacies of modernity and its reincarnations in postmodern and altermodern aesthetics.

—Decolonial Aesthetics Working Group’s “Manifesto”

In Oscar Wao we have a family that has fled, half-destroyed, from one of the rape incubators of the New World, and they are trying to find love. But not just any love. How can there be “just any love” given the history of rape and sexual violence that created the Caribbean—that Trujillo uses in the novel? The kind of love that I was interested in, that my characters long for intuitively, is the only kind of love that could liberate them from that horrible legacy of colonial violence. I am speaking about decolonial love.

—Junot Díaz, “The Search for Decolonial Love”
Junot Díaz is the first Latino writer working in the United States in the twenty-first century to be put forward as a major figure in the world-system of letters.¹ He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1999, and following the publication of Drown (1996) and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, he became one of the most famous young writers in the world. In 2012, he published This Is How You Lose Her, a finalist for the National Book Award, and almost simultaneously that year he was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Award. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, which has been translated into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Dutch, and other major languages, brought the experiences of racial and gender coloniality in the United States and the Greater Antilles to a mass readership inside and outside the global Americas. These achievements are all the more noteworthy because they took place in a period when the injustices of white supremacy in U.S. culture and society, explored so rigorously in his work, are so rarely commented on in the hegemonic and “postrace” public sphere of the United States.²

Díaz’s success can also be used to measure significant changes in the cultural politics and the political economy of publishing Latino/a writers in the United States. On the one hand, his ongoing relationship with the mainline New Yorker magazine—which under Tina Brown’s editorial regime and acumen had published his first major short story, “How to Date a Brown Girl,” when he was completing his MFA degree at Cornell University, and later in 2012 published “Monstro,” an excerpt of his new science fiction novel, in progress, set in an apocalyptic future Dominican Republic and Haiti where aliens, viruses, and zombies invade and eat the island—is an entirely new phenomenon for a Latino writer approaching the distinctive cultural dominance of our mainline literary society.³ On the other hand, his imaginative writing occupies a central place in the hemispheric political culture of postcontemporary Latin American literature, for in 2007 Bogotá’s Department of Culture and the Hay Festival named Díaz one of the most important thirty-nine authors under thirty-nine in América Latina. Forces in both the United States and in Latin America are responsible for introducing Díaz to the rest of the reading planet.⁴

Junot Díaz is, in a sense, a new kind of Latino writer, one whose fearless projection of a dark America releases creative possibilities and changes the terms of the cultural conversation in which the dissident racial and gender politics of literary expression are articulated. Díaz’s work provides an opportunity to extend our consideration of issues arising from the re-
relationship of Latinos to coloniality and the coalitional projects of decoloni­
al aesthetics and decolonial feminisms, formulations on the coloniality of gender and decolonial (sucio/a) love by the philosopher María Lugones and the sociologist Deb Vargas. Through his fiction, we can explore, in the memorable phrase of the historian and novelist Emma Pérez, “the decol­­
ional imaginary.” Díaz’s writing itself, his career as a public figure in the Global South and the Global North, his political critique of white suprem­­acy, and the debates his imaginative literature are beginning to generate raise a number of the themes of writers of color from the United States and the Greater Antilles: the possibility of dissident ethnic, gender, and racial identity within the scales of Americanity; the development of a robust decoloni­
al aesthetics; and the philosophical character of the cultural politics of a migratory Latinidad and Afro-Latinidad.

Bearing in mind Paula M. L. Moya’s endorsement of Junot Díaz’s search for “decolonial love” in his three supreme books of fiction as well as her rev­­elation that Díaz had informed her that his central consciousness, Yunior, had “ideas about women and the actions of these ideas [about them] al­­ways [left] him more alone, more thwarted, more disconnected from his community and himself.” I want to make some claims in this chapter for the value of searching for decolonial aesthetics and love in his work. I will begin first by analyzing a paratextual passage (a footnote) from Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, in which Yunior de las Casas critically reflects on his friend’s spectacularly closeted reading of science fiction and fantasy books and the effects Oscar’s reading in the closet has on Oscar’s mother, community friends, and on Yunior as the text’s “faithful watcher.” Indeed the whole point of Yunior’s observation and the incomparable allegory of Oscar’s reading in the closet, I suggest, is for us to start thinking about what happens to Latino and Latina “immigrant rising” barrio kids (like Oscar, Yunior, and Lola) when they read imaginative literature, and, more impor­tant, what goes on in their complex inner lives. While Yunior, throughout the course of his narrating Oscar’s brief and wondrous life, engages in highlighting Oscar’s developing identity politics (who he really is), Yunior is also interested in championing Oscar’s and his own changing politics of subjectivity (how they feel) as humans, their evolving dialectics of negative aesthetics, and their ethics of convivencia and coexistence. Yunior’s negative aesthetics—including his text’s intentional gaps, paginas en blanco, and blanks—expose the limitations of his own systems of thought and entice readers to articulate thoughts that are absent. I will conclude by focusing
in the chapter’s last section on Yunior’s forty-something, fulsome search for decolonial love in “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” the concluding story of This Is How You Lose Her (2012). Here Díaz’s Yunior de las Casas, now a fully professionalized assistant professor of creative writing within what the literary historian Mark McGurl calls U.S. academia’s “program era” of creative writing, offers us much more than a low-brow guide to his series of thwarted attempts to make human intimacy for himself and his series of lovers.¹⁰ I want to view both of Díaz’s linked texts as extended exercises in dissident antihomophobic inquiry and racial hermeneutics that have had important effects on the author’s provocative theories about the coloniality of power, and gender, identity, sexuality, and their interrelation.

In the case of his best-selling novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Díaz paints a deliberate and critical understanding of a pair of “black, Latino, migrant Dominican Jersey, smart boys” through the lenses and projects of decolonial love. In “The Cheater's Guide to Love,” Díaz changes gears by working through Yunior’s philosophical praise of decolonial love, and the writer’s critical self-analysis, resembling psychoanalysis, which is his hyperaware (writerly) way of expressing a decolonial love for himself and for others in his fiction. Like his favorite U.S. feminist writers, Toni Morrison and Sandra Cisneros, Díaz uses his central character, Yunior de las Casas (a kind of Paul D or Celaya Reyes), to bear witness to what really happens to young Latino men of color who have been traumatized by economic migration, racial oppression, sexual abuse, and rape. Grappling with this culture of sexual violence and abuse is what Díaz sees as his characters’ doomed search for love. In “Ysrael,” for example, the lead story of Díaz’s Drown, set in Santo Domingo and its campo, nine-year-old Yunior is instructed by his older brother Rafa to sit at the back of the bus while on one of their ordinary summer travels of boyish mischief, violence, and havoc. Yunior obeys Rafa and sits next to an older Dominican man: “I lowered myself stiffly into my seat but the pastelito [I was eating] had already put a grease stain on my pants. . . . You have to watch out for stains like that, the man said to me. He had big teeth and wore a clean fedora. . . . These things are too greasy, I said. Let me help. He spit on his fingers and started to rub at the stain but then he was pinching at the tip of my pinga through the fabric of my shorts. You pato, I said.”¹¹ This scene of sexual molestation wherein a wolflike man with “big teeth” gropes the preadolescent Yunior ends with his testifying: “The man squeezed my biceps, quickly, hard, the way my friends smack me in church. I whimpered.”¹² In “Drown,” the titular story of the collection set
in New Jersey, the college-bound Beto, Yunior’s best barrio bud, performs a hand job (and more) on him: “We had just come back from the pool and were watching a porn at his parents’ apartment. . . . We were an hour into the new movie . . . when he reached into my pants. What the fuck are you doing? I asked, but he didn’t stop. His hand was dry. I came right away, smearing the plastic covers.” As this scene powerfully suggests, part of Yunior de las Casas’s charm, vulnerability, and contradictions as a developing character in Díaz’s fictional matrix is not that he is a dishonest chronicler of his erotic and sexual intimacies but that Díaz often paints Yunior as being too incredibly honest and fantastically observant about what he sees as his grim reality.

Still later, in Díaz’s London Times award-winning story “Miss Lora,” from the linked collection of stories that make up This Is How You Lose Her, Yunior’s profesora, a high school teacher named Miss Lora, frequently invites him over to her flat to have sex with him. Among other things, Díaz’s “Miss Lora” investigates Yunior’s teenage “ambivalences” about having sex with an older woman (who has power over him). Though we often think of adolescent teenage boys of color as already hypersexualized, Díaz suggests that Yunior is not yet capable of seeing his couplings with Miss Lora as criminal and abusive. Many years later, it is only after Yunior recounts his travails with Miss Lora to his Rutgers University girlfriend, Lola, that he begins to see how abusive this doomed coupling with the high school profesora had been.

Díaz’s Yunior de las Casas is a complex contradictory, and “kooky” persona that Díaz uses in his linked fictional work to create complex narratological character-spaces and an evolving character-system in which he weighs the sexual abuses, race craziness, and transgressions Yunior experiences growing up in Santo Domingo and in New Jersey and how this abuse has centrally shaped who he is and how he feels as a subject. As Díaz has noted in the New Yorker, “Yunior’s been with [him] a long time” and he’s “watched this frustrating fool grow up” and as a result has a “pretty good sense of his kinks and contradiction.” Moreover, Yunior’s particular blindness and insights allow us to see how his culture’s heteronormativity and his masculinist ideas about women so often leave him feeling utterly disconnected or alienated from his lovers, family, and community. If Yunior senses how he constructs his own oppressive chains and he often rages against them and himself, he is unable to break free from them. As Díaz suggests to Moya, “Yunior’s desire for communion with self and
with other” is often “tragic,” since he’s continually “undermined” by his own “unwillingness to see women in his life as fully human.” If Yunior fails to recognize “the women parts of his identity as human,” as Diaz describes, then how in the world can Yunior begin to “recognize himself as fully human?”

Díaz’s painting of Yunior de las Casa’s developing and fraught character is important to the overall argument in this chapter because, as I have broadly outlined above, his early adolescent life in Santo Domingo and his teenage years in New Jersey constitute a fragmentary history in which he searches for decolonial hope, love, and compassion. But there is no real understanding of Yunior’s full development as a character “without viewing him,” Díaz suggests to the writer Greg Barrios, “through the lens of these [sexual scenes of abuse and rape],” lenses carefully thematized in Diaz’s linked stories “Israel,” “Drown,” and “Miss Lora,” and fully examined in the extended predatory rape culture of the dictator Trujillo’s Dominican Republic in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. In Díaz’s fiction, Yunior de las Casas learns how to work through his own wounded traumas of economic migration and criminal sexual abuse, and through this process of working through his past experiences he learns how to become a more compassionate writer, who “suffers with” those around him. Yunior “will not need lots of talent,” Díaz suggests, “to succeed.” What Díaz’s central consciousness, Yunior, needs “is more humanity. Yunior becomes very aware that part of what he lacks both in a relationship as a lover and perhaps even as an artist, what he lacks is not training, not will, but humanity, or what we would call sympathy or compassion.”

Oscar Wao’s Spectacular Barrio Closet

[Oscar] wanted to blame the books, the sci-fi, but he couldn’t—he loved them too much.
—Junot Díaz, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, 50

What does Yunior de las Casas in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao tell us about Oscar de León’s reading? I approach the question not in the current fashionable flourishing that intellectual historians of the book use to turn up a great deal of information about what Robert Darnton calls “the external history of reading,” or what the literary theorist of the novel Franco Moretti and his Digital Humanities team of researchers at Stanford Uni-
versity call “quantitative formalism,” but in the most literal (imaginative) way by reading a terrific footnote by Junot Díaz, one that shows us the hero Oscar engaged in the act of reading the “speculative genres,” that is, science fiction novels. This procedure may raise the question, Does Oscar’s brain, so saturated on J. R. R. Tolkien and other fantasy books’ storylands, arrest his development, like Quixote’s reading of chivalrous literature or romances that fry his brain? Does Oscar’s reading in the barrio closet thematize for Yunior an antihomophobic and dissident way of receiving, interpreting, and recoding science fiction’s alien cultures otherwise? Oscar, Díaz tells us, “wanted to blame the books, the sci-fi, but he couldn’t . . . he loved them too much.” I will not argue below that Oscar de León’s “closeted” identification suggests a transparent meaning of Oscar’s erotic and sexual orientations; instead, I want to demonstrate that Yunior’s allegory of Oscar’s reading in the closet helps him initiate a dissident way of understanding Oscar’s gendered feelings and how they relate to their heteronormative and racist worlds in New Jersey and the Dominican Republic. Queer meaning, as David Halperin says, is a characteristic “recoding” of hegemonic (straight), heteronormative “meanings already encoded in that culture.”

Thus Yunior observes that unlike other teenage boys on the mean streets of Paterson who, say, “pitched quarters,” “played wall balls” or “drove their older brothers’ fast cars, Oscar de León preferred to “gorge himself [in the closet] on a steady stream of Lovecraft, Wells, Burroughs, Howard, Alexander, Asimov, Bova, and Heinlein, and even the old ones who were already beginning to fade—E. E. Doc Smith, Stapledon, and the guy who wrote all the Doc Savage books.”

In Oscar’s reading this vast quantity of science fiction and speculative realist texts—Yunior estimates that by the time Oscar was in middle school he had read Tolkien’s modernist *The Lord of the Rings* hundreds of times, “one of his greatest loves and comforts of his life he’d first discovered”—his Dominican grandmother, La Inca, insists proudly that he “showed the genius” that “was part of the [De León-Cabral] family’s patrimony.” But not everyone in the De León family agreed with La Inca’s sense of Oscar’s “genius.” Yunior, in one of the novel’s thirty-three remarkable footnotes, rushing upward from the novel’s marginal lower frequencies at the bottom of the page to his main text, suggests that Oscar’s thick love for the “speculative genres” might have been a sociological consequence of Oscar’s deep diasporic and oceanic feelings—that is, the hero’s “being Antillean (who more SF than us?).” Alternatively, Yunior speculates that Oscar’s love of
reading “jumped off” for Oscar when, having lived “the first couple of years of his life” in the Global South (the Dominican Republic), he “abruptly” and “wrenchingly” many years later had to relocate to the Global North (the Greater Jersey environs)—“a single green card,” Yunior notes, “shifting not only worlds” geoculturally from the Global South to the Global North but also spatiotemporally “centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both).”

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yunior sets this extraordinary scene of reading within a “spacy” epistemology of the closet and within the hidden and secret spaces and encoded meanings in their Paterson barrio house. In the paratextual passage, Yunior attempts to explain to his readers why Oscar loves to read so much and, as a “smart bookish” Dominican boy of color, what “the [sociocultural] consequences” of too much reading are for Oscar’s decolonial “aesthetic education” and his emergent queered, dissident gender formation. Yunior suggests that for those *muchachos* of color living on the mean and hard streets of Paterson—where “the pure products of America go crazy,” as the great Latino poet laureate of New Jersey William Carlos Williams put it in his modernist poem “To Elsie”—Oscar’s bookishness is as if he had enormous “bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of [his] chest.” In other words, Yunior testifies to how Oscar’s bookishness and dissident queerness led to his always being victimized by Paterson’s ill-read barrio street toughs. They would kick, punch, belittle him and, worse, they would tear violently his “new Scholastic books” in half: “You like books, [Oscar,] the urchins asked him?” They would then rip his books “in half before his very eyes. Now you got two.” So here in this passage Díaz’s Yunior demonstrates how Oscar’s immersive reading in the closet can help us to understand Oscar’s Dominican American queerness not as something that he is, but as something that he does.

Díaz’s Yunior stages and investigates how Oscar’s bookishness and his reading (and writing) are performative activities loaded with survivance and imaginative regeneration. On the one hand, Oscar’s carrying his books on the streets of Paterson makes “him stick out even more than he already did” as a nerdy, overly book-smart Dominican barrio boy. Oscar’s mother, Belicia, also finds his bookish reading preoccupations “nutty” and she often belittles him so. But Díaz’s Yunior poses one of the novel’s central questions, about why Oscar de León prefers the secret and safe spaces of his Paterson home’s upstairs closet. There are a consistent series of attractive attributes that Oscar associates with the well-being of safety from the street cats on
the mean streets of Paterson: inside his house, with his older sister Lola and his mother Belicia, Oscar secludes himself, Yunior writes, “in the upstairs closet.”31 By homing in on the realities of Oscar’s closet, Yunior begins calling our attention to one of the most powerful and catalyzing aspects of queer theory’s emergent “antihomophobic inquiry,” which we know through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on the epistemology of the closet.32 Like Sedgwick’s fight against heterosexism’s dominance, Díaz’s Yunior, too, uses the insights of antihomophobic queer inquiry to help him dissect the regime of Oscar de León’s closetedness and what Belicia calls her muchacho Oscar’s “nuttiness,” especially through the closet’s structuring of power and knowing and not knowing (heteronormativity’s willful ignorance) and the experiences and possibilities of queer dissidence. Yunior, moreover, asks what it is possible to know or say about Oscar’s nuttiness in the closet. Are Oscar’s racial and gendered identities inherent or socially hardwired? Why are his inner feelings and desires for others so unpredictable and powerful for Yunior?

I want to suggest that Yunior seizes on this opportunity early in the para-textual lower frequencies of The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao to explore Oscar’s inner life, and this also helps him to strategically explore his own evolving, fraught, male subjectivity. Oscar’s closet does not operate to conceal his queered subjectivity, but it stands in for Yunior as a way of Highlighting Oscar’s masculine sensibility, affect, pleasure, and identifications as a reader of speculative realist fantasy books (who is in love with fantasy). Is there a relation here of desire to the decolonial aesthetics of science fiction and of dissident queerness and culture for Oscar de León and Yunior de las Casas? Yunior is determined at the beginning of the novel to crack open Oscar’s love and shame for the solitary pleasures of reading and in the process wants us to understand all of Oscar’s feelings for aesthetics and culture that are assiduously closeted in the barrio. Yunior proceeds to let the light in the closet by means of a distant social and literary analysis—an allegory of barrio reading—revealing Oscar’s hopes of light and darkness in Paterson as a bookish young boy of color, demonstrating that it may be possible to approach his friend’s subjectivity without recourse to ego psychology. He is also able to begin painting the pathogenic consequences of Oscar de León’s living in a racist and homophobic world.

This safe and secret space is itself linked metaphorically by Yunior to the restorative “slat of light” where Oscar reads science fiction books, tranquilly bathing him in a “razored” sublime light that rushes in “from the cracked

THE SEARCH FOR DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS 329
door of the closet.” Yunior sees Oscar reading in solitude and wonders what joyous opportunities for imaginative contemplation exist for Oscar in his acts of reading. Can the strengthening of the power-knowledge couplet brought on by reading aid in shaping the thick love Oscar has for the “speculative genres”—genres that have traditionally helped readers challenge their culture’s hegemonic social, sexual, and ethnoracial codes of conduct? Yunior suggests that by closeting himself in his home and reading by the chiascuro crack of “razored light,” Oscar’s soaring imagination finds access to other worlds and galaxies free from the real razors and the brutal and “normalized” gendered identifications of the Paterson world outside. Rather than dismissing Yunior’s nuanced and antihomophobic conjuring of his allegory of Oscar’s reading in the closet as outrageous, I want to try to understand what Yunior thinks Oscar’s reading in the closet means for the Cabral-De León family, for his neighborhood childhood friends, and for him. What exactly is at stake for Yunior? What are the larger implications of Oscar’s reading in the closet?

Yunior gets at these questions by first highlighting how Belicia’s reaction to Oscar’s reading in the upstairs closet sets off other metaphorical and figural chains of signifying connotations: “Pa’ fuera! [Oscar’s] mother roared. And out he would go, like a condemned boy, to spend a few hours being tormented by the other boys—Please I want to stay; he would beg his mother but she shoved him out—You ain’t a woman to be staying in the house.”33 Against the (symbolic) interiorized plea of Oscar’s secret hiding space, where the rising immigrant hero is free to feel, fantasize, and love, the imaginative mind as the closet, or the house of science fiction’s utopian epistemology, Belicia bodily “shoves” Oscar out of the closet and “roars” at him to go “Pa fuera.” Yunior, the novel’s central “humble watcher” as he dubs himself, observes all of this and highlights Oscar’s coming out as a performative staging of what the philosopher María Lugones terms “the coloniality of gender,” for he obeys his mother and goes out, he says, “like a condemned [and damned] boy” (Oscar as a Fanonian damné de la terre?).34 With his beautifully wrought Proustian flourish, Yunior brilliantly plays the “inside” secret space of Oscar’s closet’s recuperative powers, where his reading of the speculative genres helps him attain his aesthetic education against the harsh, male-centered, and violent urban space’s “outside” (“Pa’ Fuera”) on the Paterson streets, where a multitude of hypermasculinized and homophobic boys torment the hero, Oscar.35 If we have not yet felt the full weight of Belicia’s rigid and normalizing structures of feeling—a con-
servative mindset of a popular barriocentric and heteronormative tíguere latinidad formed both in the Dominican Republic and in New Jersey, where she equates Oscar’s love of reading with a gendered domesticity—this scene dramatizes for Yunior the harsh heteronormative ideology implicit in Belicia’s comments, which imply that every human being must be assigned “a binarized identity,” to use Sedgwick’s terms, based on the gender of object choice. Yunior de las Casas then goes on to quote Belicia’s bilanguaging and stigmatizing interpellation of her closeted son: “Pórtate como un muchacho normal,” for “You ain’t a woman to be staying the house.” Belicia not only prohibits Oscar’s reading (and his spontaneous fantasizing) in the closet, Yunior emphasizes this prohibition by using Michel Foucault’s iconic discourse, suggesting that Oscar’s family and culture want to “normalize” and discipline him as a “straight” subject within their gender regime. Alas, only Oscar’s sister Lola, a serious and capacious book-reader herself and a loca in decolonial love to boot, consoles her brother by bringing him more “books from her school library, which had a better library.”

Although Díaz’s Yunior role as a “watcher” offers his readers no explanation for the emergence of Belicia’s normalized gendered categorization and language—“un muchacho normal,” to shame Oscar into straight normalization—he expertly traces its impact on Oscar’s development both in New Jersey and the Dominican Republic and on the aesthetic figural and tropological ways we can really know those cultures. Oscar’s secrecy and disclosure in the closet, Oscar’s imaginative wholeness and fragmentariness inside his secret space, and Oscar’s mental health and suicidal anxieties come to mean what they mean in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao through their figural relationship to the matrix of the “muchacho normal” and the dissident queered boy’s reading in the closet. What Yunior’s complex meditation does here in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is allegorically illuminated, like the “razored” light rushing in through “the cracked [upstairs closet] door,” the dizzying contradictory significance of the secret signified by Oscar’s barrio closet. Yunior thus enlarges Oscar’s identification as a bookish, alienated, “bloating,” and “dyspeptic” Dominicano “nerd” growing up on the mean streets of Paterson by problematizing the complex and overlapping varieties of oppression—ethnic, sexual, racial, and gendered—he seeks to liberate himself from in his quest for decolonial love and compassion and the liberation from his world’s hegemonic, binarized identifications, which he discovers in his books.
agreement with Sedgwick's focus on the intersectionality of oppression, as Sedgwick insisted persuasively that “all oppressions . . . are differently structured and so must intersect in complex embodiments.” 42

If we now turn from the domestic, gendered economy of the barrio closet to the commercial and heteronormative economy Oscar’s mother Belicia condemns him to, Oscar’s being shoved out his closet forces him to come face to face with the contours of his prescribed normalization on the brutish, gendered, urban streets of Paterson. Oscar “morphs” right in front of Yunior’s eyes from a “nutty” and “smart bookish” young boy of color (“who ain’t a woman”) into a young, queered, dissident, and “oppressed” muchacho who appears to the straight boys on Paterson’s mean streets as if he had “bat wings . . . growing out of his chest.” Alas, “no one,” Yunior concludes in his allegory of reading, was “more oppressive than the oppressed.” 43 In Oscar’s being pushed by his mother “Pa fuera,” he experiences other ways his iconic gendered Latinidad is defined, constrained, and designed in Yunior’s cognitive mapping by the patriarchal culture and society around him and then plotted metonymically through the circuits of the contiguous Paterson streets that determine his social horizons. The chronotope of Oscar’s spectacular closet and of the domestic De León oikos that Yunior so rigorously links through the aesthetic, metonymic circuits of the street refer less to a poetics of the closet and the house than to the mutually overdetermining spheres of the private spaces and what the historian Mike Davis calls the “magical urbanism” of the social barrioscape in the Global North. 44

Here the spatialized temporalities of Oscar’s everyday barrio life—figured by Yunior as the closet and the house—stand out against the institutionalization of the subject into the heteronormativity of his culture and society. Yunior stages Oscar’s reading science fiction texts in the sheltered and secret spaces of the closet (a cradle and a retreat) that protects him against the invasion of the outside world but also borrows from this outside world some of its qualities—that is, the fragile but razored light that comes from the sun. Yunior valorizes Oscar’s rich inner world (where he is able to feel freely) as vastly preferable to the violent, outside, urban world of the streets.

This primal paratextual scene—footnoted in the novel—is pivotal because it powerfully gives us one of the text’s first tropologically rigorous indications of how the inner and the outer national and outer planetary aesthetic worlds operate for Oscar and Yunior in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. For Díaz’s Yunior, this is the importance of being Oscar Wao!
In Praise of Yunior de las Casas’s Search for Decolonial (Sucio/a) Love

In this last section on Yunior de las Casas’s searching for decolonial love, I will conclude by analyzing the last story, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” from Díaz’s This Is How You Lose Her. What kind of “love event” is Yunior de las Casas working through in this “guide”? Are there any new philosophical “truth procedures” that Yunior is grappling with? Why is the radioactive “half-life of (decolonial) love” that his story leaves us with a philosophical “event” for him?45

“The Cheater’s Guide to Love” is the central story from which all of the other stories showcasing Yunior’s verbal and idiolectical virtuosity and narratological energy in This Is How You Lose Her are derived, but this does not mean that the other linked stories in the book are pretexts or wonderful fictional shards of “The Cheater’s Guide to Love.” In stories such as “Nilda,” for instance, Díaz not only paints a fourteen-year-old Yunior yearning for sucio/a love, but also portrays him (nine years later) working through a deep and soulful mourning for his older brother, Rafa, who dies not only from the destructive effects of leukemia but also from the radioactive treatments he receives to stop this destruction. Yunior recounts his mother Virta’s and his own reactions to Rafa—one a terrific “overmuscled” boxer and “papi chulo”—as he lies dying in their forlorn London Terrace apartment in Parlin, New Jersey. At night, Rafa, “the hardest dude in the nabe” and the cruellest, most chiflado, abusive, and monstrous older brother to Yunior, regularly sneaks the Dominicana Nilda and other barrio girls “orbiting around him” into the apartment’s basement bedroom, which he shares with Yunior, and has sex with them.46 Fourteen-year-old Yunior endures all of this embarrassment because his mother does not allow her boys to sleep upstairs on the living room couch. But “Nilda” begins years later, when twenty-three-year-old Yunior runs into Rafa’s former girlfriend Nilda in a laundromat years after his brother’s death and thinks that anything in his London Terrace multiverse—even escape from their downtrodden world—is still possible. This moment, however, closes quickly.

Nilda once had super-long black hair and “world-class looks.”47 Some nights she and Yunior would sit on the couch while Rafa was off at his job at the carpet factory or working out at the gym. But as soon as Rafa showed up, Nilda jumped into his arms. Diaz’s teenage Yunior has an “I.Q. that would have broken you in two” but he would have traded his smarts in for a
halfway decent face in a second. The story then loops back to earlier times when Nilda had been visiting Yunior and first met Rafa. Rafa noticed Nilda because she was wearing a tank top that “couldn’t have blocked a sneeze.” They went out that whole summer, and Rafa was tired all the time and pale, and some mornings, Yunior remembers, Rafa’s “leg bones hurt so much he couldn’t get of bed.” There is nothing heartbroken Yunior can do to help to “soothe Rafa’s pain,” not even “massag[ing] Rafa’s shins.” Rafa eventually quits high school, works manual-labor jobs, and dreams of going to California. One night, at the end of summer, Yunior overhears Nilda’s telling Rafa about her plans for the future: she wants to get away from her mom and their downtrodden world and open up a group home for runaway kids. “Listening to her imagining herself,” Yunior writes, “was about the saddest thing you ever heard.” Rafa didn’t even say “wow.” An hour later she gets up and leaves. A week later Rafa is seeing some other London Terrace “nabe” girl.

But why was Nilda so doomed, Yunior asks? Why did an older man scoop her up, when she had just gotten back from the group home? And why had Nilda gotten tossed out when the older barrio cat “bounced” and then been handed around from man to man? Two years later, Yunior’s brother Rafa dies and the friendless Yunior is out of school most of the time and smoking mota at the toxic Global Landfill next to the London Terrace Apartments and chronicling in his mind everything about Rafa’s and Nilda’s woes, incapable of effecting any change for them. Yunior’s sad story records Nilda’s downward spiral: how she fell in with more “stupid” street cats, got a “Brick city beat down,” and lost some of her teeth. She continues to be in and out of school until she finally drops out completely. She loses her world-class looks, and she “cuts her hair down to nothing.”

The story concludes when Yunior (now twenty-three) is washing his clothes up at the mini mall and he happens to run into Nilda. She tells him that she misses his brother, Rafa. “He treated me the best.” What else can they really say about their London Terrace multiverse, Yunior muses? They then walk back through the old New Jersey neighborhood, and Yunior, “his heart beating fast” has an epiphany: Could they do anything? Even marry and drive off together to the West Coast, as Rafa once desired, and start off in a better California world? But this moment in “Nilda” closes quickly and they are back in the downtrodden London Terrace world they have always known. “Remember the day we met?” Nilda asks. Nilda had been wearing a tank top, and Yunior, who wanted to play baseball, made her
put on a shirt before he would let her be on his team. “I remember,” Yunior the chronicler says.⁶⁰ They never speak again. Many years later, Yunior goes away to Rutgers, and he discovers “he didn’t know where the fuck she went.”⁶¹ “Nilda” is one of saddest and most well-wrought stories Yunior de las Casas writes about the brutalizing inequality of wealth for those like Nilda living in Parlin’s London Terrace Apartments, and it is sadder still because in “Nilda” Yunior ingeniously chronicles how Rafa was mourned for. It “broke my heart,” he writes.⁶²

Like Nilda and the multitude of other young, doomed women painted in This Is How You Lose Her, Díaz’s Yunior yearns for a better multiverse: it “was the summer when everything we would become was hovering just over our heads.” “In another universe,” he philosophizes, he might have “come out OK, ended up with mad novias and jobs and a sea of love in which to swim, but in this world I had a brother dying of cancer and a long dark patch of life like a mile of black ice waiting for me up ahead.”⁶³ Yunior’s captivating “dark patches of life,” sucio/a love and loss—like the miles of black ice waiting ahead for him—are at the very heart of Díaz’s prodigious book, but there is a deeper feeling still that Yunior stitches together in “Nilda”: Yunior madly loves his dying brother, Rafa, and Nilda’s love for the “papi chulo” Rafa makes Yunior fall madly in love with her. As he agonizes over his mourning for Rafa, he cannot suppress his memories about the doomed Dominicana Nilda. Every time he runs into her in their London Terrace nabe, she acts as a painful reminder to him of everything he has lost in his multiverse. At the funeral his mother and he arrange for Rafa, a broken down and toothless Nilda spectrally appears: “What a short skirt she’d worn,” Yunior writes, “like maybe she could still convince” the dead Rafa “of something.”⁶⁴ While Virta cannot easily place this forlorn Nilda, all she can remember about her she says to Yunior that “she was the one who smelled good . . . It wasn’t until Mami said it that I realized it was true.”⁶⁵ The story ends with an older but still foolish Yunior’s remembering his London Terrace world and attempting to make sense of his dark and icy patch of kinks and contradictions—and to chronicle Rafa’s loss: “He’s gone; he’s gone, he’s gone.”⁶⁶ In stories such as “Nilda” Yunior cannot offer us an epic or grand anatomy of decolonial love. But in Díaz’s perfectly crafted and linked stories such as “Nilda” and “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” Díaz’s Yunior opens up a small window on the subject of his searching for decolonial love.

Díaz’s “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” is the most philosophically and aesthetically nuanced of his imaginative work, centering on the forty-something
Yunior’s throwing down some thoughts on decolonial (sucio/a) love’s risks and instabilities. It is also Díaz’s most unstinting analysis of Yunior’s culpability for a relationship that he did not want to see collapse. Does sucio/a love disrupt? Or does sucio/a love refashion the self in love with the other? I am also interested in thinking about why “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” may be Díaz’s most legible story at this stage in his writing career in praise of (doubting) love, where Yunior’s lost love is never usefully described or represented. Indeed, Yunior’s fiancée is irrevocably lost to him and he has to figure out in his “cheater’s guide” how to paint this irrevocable loss, which he ingeniously does by literally making his fiancée invisible throughout the story to the reader.

Here is the long and short of Yunior’s cheater’s guide to love: the story is divided by Yunior into the last six “years” of his life in praise of (doubting) sucio love, where he works on his lost and shattered love on his own terms and wants to chronicle those heartbreaks that never leave him. The longitudinal scope of the guide allows Yunior to both measure this wounding, absent, lost love and to simultaneously open up a question about decolonial (sucio/a) love that his imaginative cheater’s guide cannot possibly answer through his hypermasculinist, self-centered focalizations. In other words, if Yunior’s serial cheating has carved up such a gaping hole in his forty-something immigrant heart, what ugly feelings and pain had his cheating opened up for his fiancée?

Yunior’s “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” blasts off with “Year 0,” a kind of ground zero of love where Yunior’s knowledge about love has been hidden in the transparency and worldliness of the “0.” Six numbered years in Yunior’s midlife crisis in love and loss follow. “Year 0” chronicles the collapse of Yunior’s adult life as a professor of writing in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he has never wanted to live, where he feels himself “exiled” from New Jersey and Harlem’s conviviality and racial diversity. His fiancée, a successful Latina lawyer working in New York, called off their engagement for his rampant “cheating” on her. Yunior the writer and chronicler has forgotten to empty the emails on his computer’s desktop trashcan, and his fiancée finds an archive fever of trashed but not erased emails that document his love “affairs” with some fifty women. In order to begin the real gathering of all of the broken pieces of his pain, Yunior tells his fiancée that he will change his cheating ways, and he begins his rehabilitation by not only closing his Facebook account (a social networking service initially conjured by some Harvard nerds to hook up with college women), but also by giv-
ing his intended all of his email passwords, and taking her to Salsa dance classes so that they can begin living a life from the lovers’ perspective of twoness. Yunior’s intended is “immensely sad[dened]” by Yunior’s reckless infidelities, but he tries to apologize for his cheating by blaming it on the patriarchy, his having been groomed for cheating by the serial peccadilloes of his father, an officer in the Dominican military police, and by the pressures of his life as an assistant professor, for he is struggling to move up in the university’s ranks from an assistant professor to an associate professor with tenure. 68 “It was the book,” he confesses—the great American novel he is in the process of completing in Cambridge—on which he blames all of his amorous troubles. Wearied by Yunior’s prevarications the fiancée says, “Ya,” as in the EZLN’s Zapatismo’s “Ya Basta.”69 This may be for Yunior a critical scene of ruptured difference. “Ya” suggests that he must stop showing up at his fiancée’s New York City apartment “at odd hours”—and “stop the phoning and emails,” or, his fiancée’s sister tells him, his intended will put “a restraining order on you.”70

The next sections—one through five—in “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” document Yunior’s attempts to reconstruct how he has ended up as a cheating serial shagger. Yunior’s cheating life implodes, and he tries to pull himself together by addressing his foolish immigrant cheating, kinks, and contradictions. Does Yunior’s search for decolonial love end up any better at the end of his story? Or is his life one huge doomed mess? Why has he always cheated on all of his girlfriends and why does he continue thriving on his infidelities? Lola de León? Magda? Veronica? Cassandra? Alma? Paloma? His fiancée? The list is a partial one. And why have Yunior’s betrayals continued so blatantly even in the face of his fiancée’s threat that she would take “a machete” to him if he “ever cheated?”71

The first eight linked stories of This Is How You Lose Her are Yunior’s attempt to fill in the glorious gaps of ephemerality in “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” (and Yunior dutifully and lyrically documents all of his failed commitments and his major infidelities). In his “cheater’s guide” he wants to leave it all out in the open, writing that he “needs to finish” his guide in order to show “[the reader] what kind of fool I was.”72 Throughout this linked book of stories, forty-something Yunior self-critically begins to see himself and his life’s relational longue durée as “weak” and “full of mistakes.”73 He even sees himself as others truly see him—as the many ex-novias in the book end up seeing him—as a “typical Dominican man,” as Magda says, in the book’s opening, linked story, “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars.” Not only
is he a typical Dominicano male, he is also a “sucio” and an “asshole,” as his novia calls him. If Yunior is a “totally batshit cuero” who does not have the discipline to commit himself to his fiancée, by the time the forty-something writing-professor Yunior chronicles the trauma of his younger, high school, criminal affair he experienced with the high school teacher Miss Lora, he wants to avoid the whole thing.74

But Díaz’s Yunior can do no such thing. In the story “Miss Lora,” for example, an analytic Yunior looks back on his life and asks himself: “Are you your father’s son and your brother’s brother?” Are all of the de las Casas men “genetically” “batshit” “sucios,” he asks?75 And perhaps it is only in this tale where the heartbroken and still mourning Yunior wonders about the criminalized love affair he had with the high school teacher: “You wonder if she feels like you do. Like it might be love.”76 While the hypersexualized, sixteen-year-old Yunior does not yet have any real understanding about human erotic love, the forty-something writing-professor Yunior recalls the ugly feelings of “panic” he felt as a result of his couplings with Miss Lola: “Now it’s official.”77 Yunior writes about himself in the third person; “he’s the worst of sucios”—just like his abusive and corrupt father Ramón (who used to take him with him “on his pussy runs”) and his monstrous brother Rafa (who “banged girls in the bed next to his”).78 In listening to all of Yunior’s fulsome confessions and revelations about his sexual peccadilloes and pain, another friend, Paloma, grows weary and tells him to stop, for she does not have the time to listen to all of his loco “craziness.”79 So Yunior’s “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” tries to address both the large flow of the dark patches of black ice that constituted his downtrodden, immigrant life, and to salvage his shattered and broken love.

One can therefore read Yunior de las Casas’s linked stories from Drown and This Is How You Lose Her—as I have attempted to do in this chapter—not only as linked stories that work perfectly well on their own terms, but also as collective historias that chronicle and work with and against one another, producing an arresting “surplus of feeling” and affect that go beyond the ordinary sum of the parts. This is the wonderful patch of liminality that Díaz’s Yunior (in his own Dominican island Odyssey) spins out for us both in his linked story collections of a son abandoned on his island by his father and in the novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, texts in which he chronicles the historia of Oscar and his own journeys through heartbreak and as he emerges possessing something approximating what I am calling human, decolonial love.

338  JOSÉ DAVID SALDÍVAR
Yunior documents in “Year 1” how he has gone through the various stages of mourning following the shattered love and break up with his intended, and in “Year 2” Yunior chronicles how after the worst of his grieving is over, he begins to date Naomi, a nurse. But he screws this budding relationship up too when one day he “classlessly” and clumsily asks Naomi if “she is planning to give him some ass anytime soon.” In “Year 3,” Yunior recounts how he wishes to take better care of himself: he takes up yoga, starts running along the paths next to the Charles River, and he rededicates himself to completing a new novel he is writing. He begins dating again and this time dates a young woman half his age who is attending Harvard Law School. Yunior says that she is one of those “super geniuses who finished undergrad when she was nineteen.” But, alas, she dumps him when she decides to take up with a law school classmate who is more her age. The year ends with yet another doomed love affair Yunior has with a married and upper-class woman from the Dominican Republic who is studying at the Harvard Graduate School of Business. In “Year 4,” Yunior’s off-and-on law school girlfriend returns to his life and tells him that she is pregnant and that he is the father, which adds to what he describes as his life’s “berserkería.” She moves in with Yunior, takes over his bedroom, and exiles him to the living room couch.

It is hard for me not to pull a Pierre Menard and simply write out the entire section of events that make up “Year 5” of “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” because they are so important to the central philosophical point Yunior’s guide is making about what he terms the radioactive half-life of his (doubting) decolonial love. Near the story’s end, Yunior decides to read what he calls “The Doomsday Book,” a book he has hidden in a folder under his bed. The “Doomsday Book,” in fact, consists of “copies of all the emails and fotos” from Yunior’s cheating life we have been reading about—the dumped and trashed emails his fiancée” found in his computer’s trash, printed out, and then “compiled, [bound], and mailed to [him] a month after she ended it.” “Dear Yunior,” the ex (intended) explains, “for your next book.”

Yunior sits and reads “the whole thing cover to cover.” “You are surprised,” he later writes, “at what a fucking chickenshit coward you are. It kills you to admit it but it’s true. You are astounded by the depth of your mendacity.” Many days later, after Yunior and Elvis (his AfroDominicano sidekick) are pulled over by the Boston police for driving while brown, Elvis encourages Yunior to think seriously about writing “The Cheater’s Guide to
Love,” that is, the doomsday book of e-mails and photographs his intended sent him.⁸⁷ In the months that follow, Yunior writes, “you bend to the work, because it feels like hope, like grace—and because you know in your lying cheater’s heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get.”⁸⁸

But why does Díaz’s “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” underscore the philosophical conclusion in praise of the radioactive “half-life of love” that fortysomething Yunior ends his book with? Why does Yunior believe that the “half-life of love is forever?”⁸⁹ Does this revelation mark the central turning point of Yunior’s redemption, a passionate redemption that he fills in through the stories he has composed in This Is How You Lose Her? When we finish reading Yunior’s book of linked stories do we comprehend that, in addition to creating a greater and cooler distance between himself and his readers, his many second-person stories are not simply focalized stories directed to his readers but are in fact stories he has been writing to his “sucio,” cheating, prevaricating self? Díaz calls this strategy his “writer’s trick,” which he uses through his character Yunior, to play on the reader: “It’s that the book we are reading is not directly from me. It’s Yunior de las Casas’s book. He, at the end of the book, is seen writing the book that now we realize we have been reading.”⁹⁰

Before offering a few answers to some of these key questions, allow me to spell out some of the philosophical frames of reference to the case I am making about Yunior’s “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” as his search for a (doubting) decolonial love. Much of what I have been arguing about Yunior de las Casas’s search for decolonial love in the chronicle he is writing has been framed not only by the critical work of decolonial feminists such as the historian and novelist Emma Pérez, the philosopher María Lugones, and the sociologist Deborah R. Vargas but also by the work of two thinkers who have diametrically opposed views on human love—the French postexistentialist philosopher Alain Badiou, who writes in praise of love as a kind of “communism,” and the modernist founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. In one of his iconic case histories, Freud philosophized about one of his patient’s obsessional neurosis about love that paralyzed him with doubts, writing the following prodigious sentence to get at the limits of masculine human love: “A man who doubts his own love, may, or indeed, must doubt every lesser thing.”⁹¹ I will also conclude by circling back to Junot Díaz’s definition of decolonial love as a kind of revolutionary Fanonian hope and love. Does Yunior’s doubting (sucio/a) love incite or foreclose love? Can we frame Yunior’s search for decolonial love in his guide as his becoming phil-
osophical about his quotidian intimacies and passions? If Yunior does not kill his passions in “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” by thinking them into the ground, through writing about his passions he seeks to think deeply about them, posing his question about why “the half-life of love lasts forever” into the practice of decolonial love.92

In Badiou’s In Praise of Love, he uses the Western philosophical concepts he developed in Theory of the Subject (1982) and Being and Event (1988) to give us a comprehensive theory of love by arguing that love in our late capitalist epoch threatens to destroy love’s passions, risks, and buoyant unpredictability. His book (a long interview with Peter Truong in 2009) praising love—like Yunior’s guide to the half-life of love—interests me for what he says about the praising of love in the face of the “cozi[ness]” of a globalized love market and its “consumerist permissiveness.”93 Some of the themes Badiou covers are the relationships between love and politics, love and aesthetics, and love in the face of risk-free, on-line, commodified dating agencies.

One of the main features of (heteronormative) love for Badiou is its initiation of risk, for love is an “event” and events contain volatility, instability, and risk. Put more precisely, an event is a radical break with the existing state of affairs. “It’s something that doesn’t enter into the immediate order of things.”94 Events are totally new, Badiou suggests. Badiou then looks at the structure of what he calls the “love event” and its transformation into a “truth procedure.” With respect to the love event, the site is not to be found in our risk-free on-line dating services but rather in our everyday relations with others at schools, work, meetings, and political rallies. For Badiou, love is an encounter based entirely on chance (like a Mallarmé poem), a totally random encounter. One cannot plan on love events because they are often impossible to imagine.

Further, the French philosopher defines love by the difference between the two lovers who by chance meet and fall in love. Their different standpoint locations and epistemologies of the world demand what we might call their pluritopical perspectives. “Love,” Badiou writes, “is a decision to live a life . . . no longer from the perspective of One but from the perspective of Two,” for “you have two. Love involves two.”95 And it is precisely this critical difference between the two lovers that makes love so risky for Badiou and this riskiness is what gives love its possibilities for creating “a different way of living in life” and a “desire for an unknown duration.”96

Put briefly, for Badiou, it is through the chance encounter that the lovers transform the love event into a “truth procedure”: by declaring their love
and fidelity to the other. This performative declaration “seals the act of the encounter” and constitutes a “commitment” to one another. By naming the void through language that structures the encounter, one makes oneself vulnerable to the other and risks losing everything. Love is thus “the proof of two.” If love has the same structure as “minimal communism,” for Badiou it is because both love and politics concern becoming collective rather than the individual. “People in love,” he concludes, “put their trust in difference rather than being suspicious of it.” “To love” is thus “to struggle, beyond solitude, with everything in the world that can animate existence.”

Are Yunior’s love encounters in This Is How You Lose Her in general and “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” in particular what constitute his truth procedures as a writer? Does it follow that the radioactive half-life of Yunior’s search for (decolonial) love is a love shattered and destroyed by his cheating? Can Freud’s prodigious dictum I quoted above or Deborah R. Vargas’s incisive feminist reading of sucio/a love serve as our partial guides to men’s doubting love and help us make some initial sense of Yunior’s manifesto on love? While Yunior makes a statement about the possibility of decolonial love, he also gives us a warning and an admonition. Yunior ends “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” by doubting the possibility of (decolonial) love, but does he—as Freud suggests all men who doubt love must do—also doubt himself? Does Díaz’s Yunior here lose his epistemological anchor of certainty about decolonial love? Does he, like Freud, hesitate that men who doubt their own love “may” or rather “must” doubt “every lesser thing”? Is every lesser love the same as the other thing—love?

I want to suggest that Yunior dramatizes in “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” a questioning man grappling both with the foreclosure and the incitation of what he calls the radioactive half-life of love. What good is it, for the forty-something Yunior, to question love? Is Yunior’s love a problem of his manhood? Does he love when he thinks that he does? Or when he says he does? Can U.S. men of color like Yunior be wise in the moment of love? Or is part of the point of Yunior’s “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” to make the claim that love is unreliable under systems of the coloniality of power and gender?

All things considered, it should come as no surprise that Díaz’s Yunior de las Casas cannot tell us that love is wise or that it furnishes the grounds on which we might have a certain knowledge of love. That is just the way Junot Díaz’s thinking about Yunior’s “kinks and contradictions” work in his linked, supreme texts. But Díaz’s decolonial readers can also glean that when
Yunior begins to explore his sucio love and his masculinist self-formation and enters a critical self-analysis, he might also be entering a scene of decolonial love. So Yunior’s forty-something self-analysis is a kind of decolonial (sucio) love, and Yunior’s “guide” and linked historias in Drown, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, and This Is How You Lose Her might be too. While Yunior’s critical self-analyses are not exactly models or schemas of love, they are relationships that resemble dreams, fantasies, drives, and fields of affective structures of feeling. When desire comes to speech in Yunior’s linked texts, desire and meaning consort amicably together, though they also continually displace one another aesthetically and figurally.

This is why it is crucial to ground Junot Díaz’s search for decolonial love in his fiction in both aesthetic (sublime) and bodily terms that emerge, he emphasizes, out of the poetics of the Greater Antilles and the feminism written by women of color in the United States, which he carefully read as a student at Rutgers and Cornell University. In his Boston Review interview with Paula M. L. Moya, Díaz recounts the genesis of his search for decolonial love by first quoting from the insights of the “prayer” with which the Martinican Frantz Fanon famously ended his classic Black Skin, White Masks (1952): “O my body, always make me a man who questions.” He then updates Fanon’s prayer by explaining how women of color writers in the United States have supplemented Fanon’s work on love. Can Fanon’s transcultural (revolutionary) psychiatry—like Freud’s psychoanalysis—help us define decolonial love as a doubting or questioning human enterprise? Like Fanon and the Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga that Díaz cites often in his interviews, his imaginative writings like theirs touch his readers affectively, bodily, and sensually. Words and writing have a charge and they powerfully have the color of “quivering flesh” and what Moraga and Anzaldúa called a “theory in the flesh.” Fanon, Moraga, Anzaldúa, and Díaz all critically diagnose societies whose pathological, heteronormative, and raciological cultures have created alienated peoples (black, brown, mixed, and white).

Whether or not everyone today shares either in Fanon’s phenomenological, existentialist hope or in Anzaldúa’s and Moraga’s bodily theory of the flesh and conocimientos, Díaz suggests that by acknowledging and supplementing Fanon’s rich psychiatry of questioning from the body and by turning to the ways Latina feminists have, in their theorizing in the flesh “wield[ed] a genius that had been cultivated of their raced, gendered, sexualized subjectivities,” we can better understand his linked collection of
stories and his novel as a searching for decolonial love.\textsuperscript{104} Like Anzaldúa and Moraga, Díaz attempts to forge in his characters’ very bodies what he envisions as “a source code” for their own “future liberation.” Thus envisaged, decolonial love for Díaz involves a radical questioning from the body, a radical decolonial (doubting) love, with all of its “oppressions,” “interpellations,” and its contrapuntal “liberatory counter-strategies.”\textsuperscript{105} This is the “quantum leap” that Latina feminists have made since Fanon’s decolonial questioning from the body in 1952, and this is the astonishing leap that Junot Díaz himself wishes to elaborate on and join in with his own supreme fiction. It is the epistemological and aesthetic ground or “basis” of his art: “The kind of love that I [am] interested in, that my characters long for intuitively, is the only kind of love that [can] liberate them from that horrible legacy of colonial violence.”\textsuperscript{106}

Notes

1. Instead of using Pascale Casanova’s Eurocentered World Republic of Letters (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), where consecration through Paris was a crucial stage in the world reception of non-French writers, I propose that Junot Díaz’s work belongs to a rather different planetary framework marked by the Global South’s narratological voices and poetics from, say, William Faulkner, Edouard Glissant, Derek Walcott, Fernando Ortiz, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and Sandra Cisneros, among others. This trans-American imaginative writing has been promoted and translated into a genuinely planetary genre, outside the confines of U.S.-centric creative writing programs. In other words, I think it is possible to glimpse in Díaz’s fiction the outlines of some wholly different world-coloniality system of letters coming into being.

2. See George M. Fredrickson, White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). As Fredrickson puts it, “The phrase ‘white supremacy’ applies with particular force to the historical experience of two nations—South Africa and the United States. As generally understood, white supremacy refers to the attitudes, ideologies, and policies associated with the rise of blatant forms of white or European dominance over ‘nonwhite’ populations. In other words, it involves making invidious distinctions of a socially crucial kind that are based primarily, if not exclusively, on physical characterizations and ancestry” (ix).

3. Under Tina Brown’s editorial leadership at The New Yorker, circulation increased steadily, from just under 659,000 at the end of 1992 to a little over 830,000 two years later. At Vanity Fair, where she worked before she arrived at The New Yorker, Brown is said to have broken the magazine industry’s $2-a-word barrier. Vanity Fair and The New Yorker made magazine writing lucrative enough that writers didn’t have to flee to Hollywood.

4. Selected by a jury comprising the Colombian novelists Piedad Bonnett, Héctor Abad Faciolince, and Oscar Callazos, all of the other recipients of the “39 under 39” Best Latin American authors award, with the exception of the Peruvian American Daniel Alarcón, write strictly in Spanish and hail from Latin American countries.

5. According to Walter Mignolo’s The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), a transmodern planet has emerged, reconfiguring the past five hundred years of coloniality and its aftermath, modernity, postmodernity, and transmodernity. A significant feature of this transformation is the creativity and aesthetic production in and from the non-Western world and its political consequences—independent thoughts and decolonial freedoms in all spheres of life. The decoloniality of knowledge and María Lugones’s the “coloniality of gender,” two philosophical concepts that have been introduced by the Modernity-Coloniality Working Group with which I have been affiliated, are two of the key concepts that grapple with the decoloniality of aesthetics and gender in order to join different gendered genealogies of reexistence in artistic practices all over the world. In this chapter I stitch together Mignolo’s and Lugones’s work in decolonial aesthetics and decolonial feminism in order to grasp the liberation of sensing, bodily feelings, affects, and sensibilities trapped by modernity and its darker side: coloniality. (See María Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” Hypatia 25, no. 4 [fall 2010]: 742–59.) Last but not least, I have benefitted in my work from the sociologist Deb Vargas’s acute focus (in her chapter in this collection) on the racialized, classed politics of “lo sucio y la sucia”: the unclean, the filthy, the imperfect. In her analysis of Díaz’s fiction, lo sucio and la sucia operate as an analytic for explaining the constructions of racialized, classed masculinities and femininities. Moreover, she examines the various ways lo sucio and la sucia operate in Díaz’s texts as a structural metonymy for nonnormative constructions of intimacy, sexual desire, and kinship. In other words, the sucias and sucios in Díaz’s This Is How You Lose Her inhabit racialized genders and sexualities that represent the “deficit citizenry” of institutional regimes of normative love and intimacy, including marriage, monogamy, biological reproduction, fidelity, and commitment. Vargas considers how the multitude of female characters in Díaz’s texts love aggressively and decolonially without any commitments to a life promised by the “American dream.”

6. See Emma Pérez’s The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). Throughout this chapter, I use the idea of decolonial love put forward by the Chicana feminist theorist and novelist Pérez, what she describes as a “theoretical tool for uncovering the hidden voices of the past that have been relegated to silences, passivity, [and] to a third space where agency is enacted through third space feminism” (xvi). In Pérez’s search “for another site of remembrance,” her aim is to remake and reclaim other stories—stories of love, compassion, and hope.


THE SEARCH FOR DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS 345
8. According to Díaz, “the footnotes are there for a number of reasons; primarily, to create a double narrative. The footnotes, which are in the lower frequencies, challenge the main text, which is the higher narrative. The footnotes are like the voice of the jester, contesting the proclamations of the king. In a book that’s all about the dangers of dictatorship, the dangers of the single voice—this felt like a smart move to me.” See Junot Díaz, interview by Meghan O’Rourke, “Questions for Junot Díaz: An Interview with the Pulitzer Prize-winning Author,” Slate, April 8, 2008, accessed April 22, 2015, http://www.slate.com/id/218849/. Díaz, Oscar Wao, 92.


10. See Mark McGurl’s The Program Era (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). Pointing to the proliferation of degree-granting “creative writing programs” in U.S. universities during the postwar era of the twentieth century, McGurl requires us to take into account the institution of the university and the processes of the democratization of higher education in the United States to fully understand the nature of postcontemporary literature in the postwar period.


14. See Alex Woloch, The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). Here Woloch develops a powerful new theory of the novel and imaginative fiction by demonstrating that the representation of any character takes place within a shifting field of narrative attention and obscurity. Each character—whether or not the central character or a subordinated one—emerges as a character only through his or her contingent space within the narrative as a whole. Because character-spaces mark the dramatic interaction between a character and his or her delimited position within a narrative, the totality of the organization and clashes between many character-spaces constitutes the text’s character system.

15. Díaz, interview by Moya.


or another, were interested in the formal conventions of genre; and quantitative, because we were looking for more precise—ideally, measurable—ways to establish generic differences.” Díaz, Oscar Wao, footnote 6, 20–21.

20. Díaz, Oscar Wao, 50.


22. Díaz, Oscar Wao, footnote 6, 20–21.


26. In addition to the decolonial work on aesthetics by Mignolo, Pérez, and Fanon I have discussed above, let me mention just a few more texts that take up the issues of aesthetics and aesthetic education in substantial ways: Immanuel Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, trans. Paul Geyer and Eric Mathews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man (New York: Dover, 2004); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); and Sianne Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). An aesthetic education—from Kant and Schiller to Spivak and Ngai—seems to be most easily defined by what it is not. It is not the teaching of logical form or matters of fact. Generally, aesthetics seems to be the defining characteristic of the humanities and the arts, with which it is usually identified. Kant and Schiller saw the central task of aesthetic education as the improvement of taste, claiming that this required the development of two tendencies: the capacity to produce aesthetic gratification from complex objects that are characterized by various Aristotelian forms of unity, and a dependence on beautiful and sublime objects as sources of aesthetic satisfaction.


28. Díaz, Oscar Wao, footnote 6, 22.

29. Junot Díaz may also be addressing another more complex educational issue of why boys in our U.S. schools are in academic trouble. Unlike Oscar and Yunior, boys are lagging behind girls from early primary to secondary school. Why are boys doing poorly in reading in early grades, and why do they fail to complete their higher education programs at a higher rate than their female counterparts? Are boys’ brains somehow hardwired differently than girls’ brains? Are there no role models for the boys? In all of his work his central characters—Yunior, Oscar, Lola—all champion reading and writing skills, for our world has become increasingly verbal. For an overview of why boys are failing, see Richard Whitmore’s Why Boys Fail: Saving Our Sons from an Educational System That’s Leaving Them Behind (New York: AMACON, 2010).

30. Díaz, Oscar Wao, 22.


33. Díaz, Oscar Wao, footnote 6, 22 (my emphasis).

34. Díaz, Oscar Wao, 92. See Maria Lugones’s “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” Hypatia 25, no. 4 (fall 2010): 742–59. For Lugones, the coloniality of gender involves the process of how “the colonized became subjects” in the first modernity, that is, “the tensions created by the brutal imposition of the modern, colonial gender system” (743).

35. Later, Yunior rewrites the Madeleine allegorical experience in Proust’s Recherche by contrasting young Marcel’s dipping a piece of the French cake in tea and tasting it and undergoing a vision of inner gardens and alleys that marvelously grow out of the teacup like Japanese paper flowers by depicting Oscar’s experiences of resurrecting his Caribbean past through a different geocultural dynamic. Once Belicia and Oscar arrive in Santo Domingo to visit their island family, Oscar breathes in the island’s “fécund tropical smell that he had never forgotten, that to him was more evocative than any madeleine . . . like a whole new country was materializing atop the ruins of old ones” (273). In this Antillean island setting, the planet’s exteriority does not lose its privileged position but helps release the impulse through smell and sight for Oscar’s imaginative production of a completely internal world which is that of his own past that is reborn and transfigured. Can whole historical periods and other worlds, as Yunior suggests, be hidden in the “dilapidated” tropicalized streets of the Dominican Republic and the Global South? Is Santo Domingo the ontological site of unfolded remembered time for Oscar? As Yunior brilliantly suggests, Oscar’s dynamic of the involuntary memory is tropologically metonymical: the whole of the Dominican Republic emerges from the Caribbean heat and smell of Santo Domingo’s “pollution and the thousands of motos and cars” on the city’s roads (273). Oscar thus compares his inner world, which is largely shaped by his reading of the speculative genres, with his Caribbean island’s spatialized urban smells and sounds. But we also discover, as I argued above, that Yunior’s tropological model of allegory in a wider range of varieties organizing Oscar’s world of reading the speculative fictive genres: in footnote six, Yunior models Oscar’s interiority as a hiding-place of secret and ideality, of dense aesthetic atmosphere.

36. In her study of the popular Dominican masculine imagination in the age and afterlife of the Trujillato, the anthropologist Lauren Denby incisively defines the tiguere as “the figure of the popular hero from the barrio—the quintessential Dominican underdog who gains power, prestige, and social status through a combination of extra-institutional wits, force of will, sartorial style and cojones. The tiguere seduces. . . . A man of the street, the tiguere operates through cunning, frequently via illicit means” (114). See Denby’s The Dictator’s Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

37. Díaz, Oscar Wao, footnote 6, 22.

38. Junot Díaz’s Yunior de las Casas (like Díaz himself) is well versed in queer theory and decolonial feminism’s theorization of power and gender. Here he is conjuncturally uniting Michel Foucault’s iconic work on power and gender—that far from enslaving its objects it constructs them as subjective agents—with his rewriting of Marcel Proust. Foucault’s idea of power does not only indirectly terrorize its subjects, it also directly

39. Diaz, Oscar Wao, 22.

40. Diaz, Oscar Wao, 22.

41. Diaz, Oscar Wao, 28.


43. Diaz, Oscar Wao, footnote 6, 22.

44. See Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvest the U.S. Big City* (New York: Verso, 2000).


46. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 34.

47. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 30.


49. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 33.

50. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 37.


52. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 38.

53. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 38.

54. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 32.

55. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 40.

56. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 40.

57. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 42.

58. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 42.

59. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 42.

60. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 43.

61. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 43.


63. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 38.

64. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 40.

65. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 41.

66. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 41.

67. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 175.

68. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 175.

69. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 177.

70. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 177.

71. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 175.


73. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 3.

74. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 175.

75. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 163.

76. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 163.

77. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 165.

78. Diaz, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 165.
79. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 165.
80. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 185.
81. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 189.
82. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 193.
83. See Jorge Luis Borges’s “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions Books, 1962), 36–44. In the form of a scholarly article, Borges’s iconic short story tells of the writer Pierre Menard, who has undertaken the task of rewriting Cervantes’s Don Quixote as a literal translation of his own creativity. Menard wants his text to “coincide with” the original—word for word. Because of Borges’s erudite reputation, the publication of this fiction sent readers to discover the author Pierre Menard. They unearthed a minor writer.
84. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 212.
85. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 212.
86. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 212.
87. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 212.
88. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 213.
89. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 213.
92. Díaz, This Is How You Lose Her, 213.
103. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983), 22.
104. Díaz, interview by Paula Moya.
105. Díaz, interview by Paula Moya.
106. Díaz, interview by Paula Moya.