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The Picaresque Tradition and the Immigrant Experience in Contemporary American Fiction

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Table of Contents

Introduction

> She did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair. It was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton– a few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids– and yet as she waited at Princeton Junction station for the train, on an afternoon ablaze with heat, she wondered why there *was* no place where she could braid her hair…
> So here she was, on a day filled with the opulence of summer, about to braid her hair for the journey home (1,9).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) begins as the protagonist, Ifemelu, visits a hair salon to braid her hair once again, but this time in preparation for the move back home to Nigeria. Ifemelu emigrated from Nigeria to America and moved within America to Brooklyn, Baltimore, New Haven, Philadelphia and Princeton. The novel begins at the hair salon before moving into flashbacks of Ifemelu's childhood in Lagos, Nigeria. On a narrative level, the salon serves as the cultural hub from which memories of her past arise, but where she too contemplates her present life in America. It is here that she comes to change her hairstyle (using relaxers, adding extensions or cutting it off completely) for a new job or boyfriend, and finally, for the return to her birthplace. Her "final" braids can be seen as a metaphor for the hybrid identity she has established in America, the weaving of people and places encountered yet necessary for the return home.

The salon is a place that magnifies the psychological and cultural ramifications of being on the move. Further, the returning visits to the salon are microcosmic episodes expressing Ifemelu's feeling that she is an insider and outsider simultaneously. Ifemelu, like most other immigrants who arrive in America, encounter variants of herself – in this case, "Nigerians in America… Africans in America, indeed among immigrants in America" (19). Navigating this terrain of similar but different, moving between the positions of insider and outsider – both of which Ifemelu can feel at the salon on a smaller scale – is a central theme of Adichie's work.

Americanah is one example of many contemporary novels by immigrant writers exploring the challenges involved in movement across borders and in the diaspora. For this

project, I will be invoking a far older genre focused on movement, that of the picaresque. Simply, the picaresque is a literary form that involves an episodic style of writing which follows the travels and adventures of a socially marginal protagonist. I will examine the usefulness of considering the immigrant in contemporary fiction as a kind of modern-day *picaro* or *picara* figure, who is displaced and yearns for home – in both an emotional and a physical sense. My thesis will explore the developing characteristics of movement in the traditional picaresque genre; what meanings we attach to movement today and why; and how this change is mirrored in contemporary stories of immigrants.

Aims and General Description

My aim is to use the picaresque tradition – the genre and the criticism surrounding it – as a springboard for understanding a current trend in fiction, that of novels focused on the stories and experiences of immigrants. I will draw on studies of the picaresque tradition from its inception in order to understand the characteristics of the genre and will apply the insights of this critical literature to contemporary American novels about immigration.

There has been a surge in recent years of tales of migration and displacement written by immigrants themselves. The type of movement represented in these works mirrors recent and current national changes, such as mass migration to the United States and other dislocations caused by war and globalization. The thesis will focus on two contemporary novels, Adichie's *Americanah* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Junot Diaz. By drawing on insights provided by studies of the picaresque tradition, I hope to analyze how movement is represented and what it means in in these particularly modern works and to explore the relationship between place, movement and identity within them.

I do not wish to prove that these novels are picaresque, but rather to examine how critical discussions of the traditional picaresque shed light on the meaning and experience of immigrant

movement in these novels. By placing common characteristics of picaresque fiction in conversation with this newer body of fiction, we can begin to gain insight into how movement is narrated in contemporary novels of displacement.

Methodology

My research strategy will involve a close reading of two contemporary novels that explore the movement of immigrants vis-à-vis traditional discussions and theorizations of the picaresque. These novels are not representative of the picaresque genre, but they do employ motifs and narrative techniques similar to those that are found within the picaresque tradition. I will make use of the critical vocabulary and interpretive frameworks used in the study of the picaresque to understand the back and forth movement of the immigrant in these contemporary fictions. In addition, I will draw in my analysis on the work of postcolonial theorists and on the emerging body of scholarship about immigrant experience and writing.

Scholarly and Critical Background

A. Picaresque

Most critics agree that the picaresque form has a particular type of structure, protagonist and landscape. The structure is episodic, the protagonist is a marginal figure (the Spanish *picaro* meaning a rogue) who relies on wit and trickery to gain a certain social position, and the landscape is panoramic. The *picaro* or *picara* travels and meets people from all sectors of society. The tone is one of social satire and successive adventure.

The origins of the tradition are two seminal Spanish works, *La vida del Lazarillo de Tormes*, anonymously written in 1554, and *Guzman de Alfarache- el picaro*, written by Mateo Aleman and published in installments in 1559 and 1604. The earlier text, *Lazarillo,* written in an autobiographical format, draws upon Spanish medieval material for plot and character and

satirizes Spanish types. The narrative is Lazaro's "response" to rumors circulating in the city of Toledo concerning his unusual behavior, and in it he describes his life, from an unusual birth to his present position. Thrust from his home as his father dies and his mother is no longer able to support him, Lazaro becomes subject to several masters and through acts of trickery and deceit attempts to secure shelter and food for himself. Along this journey from young boy to manhood, Lazaro learns about himself and the society he lives in.

Aleman's *Guzman de Alfarche* becomes the most popular work of fiction circulating in seventeenth-century Spain. The protagonist of this work, too, involuntarily leaves home and is thrown into a series of adventures, meeting all types of people, becoming subject to many masters. The *picaro* in his narrative is a response to and means of exposing the widespread poverty and vagrancy in Spain at the time. Following Guzman, many other Spanish writers began to play on the *picaro* theme in their works; among them were Gregorio Gonzalez, Francisco Lopez de Ubeda and – most famously – Miguel de Cervantes in *Don Quixote* (1605).

The next important phase in the development of the picaresque is the eighteenth- century British novel, especially the work of Daniel Defoe and Tobias Smollett. Whereas the Spanish *picaro* is permanently defined by his birth and lineage, English picaresque fiction reflects the era's greater social mobility, which allowed even marginal members of society the opportunity to rise in class and status. The novel with the clearest correlation (in terms of both the fiction and the situation of its author) to the Spanish original texts is Defoe's *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722). Another example is Smollett's *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), which was influenced by French author Alain-Rene Lesage's picaresque novel *Gil Blas* (1749).

Almost every aspect of the picaresque tradition has been debated among critics. Critics in the latter twentieth century attempted to decipher if the picaresque is a historical phenomenon or can also be seen as ahistorical (See Robert Alter and W.M Frohock). Further, critics have asked

questions regarding the nature of picaresque fiction: is a picaresque novel defined by a certain number of characteristics, such as a first-person point of view, a *picaro* protagonist and/or a "vast gallery of human types" (Wicks 245)? Or is the author's awareness of writing in a particular literary tradition a necessary criterion? (See Howard Mancing). More recently, critics have tried to understand the form through the lens of its reception and publication history (Coll-Tellechea, Perez- Romera and Peterson). Specifically, the focus of contemporary scholars has been translations of the original text(s) and their relation to the emergence of the modern novel (Peterson, Ardila).

One element of the picaresque tradition that I will be exploring in regards to movement is the genre's social dimension. Sieber notes the "encyclopedic" nature of Guzman's text, which surveys "an extensive series of satires against money, honor, justice and a multitude of social types" (23). Ulrich Wick's list of characteristics that define the picaresque genre also includes a "picaro-landscape relationship" and a "vast gallery of human types who appear as representatives of the landscape." Wicks adds that "each incident of picaresque fiction moves from exclusion to attempted inclusion and back to exclusion: outside-inside-outside" (245). The relationship between protagonist and place, and the showcasing of a "multitude of social types" is of interest to me in this project. Moreover, many critics have noted that picaresque novels become a popular genre when a society, or a nation, is in a state of flux (Blackburn and Bjornson). Bjornson (1977) defines *the* picaro situation as "the paradigmatic confrontation between an isolated individual and hostile society" (4). If the picaresque novel has clear national underpinnings, it is interesting to look at immigration fiction in a similar light.

Another avenue of exploration is the role of narrative in shaping the experience of characters on the move in both traditional and contemporary works. With regards to *Lazarillo* Sieber writes that "his autobiography is [a] 'new' [subject for fiction] in the sense that it simultaneously tells the story of how he becomes an author." Through the artistic medium of

fiction, Lazarillo becomes the author of his own life. Sieber continues, "in the end, Lazaro emerges as the master and society as the slave because he is the one who manipulates the language and selects the episodes with which to narrate his life" (14). Part of the *picaro*'s development involves moving amongst various sectors of society and making sense of his surroundings and encounters through writing.

B. Immigration Fiction

The concept of migration in both a factual and literary sense attracted much critical attention in the first half of the twentieth century, most prominently in the context of the era's mass migration to the United States. Critics in this period begin writing of an American "ethnicity," conceptualizing topics such as the melting pot, assimilation, transnationalism, race, migration and marginality. These critics are concerned with what happens to immigrants in America and Americanization (See Handlin, Hansen, Bercovitch and Sollors). An important aspect of my project, which is focused on two novels about immigration to America, is the way later authors place America as the center location of the world towards which their characters migrate.

Also useful for my research are later discussions of movement explored in postcolonial studies. I am particularly interested in the way postcolonial literary studies celebrate migrancy, hybridity and diaspora, and in particular the unique and somewhat privileged position of the migrant writer. Andrew Smith writes that "the migrant is in a position of peculiar insight, blessed with a specific awareness of the relativity of cultural rules and forms" (246). I would like to explore whether this is true of the fictional migrants these writers create as well. Migrants, situated at the periphery, have a privileged way of seeing and therefore of telling stories. By viewing the immigrant as a kind of *picaro*-character (in the marginal sense) working within a specific narrative framework, I hope to explore the essential questions of movement within each

work: *where* do the fictional characters move, *why* do they move (and why do they return) and *who* to they meet or form relationships with along the way? What, then, does their movement – their physical relocation and encounters with others – expose about belonging, identity and place?

My reading of these contemporary texts is largely informed by the postcolonial scholars Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Chinua Achebe. Like the novelists themselves, these thinkers are immigrants, each grappling with his own hybrid identity and each conceiving of migrancy in different ways, under the large umbrella that is "postcolonialism." The questions these thinkers deal with are largely based on location and movement: in what location, home or in exile, can we access knowledge of ourselves and others? Is this back-and-forth necessary for self-knowledge to begin with? And more generally, what does it mean that the dominant literature of our times is written from these marginal spaces?

C. Diaz and Adichie

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a hybrid, multigenerational immigration tale that zeroes in on the misfortune of an immigrant family, a story too often overlooked and unknown. Oscar De Leon is a twofold outsider; an "overweight freak" (15), "a social introvert" and "girl repeller" (22-3) for one, and a second- generation Dominican living in Paterson, New Jersey.

Americanah follows the life of its Nigerian immigrant protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze, as they move to America and England and return to their birthplace. Ifemelu starts a successful blog about race in America, earning a fellowship at Princeton University. The novel follows Ifemelu's romantic relationships with Obinze, her fellow Nigerian; with Curt, a wealthy white American; and with Blaine, a black American. Obinze, who wishes to join Ifemelu, is denied citizenship to the United States and moves to London, where he remains an undocumented

immigrant before returning to Nigeria. In Nigeria, Obinze becomes a wealthy, property developer and starts a family. The novel begins as Ifemelu is about to return to Nigeria, recounts her story through flashbacks, and culminates in her homecoming.

Since its appearance in 2007, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* has been subject to much critical attention. In his *New York Magazine* review of the novel Boris Kachka does in fact call the novel a "tragicomic picaresque." Yet, most critics have focused on other aspects of the novel, such as the unique narrative voice Diaz employs, which includes use of Spanish without translation and detailed footnotes; the narrator, who remains unidentified until half-way into the novel; the text's mix of linguistic modes; and a plethora of sci-fi and literary references.

In addition, many critics have debated who the real protagonist, or marginal figure, is in the text, which focuses on Oscar but is told by his college roommate, Yunior. Much of the criticism, which I will draw on in my work, has focused on Oscar and his family's otherness as exemplary models of a diasporic community (Perez, Flores- Rodriguez, Hanna). Yet Elana Machado Saez (2011) notes that the real Other is Yunior, the novel's narrative eye. She writes "despite its title, the true protagonist of *Oscar Wao* is Yunior, and the relationship between Yunior and Oscar calls attention to how narrating a diaspora's history also entails domesticating difference" (523). Relevant too is Bharati Mukherjee and Maria Laurent's classification of the novel as an example of the "literature of new arrival." The notion of de-centering America through the emergence of a new immigrant literature is of interest for my project. The marginality of the narrative voice (including the effect it has on the reader) and of the central character(s) is also important for my purposes.

The existing scholarship on *Americanah* focuses on Adichie's portrayal of American and Nigerian characters, and on whether Adichie is perpetrating stereotypes (Ogbe) or obliterating them (Franklin). More relevant to my research is Katherine Hallemeier's (2015) placement of the novel in the contemporary canon of "Afropolitan" and "post-national" literature written by

immigrants. Relevant, too, is Hallemeir's understanding of the influence of global capitalism that permeates the romantic relationships in the novel. She writes that the novel presents "a tale of two capitalisms" (237), replacing the old ideal of an 'American dream' with "a desirable Nigerian future" (235). No critic, as far as I am concerned, has understood the novel to have picaresque tendencies, and it is this aspect that my own research will explore.

Chapter Outline

Introduction

In order to explore the movement of the characters and narrative in contemporary immigrant fiction, the Introduction will examine the traditional picaresque conventions as introduced briefly in this proposal. Further, I will draw on relevant criticism from the field of postcolonialism to deepen my understanding of the fictional immigrant to America and the issues involved in their movement.

Chapter 1: The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

On the simplest narrative level, Oscar is looking for love – his girl repelling personality deems him "*very* un-Dominican" (11) – which becomes his search for a home. Yet the concerns that drive the narrator, Yunior (who unlike Oscar, is Dominican born), involve Oscar's ancestral roots in the Dominican Republic – not only the biographical details of his family's life but the country's folklore, language and politics. There is no idealization of America in the novel, and Oscar finds his tragic end in his mother's birthplace and in a cane field, the same place his mother was brutally beaten twenty years prior. In this chapter, I will assess the way Diaz, through Oscar and his narrator, conceive of diaspora and displacement. I am interested in the way the initial escape of Oscar's mother to America and Oscar's later return to the Dominican

Republic involve the transferring of intergenerational trauma. The De Leon's family back and forth movement highlights the picaresque theme that safety and success cannot be secured in one location.

Chapter 2: Americanah

In this chapter, I will examine the way Adichie's characters, specifically the protagonists Ifemelu and Obinze, keenly observe their surroundings, people and places, in America, Nigeria and Britain. Both representative of the new or partial African immigrant, Ifemelu and Obinze are by no means forced to leave their native land, rather they decide to move out of a "need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness" (7). From the time they leave their childhood homes and birthplace, Ifemelu and Obinze are cast into a "no place" of uncertainty and dissatisfaction. I will explore the ways in which these immigrants, despite their success in America and Nigeria, constantly feel "an early morning fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness" which brings "amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives [they] could be living" (7). Through the protagonist's romantic relationships in particular, the novel examines the insider/outsider perspective of the immigrant, which I argue is typical of the *picaro*. *Americanah* is asking a core question about hybrid identities: If Ifemelu and Obinze feel like strangers both in America and in Nigeria, can one attribute belonging or self- knowledge to a location? Furthermore, if vagrancy is a core aspect of the picaresque, I will explore the feeling of homelessness that Adichie's protagonists express throughout the narrative.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I will summarize the picaresque themes relevant to these contemporary novels of migrant movement and to immigration fiction as a whole. The purpose of this chapter is to draw conclusions from these two specific examples and apply them to picaresque scholarship and the developing field of immigrant writing.

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