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## Chapter 12

# AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: JUNOT DÍAZ AND ROBERTO BOLAÑO— TODAY’S MOST CELEBRATED CONTEMPORARY LATINO VOICES?

**Keywords:** Bolaño, *By Night in Chile*, Díaz, doubling, *Drown*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *The Savage Detectives*, *This Is How You Lose Her*, 2666

**MFS:** Both Junot Díaz (1968-) and Robert Bolaño (1953-2003) are immigrants (Dominican and Chilean). How does this impact their work and our views of them?

**DS:** Writers use the content they’re given to shape their fiction. That includes material from their native countries and their adopted countries. The emotional response to living in another place heightens their sense of being an outsider. That perspective broadens and deepens the narratives they write. But in this instance where we are examining the doubling characteristics—those similarities and differences that define authors—I’m more interested in the distinctions, rather than the parallels, that shape the “Latino” experience of these two writers.

Bolaño’s perspective resembles that of Gabriel García Márquez and, to a significantly lesser degree, Jorge Luis Borges, both of whom we’ve discussed together in an earlier essay in this collection. Just as Márquez lived in Columbia and later moved to Mexico, Bolaño lived in Chile and subsequently moved to Mexico. Both authors borrowed from their formative experiences in their native countries and both developed artistically in Mexico, their adopted Latin American country. Bolaño, and other Latin American writers including Borges, began his literary career writing poetry. Bolaño, resembling Márquez, worked initially as a journalist and was active in leftist causes. Bolaño, as with so many other Latin American writers including both Borges and Márquez, later moved to Europe, and this experience, filtered through a Latin American lens, shaped his writerly worldview.

It's also important to remember that Bolaño arrived in Mexico in 1968, one year after Márquez, who lived there, catapulted to fame with the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. By 1982 Márquez had received the Nobel Prize in literature and became the writer to best, even if Bolaño—rightfully, I believe—felt that Borges was unquestionably Latin America's more influential writer of fiction. Just as Márquez was anointed as the most famous Latin American Boom writer (fiction published *circa* the 1960s & 1970s), Bolaño has become celebrated as the most famous Post-Boom writer (fiction published *circa* the 1980s, 1990s, and into the new millennium). His posthumous novel *2666* was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award in America and Lev Grossman of *Time* magazine named it the "Best Book of 2008" (Grossman, 2008). By 2013 nineteen of his works were published in English by two literary New York publishing houses—New Directions and Farrar, Straus and Giroux (Tobar, 2013).

Bolaño wrote about how his immigrant experience shaped his perception of identity. He acknowledged living in three countries: Chile, Mexico, and Spain. However, he emphasized that "my only nationality is Chilean" (Bolaño, 2011d, p. 16).

In his invited talk "Literature and Exile", Bolaño stressed that the two words are by no means complimentary "since I don't believe in exile, especially not when the word sits next to the word *literature*" (Bolaño, 2011c, p. 38). He then elaborated on the so-called plight of the exiled author to emphasize that ultimately the only "homeland" of a "true writer" is to be found in books, whether they be physically manifested or psychologically embedded in one's memory.

Of course, a refrain is heard throughout Europe and it's the refrain of the suffering of exiles, a music composed of complaints and lamentations and a baffling nostalgia. Can one feel nostalgia for the land where one nearly died? Can one feel nostalgia for poverty, intolerance, arrogance, injustice? The refrain, intoned by Latin Americans and also by writers from other impoverished or traumatized regions, insists on nostalgia, on the return to the native land, and to me this refrain has always sounded like a lie. Books are the only homeland of the true writer, books that may sit on shelves or in the memory. (Bolaño, 2011c, pp. 41-42)

He also wrote about the concepts of writing, exile, and identity: "To be exiled is not to disappear but to shrink", Bolaño suggested, "to slowly or quickly get smaller and smaller until we reach our real height, the true height of the self. Swift, master of exile, knew this. For him *exile* was a secret word for *journey*". He added, "All literature carries exile within it, whether the writer has had to pick up and go at the age of twenty or has never left home" (Bolaño, 2011b, p. 49).

Junot Díaz's fiction, by contrast, has a distinctly Latino-American character. He was born in the Dominican Republic in 1968 and subsequently immigrated at age six to New Jersey with his family. Díaz writes in a distinctive Spanglish that I have characterized as "abrasive, fractured, poetic, and compelling" (Sheets, 2008b). But unlike the early 20<sup>th</sup> century novels of immigration where characters successfully assimilate or face being economically and socially marginalized, Díaz's Dominican characters live in a bifurcated world in which they rarely transcend their mean circumstances, in large part, because they're unwilling to acculturate. Assimilation, I would argue, is the most effective means of transcending the *barrio*.

Bolaño's fiction is both Latin American and simultaneously immersed in the European literary tradition. By contrast, Díaz's stories are Dominican-American, turning away from the

Central and South American, as well as the European perspectives in favor of the Caribbean-American experience. In comparing and contrasting the two approaches, Bolaño's literary sensibilities might be loosely grouped with Henry James, that is, the Latin American literary novel that has intrinsic ties to Europe. Díaz's perspective, by comparison, is a reaction to and rejection of the assimilationist immigrant-inspired fiction of Dreiser and Bellow in favor of an immersive Latino-American consciousness in which the "melting pot" metaphor of acculturation had been replaced by the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries with the a "rainbow" or "mosaic" of ethnic identities that retain their cultural differences, despite the enormous economic and social costs. Thus, Bolaño's fiction is, in a sense, "haute" literary while Díaz's writing is deliberately calibrated to appeal to "high" and "low", both literary readers and multicultural audiences.

**MFS: How would you characterize Díaz's story collection *Drown* and his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and their associations with the immigrant experience?**

**DS:** Díaz was the recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 2012, as well as the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for his celebrated novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). It would be hard to overestimate the impact of Díaz's fiction. His story collection *Drown* (1996) consisted of ten interconnected stories of the struggling immigrant experience of a fractured family—the sons, Rafael and Yunior, and their mother, Mami—as they are forced to overcome economic hardship in the Dominican Republic before, years later, joining the father, Papi, in the grim environs of New Jersey. Most of the stories are narrated by Yunior. Here's a sample.

The initial fights, with Mami throwing our silverware into wild orbits, lasted a week. After a fork pierced him in the cheek, Papi decided to move out, just until things cooled down. He took a small bag of clothes and broke out early in the morning. On his second night away from the house, with the puta asleep at his side, Papi had a dream that the money Mami's father had promised him was spiraling away in the wind like bright bright birds. The dream blew him out of bed like a gunshot. Are you OK? The puta asked and he shook his head. I think I have to go somewhere, he said. He borrowed a clean mustard-colored guayabera from a friend, put himself in a concho and paid our abuelo a visit. (Díaz cited in Sheets, 2008b)

Díaz's fiction borrows from the memoirs by Piri Thomas and Edward Rivera—*Down Those Mean Streets* (1967) and *Family Installments* (1982), respectively— that use fractured Spanglish to convey the Puerto Rican experience of living in America. If Rivera's technique features layered memories, Thomas's approach expresses explosive rage conveyed by means of present tense. By omitting italics when using Spanish, Díaz brings the reader into the bifurcated consciousness of Dominicans navigating between two worlds. His stories are emotionally affecting. His point of view shifts; the voice modulates; we experience Yunior's shifting sensibility—sensitive, calculated, and tough—with the prospect that in time he may come to emulate his older brother Rafael, the street-wise thug (Sheets, 2008b).

For most readers *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the book that demonstrates Díaz's literary prowess. It's a novel that weaves the history of the brutal authoritarian dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina (1930-1961) in the Dominican Republic, a

regime that killed an estimated 50,000 people, with the tragic fate of one family over the course of three generations. Beli, the mother of Oscar and Lola Wao, is orphaned as an infant in the Dominican Republic. Directly or indirectly, the entire family is harmed by the Trujillo dictatorship. The father, a doctor, is imprisoned, tortured, and killed. The mother, unable to cope, dies after the imprisonment of her husband and the birth of her third child. The two older daughters are sent to live with other families. Their lives end prematurely and tragically.

The sole surviving child, infant Beli, is orphaned and eventually sold for a trifling sum to another family. A few years later, after having been woefully mistreated, she is rescued by an aunt. Beli matures, gets into trouble, quits school, and becomes pregnant by “the Gangster”, who is related by marriage to Trujillo. The Gangster’s henchmen beat her nearly to death, causing the loss of her unborn child. Miraculously, Beli survives and flees for her life to the United States where she is exiled. There, she has two children, Oscar and Lola. Years later she dies of cancer. Her son, Oscar, becomes, in effect, the symbolic representation of the next generation of Dominicans to fall prey to tragedy when he is murdered while visiting the Dominican Republic. Thus, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is about the Dominican curse—what Díaz refers to as “the Curse and the Doom of the New World”—and how the troubled destiny of the Dominican Republic is revisited, again and again, upon the lives of its people.

The story is narrated by Yunior, the primary character in *Drown*, who reappears in the novel as a young adult. Now older, wiser, tougher, he is romantically involved with Lola while in college when not distracted by momentary trysts. At Lola’s suggestion he rooms with her nerdish, bookish, and overweight brother. Later, Oscar attempts suicide, ostensibly due to a failed romance. Upon graduation he travels to the Dominican Republic and becomes infatuated with a prostitute, Ybón. He ultimately loses his virginity to her only to be subsequently shot by surrogates of “the capitán” (a police captain), her jealous lover.

But this plot about Oscar is really only a contextual backdrop to present the Dominican-American story and to illustrate how the brutal Trujillo dictatorship impacted the lives of successive generations of Dominicans both in that country and in the United States. Indeed, in Díaz’s hands *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* becomes a quasi-historical narrative in which a nation’s tragic destiny becomes manifest in the diaspora story of the Cabral/Wao family. But it’s more than that since Díaz borrows and reshapes the concept of “Moira”, the “cruel fate” of the Dominican Republic, developed by Juan Bosch. Bosch actively opposed the Trujillo regime and was exiled for much of his life. He briefly served in 1963 as the first democratically elected President of the Dominican Republic. Today, he continues to be celebrated by many for his political, social, historical, and literary contributions. For Bosch, and by extension for Díaz who recasts Bosch’s historical metaphor into a literary mythology, the tragic destiny of the Dominican Republic extends back to the beginnings of colonial imperialism when Christopher Columbus first set foot on Hispaniola in 1492. It continues today through its post-colonial travesties—including, of course, the support by the United States government of the Trujillo regime. Permit me to quote from the opening lines of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* that invoke the spectral presence of the “fukú”.

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. (Díaz, 2008b, p. 1)

In a 2015 poll of American literary critics undertaken by BBC Culture, the “arts section” of BBC’s globally focused website, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* was acclaimed the best 21<sup>st</sup> century novel thus far (Flood, 2015).

**MFS: Bolaño’s *By Night in Chile* (2003) was the first of his novels to appear in English here in America. How does it compare to what many regard as his best novels *The Savage Detectives* (2007) and *2666* (2008)?**

**DS:** *By Night in Chile* is, I believe, Bolaño’s most accessible novel. It takes place during the Pinochet military dictatorship (1973-1990), which received CIA backing to overthrow the democratically elected Marxist, Salvador Allende. Some 3,000 individuals were killed or “disappeared” during Pinochet’s rule in Chile. As many as 80,000 were incarcerated and an estimated 30,000 were tortured. Estimates are that 200,000 Chileans were driven into exile.

The novella, presented as an extended monologue by a dying Father Urrutia, tells the story of a priest who is a literary critic. It is a sustained attempt by a feverishly ill man to defend and justify both his artistry and his actions that made him complicit with the Pinochet regime. The sins of Father Urrutia become, by extension, the crimes of a generation of artists who continued writing—business as usual—during that horrific regime in Chile, as well as other artists who collaborated with right-wing dictatorships throughout Latin America. Indeed, Chris Andrews, one of Bolaño’s principal English translators, has described his entire corpus as representing “an anatomy of evil” (Andrews, 2014, p. xvi).

Bolaño’s literary fame began in earnest after *The Savage Detectives* was published in Spanish in 1998. It won the Premio Herralde de Novela, as well as the Premio Rómulo Gallegos. The latter prize was, in effect, “a mark of consecration in the Hispanic literary field” since its recipients included some of the greatest Latin American writers—Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, and Javier Marías (Andrews, 2014, p. 1).

*The Savage Detectives* is a digressive novel interleaving the poetic experience of creating a new movement with a “who done it” literary mystery. It’s presented in first person and relayed by a number of narrators. Essentially it’s a detective story about the search by two young men—Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, leaders of a poetic movement known as “Visceral Realism”—for the famed 1920s poet, Cesárea Tinajero. Of course, “Visceral Realism” is a fictive substitute for the poetry movement “*infrarrealismo*”, which Bolaño actually founded, and the character Belano, obviously, is the author’s alter-ego. *Infrarrealismo* looked to surrealism for inspiration, a way of resisting the towering literary influence of the Mexican writers such as poet Octavio Paz, as well as the novelists Juan Rulfo and Gabriel García Márquez.

Part I of *The Savage Detectives*, entitled “Mexicans Lost in Mexico”, is narrated by Juan García Madero and presents the Visceral Realists circa 1975. Part II features some 40 narrators interviewed over 20 years (1976-1996) about the leaders of this movement. The

interviewees speculate about these poets: Are they drifters, elitists, bohemians? This detective story, in effect, designates the reader as a literary sleuth empowered to solve this mystery. Part 3, “The Deserts of Sonora”, is a continuation of Part I. Again, it’s narrated by Madero who is with Lima and Belano, as well as a prostitute, Lupe. They appear on the verge of discovering the poet, Tinajero. In hot pursuit of the Visceral Realists are a pimp and a corrupt cop.

Here’s a passage from the diary of Madero, who narrates the first and third sections of *The Savage Detectives*, that conveys Bolaño’s style.

I went back to the bar on Bucareli, but the visceral realists never showed up. While I was waiting for them, I spent my time reading and writing. The regulars, a group of silent, pretty grisly-looking drunks, never once took their eyes off me.

Results of five hours of waiting: four beers, four tequilas, a plate of tortilla *sopes* that I didn’t finish (they were half spoiled), a cover-to-cover reading of Álamo’s latest book of poems (which I brought so I could make fun of Álamo with my new friends), seven texts written in the style of Ulises Lima, or rather, in the style of the one poem I’d read, or really just heard. The first one was about the *sopes*, which smelled of the grave; the second was about the university: I saw it in ruins; the third was about the university (me running naked in the middle of a crowd of zombies); the fourth was about the moon over Mexico City; the fifth about a dead singer; the sixth about a secret community living in the sewers of Chapultepec; and the seventh about a lost book and friendship. Those were the results, plus a physical and spiritual sense of loneliness. (Bolaño, 2007, pp. 7-8)

If readers long for linear narratives and desire carefully plotted novels grounded in quotidian realities offering tidy conclusions, Bolaño’s fiction is sure to disappoint. As Chris Andrews notes, “Bolaño is an anarchist in the way that he privileges voluntary associations and spontaneous forms of solidarity over institutions” and intrinsically “antihierarchical” in his disposition. His “romanticism is apparent in his privileging of poetry, understood broadly, not as a kind of text or specialized activity, but as an adventurous (which is not to say spectacular) way of living” (Andrews, 2014, pp. xvi-xvii).

Bolaño, our romantic dreamer, employs poetic symbolic imagery. His stories are teeming with passion, violence, and alternatives to our known world. Featuring duels, brawls, and the abiding stench of death, his fiction might be characterized as a series of unobtainable quests destined to conclude inconclusively. Think of it as a prose-poem, a *cri de coeur* against the dehumanizing taint of the world, a heroic anti-heroism.

It’s virtually impossible to provide a plot summary for *2666*, his novel published in 2004, a year after he died. At nearly 900 pages, it is an apocalyptic novel steeped in violence and death. It features several narratives. One concerns a horrific mass murder of women who died between 1993 and 1997 in Santa Teresa, Mexico that is drawn from the real-life massacre of some 400 women near Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Another key narrative is the quest by critics to uncover the literary substance of Benno von Archimboldi, a famous and reclusive German novelist who served as a soldier in World War II along the Eastern Front. Naturally, this pursuit draws parallels with the Visceral Realists’ hunt for Cesárea Tinajero in *The Savage Detectives*. The novel *2666* appears to address our 21<sup>st</sup> century degeneration that verges upon apocalypse. It has a wide cast of characters, locations, time periods, and narratives that ultimately render a literary mentality, rather than a conventionally plotted realistic story.

Amaia Gabantxo, writing for the *Times Literary Supplement*, characterizes it, appropriately enough, as “an exceptionally exciting literary labyrinth” (Gabantxo, “2005, p. 23). Adam Kirsch suggests “2666 is an epic of whispers and details, full of buried structures and intuitions that seem too evanescent, or too terrible, to put into words” (Kirsch, 2008). Francisco Goldman contends that the narrators conveying the stories appear “to represent various of its literary influences, from European avant-garde to critical theory to pulp fiction”. The final approach toward Santa Teresa where the murders occurred and where Archiboldi might be found renders a conclusion, Goldman argues, “just short of whatever the epiphany might have been” (Goldman, 2007).

But not everyone feels so inclined to anoint Bolaño as the literary genius, the heir apparent to either Márquez or Borges.

My perspective is that Bolaño was talented. His fiction has a distinctive voice and narrative style that sets him apart from his contemporaries. But it never measures up to the stature of literature written by Márquez or Borges. Bolaño’s fiction is feminized. It focuses on literary poets and dreamers that inhabit a state of consciousness divorced from reality.

This lack of substantive engagement with the world drains Bolaño’s stories of real characters, real plots, and real narrative consequences. His characters, consequently, are lifeless archetypes. Their actions are inconsequential because of the author’s failure to connect their motivations and behavior with the actual world in which they live. As with so many literary writers today, Bolaño conveys a sense of moral outrage against social injustices that resonates with the feminized literary reader. But absent reality in his fiction, how effective can righteousness actually be?

Bolaño’s untimely death brought him a measure of global fame extending well beyond Spain and Latin America. Nevertheless, I believe his fiction, while worthy, nevertheless, is not transformative. For that reason it reflects the generally diminished stature of literature in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. For readers interested in understanding my argument about the dismal state of fiction today, I direct them to several of my essays posted on Literary Gulag (Sheets, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008a, 2008b).

Nor am I alone in my assessment about the outsized critical acclaim attributed to Bolaño’s fiction. Argentinian writer Alberto Manguel also has his reservations.

Bolaño has suffered a fate worse than being unjustly neglected: he’s been unjustly praised. One or two of his novels are memorable experiments, but most readers, looking in his writing for the revolutionary genius that his devotees claim to have discovered, will be disappointed. A chosen master need not necessarily be himself masterly, and we can hope that Bolaño’s followers will succeed where the posthumously appointed leader did not. (Manguel cited by Christopher Tayler, 2009)

**MFS: Love seems to be a central theme of Díaz’s recent story collection *This is How You Lose Her* (2012). How does this book encompass the various forms of love, and all the tangled emotions that go along with it?**

**DS:** This collection of stories is not so much about love, broadly understood, but about the Dominican fallout from the “love” experience, which all too frequently devolves into infidelity and the heartaches that ensue when sexual betrayal trumps love and commitment. Compounding the grievous wounds, many infidelities are discovered by means of words—a

letter, a journal, an e-mail. Yunior, who is featured in many of the stories, attempts to make his case directly to the reader.

I'm not a bad guy. I know how that sounds—defensive, unscrupulous—but it's true. I'm like everybody else: weak, full of mistakes, but basically good. Magdalena disagrees though. She considers me a typical Dominican man: a *sucio*, an asshole. See, many months ago, when Magda was still my girl, when I didn't have to be careful about almost anything, I cheated on her with this chick who had tons of eighties free-style hair. Didn't tell Magda about it, either. You know how it is. A smelly bone like that, better off buried in the backyard of your life. Magda only found out because homegirl wrote her a fucking *letter*. And the letter had *details*. Shit you wouldn't even tell your boys drunk. (Díaz, 2012, p. 3)

This opening passage and the book overall has none of the clinical postmodern brilliance of David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (1999), a series of fictive interviews that reveal the predatory actions of "hideous men" and the measures they're prepared to take in their malevolent conquest of women. Rather, Díaz plies the sympathies of his audience to overlook these transgressions primarily by exposing the reader to Yunior's pain.

*This Is How You Lose Her* can be digested in a few easy gulps. It builds upon Díaz's pioneering collection of stories *Drown*, but without the dazzle, excitement, and literary heft of his first book. As Francine Prose charitably noted in the conclusion of her article for *The New York Review of Books*, the stories in *This Is How You Lose Her* "make us hope that Yunior will get over his latest heartbreak" and that "Díaz will remember what he so ably demonstrated in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*", namely, that "a wider, brighter, and more interesting world . . . exists beyond the circle of hell reserved for serial cheaters suffering the torments of remorse and romantic obsession" (Prose, 2012).

But there are more challenges in Díaz's fiction than those to which Prose alludes. The female characters in his stories, as I noted in my Literary Gulag essay about him, "never depart far from their prescriptive roles. Mothers are portrayed as victims and emotionally scarred" while "young women are objectified". However, the greatest impediment Díaz faces is, as I suggested, that "the characters are deprived of human agency—the chance to alter destiny by means of their own efforts" when he trades heavily in colonial and post-colonial victimology as is evident in *The Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Sheets, 2008b).

Finally, there is the question of whether Díaz's Spanglish, which can be haunting and poetic, nevertheless, dooms his fictional characters—and perhaps even some of his ardent young readers—to a social and economic purgatory by celebrating Dominicans living on the cultural margins of society who fail their families and their loved ones while willfully resisting acculturation. Certainly, these heartbreaking stories make for gripping dramas. Nevertheless, they glorify circumstances that ultimately lead to societal wreckage.

**MFS: Sadly, Bolaño died relatively young at age 50. Some of the details upon which his stories are founded are now contested, and the author has been accused of exaggerating his debauched lifestyle to enhance his literary reputation. Do the stories of a writer survive his death?**

**DS:** An interesting case might be made that Bolaño became his greatest fiction by stoking rumors of his “reputation as a hard-living literary outlaw” (Rohter, 2009). Here was a poet who for years labored in obscurity and decided, after having a son, that he had to provide for his family. Consequently, Bolaño began writing fiction. By the early 90s, having been diagnosed with what would prove to be a fatal liver problem, “he holed up in his home on the Costa Brava and started turning out books at an extraordinary rate” (Tayler, 2009).

But in recent years many of his more dramatic stories have been shown to be creative fabrications designed to enhance his literary reputation. Several of his friends now challenge his account of having returned to Chile to oppose the Pinochet regime. These include Richard Pascoe, a sociologist and a diplomat, who traveled to Chile to support Allende’s revolution in 1970. During the violence associated with Pinochet’s *coup d’état*, hundreds of artists who had supported Allende retreated to the Mexican Embassy located in Santiago until they could safely be allowed to return to Mexico. But Bolaño, he insisted, was “definitely not there”. Later, when Pascoe asked Bolaño if he had been in Chile at the time, his response was so vague it might as well have been a resounding “No” (Rohter, 2009).

Bolaño’s “autobiographical essay” entitled “Beach” was published in the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* in 2000. It was included in a series of short pieces written by some 30 authors who were asked to contribute an essay about their worst summer. Bolaño’s begins melodramatically with “I gave up heroin and went home and began the methadone treatment administered at the outpatient clinic” (Bolaño, 2011a, p. 260). However his widow, Carolina López, has denied that he was a heroin addict. Indeed, the accuracy of Bolaño’s account has been so vigorously challenged that his essay, once considered autobiographical, has more recently been reclassified as “fiction”. Manuel Llorente, the literary editor who accepted Bolaño’s submission, acknowledged that “I knew Bolaño was a writer who played with reality, who cultivated ambiguities and false identities, so I didn’t care whether the narrative he submitted was true or invented”. He added, “To me, the only thing that mattered was its literary value” (Rohter, 2009). Rodrigo Fresán, an Argentinian writer living in Spain, suggested that because Bolaño embellished so many aspects of his life that “Roberto’s biography is going to be interesting to read, and I am thankful that I was only his friend and not the one who is going to have to write it” (Rohter, 2009).

In answer to your question, a writer hungering for fame and literary immortality today is often willing to do almost anything to get his fiction noticed.

**MFS: Both Díaz and Bolaño seem to have been impacted by politics, activism, causes and advocacy. Did these endeavors help or hinder their writing or simply reflect their priorities?**

**DS:** Today, most Latin American writers prove their bona fides by presenting their leftist credentials. Increasingly that’s true of writers in our country as well.

**MFS: What do these writers tell us about the state of fiction today?**

**DS:** These two very talented writers represent the contemporary Latino voices of today. But the question for Díaz, particularly after *This is How You Lose Her*, is whether he can reinvent himself in order to demonstrate that he's capable of a range of literary writing that transcends identity politics and Dominican stereotypes to presents us with something profoundly new. As I noted in an essay about him posted on Literary Gulag, "Let us hope that Mr. Díaz possesses the courage to write that truly great work of literature—tackling the assimilation story, or any other he sees fit, with brio and maturity". But to do this, I point out, "he must be prepared to challenge himself and his audience, permitting his fiction to transcend the limitations imposed by writing just another diaspora tale of hardship and struggle, vulgarity and titillation, set against that prerequisite backdrop of social justice" (Sheets, 2008b).

With respect to Bolaño, there's no question that his literary style represents a distinctive Latin American voice. I've also found some of his short articles in his collection *Between Parentheses* interesting. Then, I read his short story "The Insufferable Gaucho", which was written toward the end of his life. It's a wonderful story, flawlessly composed, deftly plotted, stylishly written while confounding the reader's expectations. Indeed, the spirit of Borges permeates Bolaño's Argentinian tale, which actually refers to Borges's gem of a story, "The South". Consequently, just when I'm prepared to conclude that Bolaño's *oeuvre* is vastly more hype than substance, I found myself, once again, intrigued.

The larger challenge, of course, hanging over 21<sup>st</sup> century fiction is how do we create meaningful stories in an age when fiction has ceased to be viable? We live in an era when deep, thoughtful reading and knowledge of the Great Books has all but died. The Internet has generated a new orality in which the written word is secondary to visual and auditory stimuli. Today, literary novels are, arguably, as marginalized as poetry became in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Let me conclude this Q&A by suggesting that notwithstanding the contributions of Díaz and Bolaño, fiction—and the humanities overall—have become almost irrelevant given the current cultural climate (Sheets, 2010; Sheets, 2015).

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