

### Imperialism is a Plague, Too: Transatlantic Pandemic Imaginaries in César Mba Abogo's "El sueño de Dayo" (2007) and Junot Díaz's "Monstro" (2012)



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As the world is in the midst of a global health pandemic, focus on the continued other crises that have plagued our world is both minimised and increased. It is minimised because COVID-19 seems to have taken centre stage in all news outlets and in much academic research and it continues to impact everyone's daily life. However, it has also increased the focus on structural and systemic inequalities, which are pandemics of sorts as well. The very marginalised communities that are more vulnerable to COVID-19 have also continually suffered from these inequalities in the past. Our current health crisis is entangled with all these other ones, including our climate emergency, our racism pandemic and many others.

This brief paper engages with pre-COVID-19 pandemic imaginaries in two short stories. The first is authored by Equatoguinean César Mba Abogo entitled "El sueño de Dayo" ("Dayo's Dream")<sup>1</sup> (2007) and the second is by US-Dominican author Junot Díaz and entitled "Monstro", first published in *The New Yorker* in 2012. The transatlantic connections between these two works inscribe pandemic imaginaries into the history of the Atlantic trade and colonialism, the diseases developed then, and into contemporary histories of mobility and migration, put into a halt in time of lockdown. This comparative investigation proposes to identify the use of the pandemic trope in fiction as a manner to emphasise colonialism as a metaphorical pandemic. I argue that the mobilisation of contagion and disease in the short stories serves to highlight the continuity of uneven developments and dynamics in formerly colonised spaces. This is crucial when considering that sf tropes like alien invasions and abductions, environmental apocalypses, and contagion plots, such as pandemics, are not merely works of the imagination; they are a reality, having taken place for indigenous and previously colonised communities (Whyte). Moreover, to support this argument, I also focus on the fact that in both narratives one can displace monstrous tropes from a colonial and racist rhetoric onto (neo-)imperial practices to signify the consequences of colonial dynamics as bringing forth destruction and extinction. This is seen in particular by identifying "Western" countries—broadly described as "United Powers" and the "Great Powers" in each short story—as responsible for the creation and spread of the epidemic and pandemic scenarios depicted. The conflation of these Euro-American-based powers in the two stories emphasises how most of the Global North can be seen as having benefitted and continuing to benefit from colonialism, whether through formal colonial relations or mercantilism and because of the advantages it generated for the Global North, which continue to be at the basis of its current wealth and productive economies.

Colonisation also continues to impact former colonies economically, socio-politically, environmentally and infrastructurally. This is the reason why imperialism can be articulated as a metaphorical pandemic, though one with material consequences: It invades, exploits to the level of extinction and then leaves its victims like patients affected by an illness's long-term effects. Countries on the African continent—as noted below Mba Abogo's narrative operates a specific conflation of the continent to exemplify these dynamics—and Haiti, as the spaces of the two narratives considered here, are crucial for this discussion. Indeed, through different yet similar histories of colonisation and (neo-)imperialism, they continue to live through these uneven consequences, as I will discuss below.<sup>2</sup> It is important, though, that these spaces are more than this history and, as Gina Athena Ulysses and Felwine Sarr argue in each context, they are more than depictions of victimisation and monstrosity.

Mba Abogo's short story is part of a collection entitled *El porteador de Marlow. Canción negra sin color (Marlow's Helmsman. The Black Song without Colour)* and the work considers throughout the way in which all of Europe has profited from colonialism and is still profiting from its extension in various forms of imperialism today. This is done in particular through the setting of all the pieces in different invented places located on the European and African continents. Indeed, the collection does not directly refer to Equatorial Guinea or Spain, but rather sets its writings in imaginary places referring to Africa and Europe more broadly and “[t]hus [the pieces in the collection] transcend particular national contexts and point to more abstract geopolitical power structures determined by notions of ‘center’ and ‘periphery,’ of belonging and alienness, and by positionalities of privilege and exclusion” (Brost 35). In these terms, it becomes clear that the collection attempts to give a voice to different diasporas across the European continent, and to re-centre the “Black subject” which has been marginalised in different socio-economic, political and cultural spheres.

In “El sueño de Dayo” (“Dayo's Dream”), the narrator and character Dayo, a young man from an unnamed African country who has recently moved to Europe to study, dreams that Africa stops existing after the receipt of humanitarian aid afflicts all Africans with a strange illness from which they cannot seem to recover. This echoes dynamics in Díaz's short story “Monstro”—taking place in the Dominican Republic as a strange and unknown epidemic is slowly developing on the other side of the border in Haiti—in which we are made to recognise that apocalyptic scenarios often speak to the daily lived experiences of formerly colonised countries. Monstrosity in particular comes to play a crucial role in both narratives: in Mba Abogo's short story African characters are described as “savage” and violent towards each other following the receipt of the fatal aid: “Los negros se enfrentaron unos a otros como perros por aquellos alimentos, se arrancaron la piel a tiras y se devoraron unos a otros” (“Black people fought each other for this food, they skinned each other, devoured each other”) (20). This depiction is followed by the description of major news outlets' coverage, including that of BBC and CNN, of the humanitarian intervention and its subsequent result in a pandemic. The news outlets appear as voyeuristic and feeding on people's misery as they cover live what they describe as “el Apocalipsis de la estirpe condenada a

cuatrocientos años de agonía” (“the Apocalypse of the lineage condemned to four hundred years of agony”) (20). This phrase invokes the four hundred years of colonisation and exploitation of the continent as a catastrophic and ongoing event. This illuminates a connection between the literal pandemic unfolding and the metaphorical one that colonisation has been for the continent. This type of discourse is associated with Euro-American fantasies concerning formerly colonial spaces, in particular narratives of the African continent, which, as Patrick Brantlinger argues “grew ‘dark’ as Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of ‘savage customs’ in the name of civilization” (166).<sup>3</sup> Outside of the fictional world, this imagery is still powerful in the perception of the continent abroad, which is often conflated as one big country and described as a place of hunger, violence and “under-development”, fetishised through images of starving children and violent strife.

A similar monstrosity is deployed in Díaz’s short story in the increasingly violent depiction of the victims of an unknown pandemic. The action of “Monstro” unfolds from the perspective of a first-person narrator who has returned home from the US during the summer break to visit his mother in the Dominican Republic. She had moved back to the island to seek treatment being unwell, facing a much more dire situation in the US given the costliness and unevenness of its health care system. While this is a pre-COVID-19 imaginary, this type of situation only appears more prescient in the current health crisis that crowds hospitals all over the world and, in the US in particular where minorities have the least access to the health care system and are often the primary victims of the pandemic due to systemic and structural inequalities (“Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups”). In “Monstro”, the depictions of the people affected by the epidemic, which at first is concentrated in Port-au-Prince, evolves from describing them as “viktims [sic]” (84) to “possessed” (98) to “invaders” (101), and, as the illness evolves the city is bombed to avoid further contagion:

Nothing was working except for old diesel burners and the archaic motos with no points or capacitors. People were trying out different explanations. An earthquake. A nuke. A Carrington event. The Coming of the Lord. Reports arriving over the failing fatlines claimed that Port-au-Prince had been destroyed, that Haiti had been destroyed, that thirteen million screaming Haitian refugees were threatening the borders, that Dominican military units had been authorized to meet the *invaders* – the term the gov was now using – with ultimate force. (101, emphasis in original)

The use of the term “invaders” raises the issue of migration and the appalling treatment of Haitian labour migrants in the DR since the establishment of Rafael Trujillo’s race-based anti-Haitian autocratic rule that resulted in violence such as the *El Corte* (the cut) massacre that took place in 1937 (Martínez 115-116). This is continued in the 21st century in the obscene 23 September 2013 ruling by the Dominican constitutional court, “[a]ptly described as civil death, social apartheid, and administrative genocide” (Shoaff 59), which established that only persons born in the DR to Dominican parents or legal residents are regarded as citizens. Considering

Díaz's background as a US-Dominican author, this depiction of migrants' treatment can be read as spilling over from the Haitian-Dominican context to that of the South-North migration, especially when bearing in mind the treatment of immigrants in the US under the Trump administration. Migration is, to many extents, a legacy of colonialism, because of the lack of infrastructure in the countries that were drained (of resources and peoples) and exploited during the colonial period and then forced to take IMF loans during the decolonial period.<sup>4</sup> As Christina Sharpe argues, the:

ongoing crisis of capital in the form of migrants fleeing lives made unlivable is becoming more and more visible, or, perhaps, less and less able to be ignored. [...] The crisis is often framed as one of refugees fleeing internal economic stress and internal conflicts, but subtending this crisis is the crisis of capital and the wreckage from the continuation of military and other colonial projects of US/European wealth extraction and immiseration. (59)

The racist and discriminatory rhetoric surrounding immigration in the Global North can also be seen as such a legacy as it stems from residual traces of colonial and imperial discourse.

Moreover, monstrosity is suggested by the short story's title itself, which as Sarah Quesada notes is "phonetic for *monstruo* in Spanish" (292), which she argues reflects the term's "Latin root *monere*, which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means *to warn* and *to instruct*" (292). Scholars have, in general, focused solely on this connection of *monstrum* to *monere*: interestingly, none seem to have considered the close etymological relation that the term 'monster' bears with 'monument'. Indeed, *monere* also means "to remind, bring to one's recollection", which is the root for the term monument, to which the adverbial suffix *-mentum* is added ("Monster"). The myriad of terms associated with memory and commemoration implied in the word is crucial in understanding monstrosity and monstrous figures as monuments of colonialism. Crucially, monuments play a critical role in relation to colonisation, being physical reminders of western hegemony. Hence, the monstrous figures in these short stories—the zombie-like "viktims" in "Monstro" and the cannibal-like ill Africans in "Dayo's Dream"—can be understood as literary monuments of colonial relations, signifiers that represent a vestige of this history, and they can be read as depicting the monumental ruins, or material traces, of colonial pasts and monstrosity as representing the corporeal embodiment of empire's violence.

In particular, this violence can be seen in the fact that both pandemic scenarios depicted in Mba Abogo's and Díaz's works can be identified as resulting from colonial and neo-imperial dynamics and are considered to be the responsibility of Euro-American countries. In Mba Abogo's short story this link is made in the following description: "un doctor escandinavo, con la piel tan blanca que daba pena mirarle, denunció que el mana lanzado a los negros, por un descuido que nadie sabía bien cómo, transmitía una enfermedad mortal y contagiosa" ("a Scandinavian doctor, whose skin was so white it was painful to behold, reported that the mana thrown to black people, due to an unexplainable oversight, transmitted a contagious and fatal illness") (20). In this quotation, the description of the "Scandinavian doctor"'s whiteness as painful to behold inverts

racist discourses and thereby emphasises the arbitrary and epistemic violence of these types of rhetoric that are themselves monstrous monuments of colonialism. Along the same line, the identification of all Africans here as only black people plays on usual Euro-American stereotypes that conflate the continent to one country and ethnicity overlooking its heterogeneity.

Moreover, the identification of humanitarian aid as responsible for the pandemic highlights the unintended issues that these aid programmes often create, which perpetuate uneven dynamics already in place as consequences of colonialism. In Díaz's short story, I argue that the association of the epidemic with climate change similarly aligns the responsibility for global warming with the Global North as different colonial dynamics have accelerated and exacerbated anthropogenic climate change in former colonies and in particular in the Caribbean.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is notable that from the beginning of the short story, the narrator continually describes the epidemic alongside issues related to anthropogenic climate change, such as abnormally fluctuating temperatures: "The infection showed up on a small boy in the relocation camps outside Port-au-Prince, in the hottest March in recorded history" (81) or the exploitation of nature: "Strangest thing, though: once infected, few victims died outright; they just seemed to linger on and on. Coral reefs might have been adios on the ocean floor, but they were alive and well on the arms and backs and heads of the infected" (82). This rhetorical device informs the reader of the connection existing between the impending climate crisis, the culpability of the Global North, and the epidemic narrated in the short story. This connection continues to exist outside of this fictional world, considering the context in which COVID-19 emerged, wherein the destruction of natural habitats for a number of animal species has allowed for zoonotic diseases to spread more easily, as contact zones between humans and non-human animals continue to be compressed (Dobson et al.).

Furthermore, in both short stories, the solutions proposed and enacted to resolve the pandemics are genocidal. In "Dayo's Dream", the description is reminiscent of the stereotypical view of the "new-world-explorer" machete in hand traversing the jungle: "Con machetes y trajes especiales suministrados rápida, diligente y eficazmente por las Potencias Unidas, y sudando copiosamente, iban rematando a todos los enfermos. No se podía correr el riesgo de que le transmitieran la enfermedad a alguien. La operación fue un éxito. Se mataron a niños, mujeres, hombres, ancianos" ("With machetes and special garments rapidly, diligently and effectively supplied by the United Powers, and sweating profusely, they went to finish off all the people who were sick. One could not take the chance that the illness be transmitted to anyone else. The operation was a success. Children, women, men and elderly people were killed") (20-21). Additionally, in the narrative, the "United Powers" erect a monument in front of their headquarters to commemorate the victims of this sacrifice (21), allowing us once more to associate monstrosity, monuments and colonialism with the extinction that colonialism brings forth and that a statue cannot replace.

Echoing Mba Abogo's "United Powers", in Díaz's "Monstro" the narrator describes the decision of the "Great Powers" to bomb Port-au-Prince (99). The aftermath is felt as far as Cuba, Puerto Rico and Florida and it has many consequences, including a power outage, which itself

provokes more death: “Tens of thousands died as a direct result of the power failure” (101). While this line appears to have further meaning in the wake of the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, which inspired Díaz’s narrative, it also now echoes the state of other Caribbean islands since the repeated hurricanes and violent storms of 2017 and 2019, which have destroyed infrastructure across the region, leaving countless people without electricity or shelter. Additionally, as Quesada notes, the use of language in describing the event, and particularly of the word “white”, leaves space for multiple interpretations: “The Detonation Event—no one knows what else to call it—turned the entire world white” (Díaz 99). Quesada focuses on its relation to the race binary and its extension to lightness and illumination: “In this case, whiteness as the counterpoint of its binary other is produced by such intense illumination that it does not reveal clarity. Rather, its brightness is blinding, both literally [...] and figuratively, as it occludes the distinction of reality. The reinscription of the universal in light, like the dichotomy of blanqueamiento [whitening] and negrura [blackness], is thus reversed in ‘Monstro’” (312-313). She discusses how the lack of illumination destabilises the race binary and thus re-evaluates it, showing how, in fact, whiteness and light provoke “occlusion and blindness” (313). I want to bring this argument further by proposing that the use of the term can also be seen as a “whitening” or “white-washing” of history and identity. The bombing, metaphorically, represents European and North American colonial and imperial agendas and interventionism in the Caribbean and South America; the destruction symbolises the writing of this region’s history and identity from a one-sided Euro-American-centric perspective, which returns to my above discussion concerning the use of monstrous figures and tropes to describe former colonies.

As Mba Abogo’s story progresses, Dayo, the main character repeatedly dreams about the disappearance of the African continent provoked by the pandemic, which fills him with dread. The storyline begins to blur the boundaries between dream and reality, pushing Dayo to confront his fear and his dream. As he does, death comes upon him and, as he is about to die, he understands that “[s]u vida estaba anclada en la historia” (“his life was anchored in history”) (22). This quote can be read through what Sharpe describes as “a past that is not the past” (13), insofar as the final line of the short story concludes its message by inviting the reader to reconsider contemporary events and developments as consequences of our colonial and neo-imperial past. Crucially, Sharpe explains this as one of the ways in which black people globally live in the wake:

The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, of undoing the ‘racial calculus and . . . political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago’ (Hartman 2008, 6) and that live into the present. [...] I’ve been trying to articulate a method of encountering *a past that is not past*. A method along the lines of a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are. (13, my emphasis)

The formulation of “a past that is not the past” reminds us that colonialism, neo-imperialism and racism are a pandemic too, one that began a long time ago and that continues to spread



and perpetuate structural and systemic inequalities. Díaz's "Monstro" and Mba Abogo's "Dayo's Dream" remind us of this reality and demonstrate how epidemic and pandemic imaginaries can be mobilised to articulate colonial and (neo-)imperial realities.

## Notes

1. All translations are mine unless specified otherwise. I would like to acknowledge Nora Castle's help which significantly improved this brief intervention.
2. See for instance Walter Rodney's seminal study on this for the African context.
3. Though migration is also a pre-capitalist phenomenon, considering many nomad groups for instance, the specific fluxes and routes that are established today often follow the Global North/South or Metropole/Periphery divide established during colonialism.
4. See in particular Watts 1990.

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