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# “A Bastard Jargon”: Language Politics and Identity in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Rachel Norman

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In a 2008 interview Junot Díaz described learning English as a “violent” experience. Having emigrated from the Dominican Republic to New Jersey, he had developed a “sense of a perfect English,” as well as a sense of torment that came “with every mistake [he’d] made.” This linguistically traumatic experience left Díaz with a deconstructionist view of language, and the knowledge that full mastery of any language is an “ideal that doesn’t exist anywhere.” Turning this unattainable ideal on itself in most of his writing, Díaz tries “to see how far [he can] push English to the edge of disintegration, but still be, for the large part, entirely coherent” (*World Literature Today* 14).

In order to write in an English at the border of coming undone, Díaz combines various registers—including English, Spanish, African American Vernacular, “nerdish,” and others—within a single narrative. This linguistic assemblage generates perceived communities and outsiders, as moments of unintelligibility are created for nearly all readers within his texts. As the reader stumbles through unrecognized registers, she is placed into the uncomfortable position of being the foreigner to Díaz’s non-existent, invented community—and her experience briefly becomes a reflection of Díaz’s own experiences as an immigrant-outsider. By incorporating linguistic indexes often seen as inferior to Mainstream American English dialect<sup>1</sup> into a predominantly Anglophone text, Díaz challenges his readers to consider their own linguistic relativism, and the categories of “insider” and “outsider” as they are marked by contemporary American discourse.

This essay explores Díaz’s only full-length novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, through the theoretical lens of sociolinguistics, and examines the ways in which Díaz has attempted to overcome the publishing industry’s complicity in maintaining the nation’s ethnocentric expectations in regards to English as the only acceptable language of publication. While much of the scholarship on *Oscar Wao* has turned on questions of Caribbean history, genre, and thematic approaches,<sup>2</sup> a few scholars, such as Timothy Brennan and Elena Machado Sáez, have dabbled in exploring the polyvocality of the novel in relation to nationhood, diaspora, and masculinity. Lyn Di Iorio Sandín, Daniel Arrieta,

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and Marcy Schwartz have also explored the use of Spanish-English code-switching<sup>3</sup> as an aversive or defiant writing technique in Díaz's works. A more complete understanding of the text can be gained, however, through an examination of the Spanish alongside the other predominant discourses present in the narrative. Considering the duality of the praise that *Oscar Wao* has garnered in critical circles and the often virulent responses that the use of Spanish in the text has received from readers in online forums like Goodreads,<sup>4</sup> Díaz's deft fusion of standard and slang vocabularies in Spanish, English, and "nerd" discourse provides fertile ground for a rich and revelatory avenue of inquiry. By introducing the work of several sociolinguists into the discussion, examining the use of African American Vernacular and "nerdish" alongside the Spanish, and reviewing Díaz's relationship with his editors, I provide a more nuanced reading of the ubiquitous code-switching throughout *Oscar Wao* and suggest that beyond creating a simplistic insider-outsider binary, layers of meaning are created for each individual reader.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* chronicles the misfortunes of the de Leon family as they endure the bloody Trujillo dictatorship and ultimately participate in the diaspora that deposited over a million Dominicans in the United States. The novel centers on Oscar de Leon, an overweight and socially inept nerd, and is narrated by a slippery voice, who belatedly reveals himself to be Oscar's former college roommate, Yunior. Beginning with a young Oscar who grows up in Patterson, New Jersey as a doubly marginalized "nerd of color," the novel eventually slips into a several-chapter-long analepsis to describe the lives of Oscar's ancestors in the Dominican Republic under the Trujillato. After graduating from college in the United States, Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic and begins writing a novel, presumably about his family's lost history under the dictatorship. Oscar dies on the island at the hands of the police, and the manuscript is lost, leaving Yunior, an outsider by blood and an insider by literacy, as the self-appointed guardian of the de Leon legacy.

The entirety of the novel is filtered through Yunior, who openly warns his reader of his unreliability. Like Oscar, Yunior is a bilingual Dominican American who is phenotypically identified as African American and linguistically identified as Latino; given these multiple modes of racial and linguistic classification, he struggles to craft an identity as an immigrant in the United States. Yunior relates the Dominican family's diasporic story through a vernacular that has grown out of the identity-dismantling experience of immigration, as well as the Dominican American experience of navigating complex social and racial hierarchies in the United States.

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Drawing from myriad and disparate sources, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a text that recreates the experience of immigration and linguistic exile. Both language and allusion function on a discursive level within the novel: the cumbersome use of obscure intertextual references challenges readers' cultural indexes in the same way that code-switching challenges an interlocutor who is familiar with only one of the linguistic codes. Díaz has admitted his intentions in interviews: this constant semiotic game deliberately challenges readers' expectations of a cohesive narrative and places the reader in the experience of the immigrant by requiring either that she accept her partial understanding of the passage or disrupt her reading long enough to find a dictionary. In constructing a narrative that approximates the identity-dismantling experience of dislocation, Díaz makes a political point about the link between language and communal identity, and demonstrates how these communities move closer to—and grow apart from—each other via language.

As a field, sociolinguistics is rather young. Combining the study of aspects of society and language, sociolinguistics first appeared in the United States in the 1960s, and focuses on the varied ways in which language and society are intertwined: both the effects of culture on language, and how language serves society. Scholars inside this field have done an enormous amount of work on bilingual and dialect communities, and the perceptions of those communities by outsiders. Working on Spanish speaking populations inside the United States, linguist Adam Schwartz contends that the language is viewed by monolingual US Americans as an "import," and a marker for "cultural and social disorder" (646). These "foreign" sounds are considered to be a challenge to English language hegemony within the United States to the point that legislation has been introduced in an attempt to control linguistic identity. This perceived threat, according to Schwartz, has stirred up "anti-Spanish sentiment in the United States," which has "translated into anti-immigrant and English-only legislation" (646).

Dating back to the 1800s,<sup>5</sup> this issue is still a current debate raging along state lines in the form of "English Only" and "Official English" legislation, which has been passed in 33 states.<sup>6</sup> Lawmakers introducing these proposals argue that their purpose is to protect community interests by "work[ing] through the courts and in the court of public opinion to defend English's historic role as America's common, unifying language, and to persuade lawmakers to adopt English as the official language at all levels of government" ("Mission"). In reality, however, anti-Spanish legislation in the United States sustains a much more alarming function: according to Schwartz, these laws are introduced because the language itself has become a representation of the popu-

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lation that speaks it, and its growing visibility is seen as a challenge to the status quo of cultural hegemony within the United States. The concept of a “standard” and a “vernacular,” with one being espoused as the more acceptable—and therefore dominant—form, serves to create a hierarchy of language within a society. This power structure, predicated on language, can be used as a form of subjugation of classes (and ethnicities) when they are perceived as not being capable of participating in the more prestigious discourse community. Passing legislation that supports the prestige of one language adds to the pejoration of the other languages that fall “below” it and gives legal backing to this hierarchy.

Despite the intensity of current debates, the form of linguistic hybridity found in *Oscar Wao* is not new in the United States,<sup>7</sup> and code-switching is a phenomenon seen in communities experiencing language contact the world over. Immigrant populations are especially prone to using code-switching as a method of relating to both of their perceived communities simultaneously. According to linguists, the use of code-switching among US Latinos as a vehicle for communication is on the rise, and this has been met with hostility by monolinguals who feel that code-switching presents a threat to the integrity of language. “Indeed,” scholar Ilán Stavans quips, “the common assumption has it that Spanglish is a bastard jargon that is part *Spanish* and part *English* but has neither gravitas nor a clear identity. It is spoken (or better, broken) by millions of people of Hispanic descent in the United States” (555).

Despite these negative stereotypes about language blending and the interlocutors who perform it, many Latino/as find code-switching to be a method of expressing identity. Sociolinguist Lourdes Torres asserts, “Much of the Latino/a literature written in English in the US incorporates Spanish at some level” (76), and she suggests that this act not only serves to legitimize oral code-switching, which is often looked down upon, but also allows the author a mode of expressing the negotiation that must take place between homelands, languages, and transnational identities. Ana Celia Zentella takes this argument further, claiming that in addition to a mode of expression, code-switching is also a form of linguistic subversion. She notes that “given the hegemony of racializing discourses, there seems to be no way out—that is, no way to subvert these racist practices, to escape the stranglehold imposed by white public space” (53). The way out of this colored space, she argues, is code-switching: “Latin@s are not passive receivers or observers of racializing discourses . . . they communicate in bilingual and multidialectal ways that resist hegemonic and racist notions of language” (55). Like Torres, she suggests this can not only be seen in oral discourse, but also that “much of the best Latin@ poetry and prose

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make use of the same inter-sentential switching rules and strategies” (56). Díaz’s insistence on the inclusion of Spanish in his writing, without italics or glosses, presents the subversive techniques found in oral code-switching in a more public forum. In a novel that has achieved popular success in the United States, this choice places the challenge to pervasive ethnocentricity and monolingualism directly in front of the eyes of a very large audience.

The most common instances of Spanish-English code-switching within the novel take place, perhaps not surprisingly, in scenes involving the family. Kinship terms (e.g., mom, dad, aunt, uncle) are almost always written in Spanish. This familial resilience gives a sense of realism—the assumption is that Oscar would be speaking with his family in Spanish, and it stands to reason that he would address his uncle not as “Uncle Rudolfo,” but rather as “tío Rudolfo.” In addition to addressing one another with Spanish kinship terms, family members also speak the most Spanish in the novel, and often the language is left without translation. Thus, the monolingual reader is left to decipher context clues or to go out of her way to consult an outside source. If such a stylistic choice is off-putting for monolingual Anglophones, as is suggested by readers decrying the text as “anti-Anglo” (Judge), it is nevertheless a discursive form that underscores the interstitial home of language and identity within the fictional family.

Dialogue among the family tends to revolve around identity and what it means to be Dominican, a topic that is reinforced by the use of Spanish. For example, according to the narrator, Oscar’s tío Rudolfo is the epitome of the stereotypical Dominican man: “macho.” He tells Oscar, “Listen, palomo: you have to grab a muchacha, y méteselo. That will take care of everything. Start with a fea. Coje that fea y méteselo! Tío Rudolfo had four kids with three different women so the nigger was without doubt the family’s méteselo expert” (Díaz 24). In the context surrounding this excerpt a monolingual reader can discern the overall message. Based on the preceding paragraph we are told that because Oscar is Dominican, he should be successful with women—and that his family is full of advice. The specifics of the advice that tío Rudolfo offers are unintelligible to the non-Spanish speaker, but the message is still clear: Get a girl. The line that follows helps piece together the meaning of “méteselo”: if tío Rudolfo is the expert, and the proof is four children with three different women, the reader can deduce the meaning. Perhaps the only meaning that cannot be decoded (although it does not affect the reader’s ability to understand the text) is that of “palomo”—a slang term for a homosexual male.

A similar deciphering experience for the reader comes from a confrontation that Oscar has with his mother, Belicia de Leon:

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When Oscar whimpered, Girls, Moms de Leon nearly exploded. Tú ta llorando por una muchacha? She hauled Oscar to his feet by his ear.

Mami, stop it, his sister cried, stop it!

She threw him to the floor. Dale un galletazo, she panted, then see if that little puta respects you. (14)

The Spanish in this passage creates a larger interruption in comprehension for the monolingual reader than the previous example. The monolingual reader can still discern anger: Beli is far from sympathetic with Oscar's plight. We are told in English that she "explodes," she hauls him to his feet by his ear, an act that could never be mistaken for parental pathos, and his sister is clearly upset by the altercation. We also deduce that this conversation hinges on the concept of respect, as that is one of the few key words given to us in English.

The most important thing that a monolingual reader may miss out on, though, is the knowledge that she has not actually missed out on anything. Oscar "whimpers" the word "girls"—information that is merely restated in Beli's angry reaction, "Tú ta llorando por una muchacha?" This follows the pattern of language blending throughout the novel: although there is no glossary, nor are there any in-text glosses, the type of language blending that Díaz engages in is so carefully constructed that translation is actually unnecessary, as the two languages are, for the most part, merely echoes of each other. In both of these examples, and in the Spanish use throughout the novel, the language typically provides new instances of the same information.<sup>8</sup> This linguistic game is, of course, missed by monolingual readers who cannot know what the Spanish is doing.

The English language monolingual is not Díaz's only reader, though, and certainly not the only potentially marginalized reader. In the example above, for instance, the Spanish in Beli's reaction is linguistically Dominican. Redundant subject pronouns are rarely used in Spanish—except in Dominican Spanish, where they are used quite frequently, due to contact with Haitian Creole (Ortiz López 418). Additionally, the /s/ in the second person singular of *estar* is aspirated not only in the consonant final position, but also in the first syllable, reducing the word to *ta*. Beli's final response to Oscar continues this use of localized dialect: "galletazo" is hardly something covered in Spanish 101, or in any formal Spanish class, for that matter. Only semi-proficient speakers will recognize the command "give (it) to her" and only a speaker of Caribbean Spanish would recognize "galletazo," an open-palm slap across the face, commonly given in response to disrespect. This Caribbean, and more specifically Dominican, Spanish ("tú ta" instead of *estás*) means

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that a speaker of almost any other type of Spanish would also be put off, at least initially, by the representation of dialect. Dominican and Standard Caribbean Spanish are not the only dialects used, though, and throughout the novel Díaz plays not only with linguistic blending at the level of languages, but also at the level of dialects, incorporating various Spanish dialects together into a sort of Pan-Spanish.<sup>9</sup> This invented Pan-Spanish creates a series of shifting meanings for Díaz's bilingual readers, occasionally figuring them as "insider" and occasionally placing them as "outsider."

The construction of language at the level of dialect in *Oscar Wao* goes beyond Spanish, though, as the English in the novel is constructed from various dialects in a similar way. Perhaps the most notable of these English dialects is African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The incorporation of AAVE functions in a discursively similar way to the Spanish-English code-switching by situating the Dominican American characters within certain language communities. Use of AAVE can be seen in the narrator's frequent use of the word *nigger* (which was used to describe tío Rudolfo in the above example). This slur is one of the most racially charged terms in the United States, and there are few examples of words in the English language that more clearly create groupings of people in terms of who is, and who is not, allowed to use a word. Just as Spanish-English code-switching can act as a marker for the Latino/a community, so too does AAVE—and especially the term *nigger*—mark racial boundaries. For Dominicans (and other Afro-Latino/as), these racial boundaries are often blurred, as most Dominicans are commonly linguistically perceived as Latino/a and visually perceived as African American. In this example, and in other places in the text where the word *nigger* is used familiarly, Díaz participates in the African American linguistic community by invoking its most loaded word.

The word *nigger* has been hailed by a wide range of politicians, cultural commentators, and linguists as being "the best known of the American language's many racial insults" (Kennedy 27). In his monograph on the trajectory of the word, Randall Kennedy lists some of the more famous quotes dealing with the cultural perceptions of *nigger*:

The writer Andrew Hacker has asserted that among slurs of any sort, *nigger* "stands alone [in] its power to tear at one's insides." Judge Stephen Reinhardt deems *nigger* "the most noxious racial epithet in the contemporary American lexicon." And prosecutor Christopher Darden famously branded *nigger* the "filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language." (28, original italics)

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Used for decades by whites to deride African Americans and linguistically categorize them as “other,” the African American community has appropriated and shifted the meaning of the word. Most scholars argue that this shift began to take place with the advent of African American stand-up comedians who eschewed the role of “clown” in favor of biting satire in the 1970s. As black comedians gained access to institutions that allowed them to deliver this kind of humor publicly, the word *nigger* took on new connotations. These comedians, most notably Richard Pryor, changed how the African American community viewed the word by encouraging its members to take on the racial stereotypes and hatred implied in its usage. As portions of the African American community—and here it is important to note that not all African Americans embrace the colloquial usage of *nigger*, a fact that Díaz acknowledges by only placing it in the mouths of certain African American characters—have done just that; the word has come to represent a linguistic line in the sand. *Nigger* is now defined in the *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang* as follows: “when used by a white person in addressing a black person usually it is offensive and disparaging; used by black people among themselves, it is a racial term with undertones of warmth and goodwill—reflecting, aside from the irony, a tragicomic sensibility that is aware of black history” (85). The word itself has become a marker of both division and belonging, as the appropriateness of the word shifts based on the speaker, and the “right” to use the word demonstrates the extent to which ideas of community and identity are reflected in language. As Kennedy states, “They like to use *nigger* because it is a shorthand way of reminding themselves and everyone else precisely where they perceive themselves as standing in American society . . .” (48–49), and it allows a communally discursive acknowledgment of their marginalization within that society. Inside of this “acknowledgement of marginalization” lies a linguistic response that reorients the boundaries of community and power.

Díaz’s use of *nigger* in *Oscar Wao* serves to situate his Afro-Latino narrator firmly within the larger African American community. *Nigger* appears in both predominantly English portions of the text and in places with high rates of code-switching, indicating the complexity of belonging for Dominican Americans. They are denied entry to a predominantly “white” America due to their status as both immigrant and minority, and then ultimately caught between Latino/a and African American identities. As the characters perform their identities via language, they communicate this layered difficulty to the reader. If *nigger* forces a recognition between Anglo- and Afro-communities, as Kennedy suggests, the adoption of *nigger* by portions of the Dominican

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American community indicates where they perceive themselves within those communities.

The roles of Spanish-English code-switching and AAVE in terms of both an individual's creation of identity and their presentation of that identity in the face of group politics has been well documented in sociolinguistic research. For Dominican Americans, this interaction at the communal level is particularly problematic, as they not only create their linguistic identity not only in relation to the dominant Mainstream American English dialect but also in relation to Latino/a and African American communities. One method of overcoming this identity tug-of-war is to linguistically flip-flop; for Dominican Americans that means code-switching between languages and dialects in order to navigate the nuances of community. By incorporating both Spanish and African American Vernacular English into the text of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz demonstrates in an imaginative space what this linguistic belonging might look like for Afro-Latino/as.

In addition to these obvious uses of foreign language and dialect, Díaz employs another, less obvious, form of linguistic blending. The inclusion of what Díaz has referred to as “nerdish” creates a barrier that is no different than the linguistic block created by Spanish or the linguistically divisive *nigger*. The number of intertextual references within the novel creates an uncommon level of indirect indexicality that continually puts readers on uncertain ground as they struggle to identify what the referent is actually referring to. The novel incorporates this intertextuality throughout, and there are references to magical realism (“It used to be more popular in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo” [7]), the Bible (“all that pillars-of-salt stuff” [69]), African American literature (“They were just talking, about Alice Walker, but still . . .” [183]), Irish literature (“ . . . and Oscar would become the Dominican James Joyce” [68]), Latino/a underground comics (“ . . . he hung out with Miggs and Al, saw movies with them, talked Los Brothers Hernández” [32]), history (“You want a final conclusive answer to the Warren Commission’s question, Who killed JFK?” [4]), Japanese anime (“I always thought of myself as the Kaneda of our dyad, but here I was playing Tetsuo” [184]), Continental philosophy (“That his most beloved ideologues were a couple of Germans who never met a nigger they liked was beside the point” [111]), to name but a few.<sup>10</sup> The function of these references constitutes a semiotic game that mirrors the discursive strategy behind Díaz’s use of the Spanish and AAVE within the text, as all three hold the potential for excluding different portions of the audience.

These allusions are not inserted into the novel at random, though, and a close examination suggests layers of meaning within the text. As

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the novel begins, the narrator includes culturally and generically disparate allusions that thematically echo each other. A string of fantasy and science fiction allusions enter the narrative on the first page, as the narrator explains who Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina was. He says, “He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator . . .” (2). The first is a reference to the dark lord in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954); the second to the king of the otherworld in the fantasy novel, *The Chronicles of Prydain* (1964) by Lloyd Alexander; the third to a comic strip villain created by Jack Kirby in 1970; and the fourth to the T.H. White novel, *The Once and Future King* (1958). In addition to their immediate allusions, the references also recall the legends on which they are based: *The Once and Future King* is a retelling of Arthurian legend, King Arawn in *The Chronicles of Prydain* is based on the god of death in Welsh mythology by the same name, and the plot, characters, and invented languages of *The Lord of the Rings* are steeped in various mythological traditions, including Norse, Anglo-Saxon, Slavic, Finnish, and Greek.” In less than half a sentence, explicit and implicit references are made to a wide variety of sources that span over a millennium, and yet the message of each allusion still centers on the same complex idea—that of dictatorship, and how power, myth, and the making of history through stories are transmitted orally and through print. Depending on the reader’s knowledge, there are varying degrees of meaning that exist within these allusions, and these layers impact understanding in a unique way for each reader.

The connection between science fiction and the immigrant experience is also explicitly examined in a footnote in the novel. The passage that precedes the footnote illustrates the differences between a young Oscar and other young boys, saying, “Back when the rest of us were learning to play wallball and pitch quarters and drive our older brother’s cars and sneak dead soldiers from under our parents’ eyes, he was gorging himself on a steady stream of Lovecraft, Wells, Burroughs, Howard, Asimov, Bova . . .” (Díaz 21). The paragraph goes on to explain that Oscar could “write in Elvish and could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic” (21). The footnote then steps outside the narrative to explain to a perhaps unknowing audience the connection between science fiction and immigration, and why the genre is an appropriate choice to relate a story about Caribbean Diaspora—two things that seemingly have very little to do with one another. The footnote reads,

Where this outsized love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know. It might have been a consequence of

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being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both). After a transition like that I'm guessing only the most extreme scenario could have satisfied. (21–22)

In this aside, the reader is given an explanation of Oscar's affinity for the genre, but the quotation also explains the somewhat odd choice for the motif in the novel as a whole: to recreate the lived experience of the immigrant. Although seemingly dissonant, the genre of science fiction with its "extreme scenarios" is an appropriate metaphor for the shock that comes from immigration. The narrator of *Oscar Wao* explains to the reader the seemingly incongruous choice to represent immigration narratives via science fiction, asking, "who more sci-fi than us?" (Díaz 21). Beyond merely subverting the historical aspects of these genres, Díaz reorients them in relation to his audience. Many readers of these genres are, themselves, outsiders—nerds and geeks—people on the periphery of a school's pecking order and society's notion of normativity. Díaz's investment in these communities, presented alongside the linguistic codes in the novel, complicates the novel's relationship with its audience. The average reader is not merely positioned as an outsider to the text; rather, the intertextual allusions and the linguistic registers allow Díaz to reorient readers into multiple outsider perspectives simultaneously.

This incorporation of such superfluity of allusion echoes the language blending. The languages, both the Spanish and the English, as well as the use of dialect, cohere with the vast intertextuality to create a novel with so many different threads of discourse that no one reader would be able to fully understand everything. When discussing baseball, knowing how the game works and who its most famous players are is just as essential to the communicative act as knowing standard vocabulary like *ball* and *bat*. By playing with language on both levels, Díaz approximates the experience of being "other" and casts the reader in the role of minority outsider to the book's invented community. He does this syntactically *and* semantically, explaining in one interview that:

one discovers very quickly as an immigrant kid that there's English acquisition and then there's *English* acquisition, that there is this almost endless array of vernaculars that you have to pick up. So that you can learn the Standard English, but then you realize, I don't know shit about sports—you got to

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learn the sports stuff. Then you realize, I don't know shit about American popular music, I don't even know who the fuck The Who is—you got to pick that entire thing up. Everyone's making references to TV shows you've never heard of, old TV shows, and even little ditties *in* TV shows. I mean, the music from *Jeopardy*—that *do do do do*—that makes no fucking sense to an immigrant. You've got to learn that. And so, in the end, you keep stacking up all these little languages, these threads. (*World Literature Today* 14)

These “little threads” that make up language are comprised both of the language itself, its vocabulary and grammatical structure, and its cultural referents. As Díaz states, a speaker may be able to speak English, but without knowing the cultural allusions being made, they are still blocked from full participation in the conversation and therefore never fully accepted into the community. Mastery of a language goes beyond the classical conception of a command of grammar; in order to be accepted and to fit into a culture, mastering a community's cultural referents is also required. However, Díaz's literary mimicry of assimilation results not only in a recurring separation of the reader from the text but also in moments of understanding, as the reader is presented with a wide variety of registers and allusions that she either does or does not understand.

The typographic representation of language in the novel supports Díaz's attempt at intercultural blending that challenges a mono-cultural hierarchy. In a talk on April 4, 2006, Díaz discussed the process of editing with his publisher. He had to fight his publisher, he said, to keep the Spanish words from being glossed or italicized, and he did so because he felt strongly that it would take away from what he was trying to accomplish. Díaz claims that including the translations his editor insisted upon would have undermined what he was trying to do, namely, create a hybridity in his text that held the potential for the partial exclusion of an audience that does not possess the necessary linguistic indexes. Despite the fact that Díaz claims this exclusion as part of his goal, the English in the novel still “hangs together,” and the book remains largely accessible to a wide audience.

Díaz has addressed the issue of italics and translations in other talks given since 2006. At a reading of his new collection of short stories, *This is How You Lose Her*, on September 20, 2012, Díaz remarked on the politics behind labeling a word as “foreign” and forcing authors to represent those words in italics. He said,

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I remember *The New Yorker* house style was that every quote-un-quote “foreign” word was supposed to be in italics. And like my first two or three stories they were like, they would put dique<sup>12</sup> “foreign” words in italics. For me, Spanish and English are both as foreign, the whole thing would have to be in fucking italics. You know? It’s true. I hear both of them like they don’t belong, and yet that’s *my* belonging.

This forced highlighting of certain languages as “foreign” in printed material perpetuates the marginalization of certain groups within the United States. Italics typographically place value on one language over the other, creating a hierarchy of language within the text and indicating to the reader that this novel is written in English, and the Spanish is decorative. By contrast, the choice to leave out italics represents language in an egalitarian way. Díaz claims he fought this rule by threatening to take his stories elsewhere: “And what happened was after, I think it was the third story, they accepted a new story and I said, ‘You know what? If you don’t change it [the rule] I won’t let you publish it.’ . . . And even if I’d lost my relationship with them, I was just like, I gotta do this.” He went on to say that *The New Yorker* acquiesced: “They changed the house style, every story after that of mine, none of the Spanish is in italics . . .” This editorial triumph indicates a small, but hopeful, shift in perceptions of language inside the United States. The copy department at *The New Yorker* explains that while currently “true only for Díaz,” the magazine decided to make an exception “because of the very particular way he weaves the Spanish into the English” (Goldfield, *personal correspondence*). Implicit in this exception is an acknowledgement of the validity of Díaz’s argument that for him, English is just as “foreign.”

In Díaz’s works, the Spanish is integrated into the prose seamlessly and placed on equal footing with English. The two languages are intertwined, and although they provide an indication to the reader that not everything can be understood—indeed even fluent Spanish speakers may miss certain “Dominicanisms” in the novel—Spanish is not privileged, and neither is English. But, when read without insistence on complete understanding, the goal and function of the text becomes clear: not only does the novel mimic the experience of being “other,” it turns that experience on the very people who perpetuate it.

In reclaiming and subverting this experience, Díaz invokes Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant: “To quote Glissant again: this time that was never ours, we must now possess. Because it certainly has no problem possessing us” (*Bomb* 92).<sup>13</sup> *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* forces the realization onto each of its readers that they can

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never fully participate in the conversation because there will always be something they do not know. Díaz's aim, however, is not simply to make readers feel inadequate in his universe; the hoped-for result is the creation of a different type of conversation where an interlocutor does not mind being exposed as "not knowing" because that is the existential condition (*Granta* 1). More than just advocating for the Spanish language and linguistic equality, Díaz's fiction pushes the boundaries of knowability via an invocation of the human existential experience. Through *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz announces his ethnic particularity and the reader's own specificity while simultaneously making a move back to a universalism that recognizes how we are all unknowable humans who cannot know everything. By abandoning the ethnocentricity necessary to challenge the text as "anti-Anglo," a form of acceptance can take place that allows relation to the "other" in spite of an ultimate impenetrability.

## Notes

1. Although the popular definition of *dialect* has come to mean any form of speech that departs from, or is considered socially subordinate to, the "standard," in linguistics the term *dialect* refers to any language characteristic of a certain group. Most often it is used to demarcate geographic regions of speech, but it can also be used to refer to groups of speakers divided by gender, social class, ethnicity, or age. According to this definition, all varieties constitute dialects, and Mainstream English, for instance, is as much a dialect as Southern English or African American Vernacular English. Throughout this essay, I will be using *dialect* in the linguistic sense, not the popular sense.
2. See Tim Lanzendörfer's 2013 article, "The Marvelous History of the Dominican Republic in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," for a discussion of *Oscar Wao* in relation to history and the fantasy genre, and Monica Hanna's 2010 article, "'Reassembling the Fragments': Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," for a discussion of *Oscar Wao* and magical realism.
3. Code-switching is a linguistic term that is used to describe a speaker's alternation between two or more languages, dialects, or even registers in a single context. These switches must remain consistent with the syntax and phonology of all varieties being used.
4. The most popular review for *Oscar Wao*—out of 150,000+ reviews for the novel—on *Goodreads* (a popular social media reading site) is near vitriolic. User "Cameron" lambastes the novel, opening with "How this book won the Pulitzer Prize AND the National Book Critics Circle is beyond me. It's terrible." Cameron goes on to summarize the plot of what she refers to as "The Bloated Family Background of Oscar Wao," and eventually gets to what she feels makes the novel truly insufferable: the Spanish. It should be noted that

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Cameron mentions that “a lack of Spanish skills” was not the only thing blocking comprehension in the novel and that the “literary devices in play” add to the confusion. Cameron mentions the frustrating allusions merely in passing, though, compared to a lengthy diatribe for language. Cameron is not alone in her sentiments, and the novel has received online comments ranging from matter-of-fact statements (“I am English speaking and know a little Spanish. I can usually figure out words given the context of the situation. But Junot’s use of slang has me scratching my head”), to slightly more assertive opinions (“This isn’t the only popular book that uses slang in languages I don’t know. I think there ought to be an agreement that glossaries are required”), to the more vitriolic (“I was similarly annoyed with the author’s copious—I’d go so far as to say intentionally hostile and ostentatiously anti-Anglo—use of untranslated slang . . .”) (“An open letter to Junot Díaz”).

5. With the acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase and the territories surrendered as a result of the Mexican-American War, the United States gained large French, Spanish, and Native American language speaking populations. Initially the language rights of these populations were respected, but in a series of political moves in the 1860s and 1870s, language rights were abolished for all three groups.

6. English Only and Official English movements support the adoption of English as the only acceptable language and the only official language, respectively. The English Plus movement formed as a reaction to the English Only and Official English movements and supports instruction in both English and minority languages. Currently only four states have passed English Plus legislation, compared to 33 states and territories with Official English or English Only legislation.

7. Spanish-English code-switching has been present in the Americas for quite some time; the first attestation dates back to 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

8. There are occasionally places where the meaning of the Spanish is not indicated in the English. For example: “I said yes, and went out and put a cuerno in her” (195). “Cuerno” literally means “horn,” and is a term for sexual infidelity. These moments are few, though, and do not drive the plot.

9. Other Spanish dialects represented in *Oscar Wao* include Puerto Rican Spanish, Cuban Spanish, Standard Caribbean Spanish, Standard Latin American Spanish, etc. This reflects the blending occurring in United States Spanish due to the enormous amount of contact between dialects due to immigration.

10. “Macondo” and “McOndo” are references to the town in Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (1967) and the spin-off literary movement that followed, respectively. “Pillars-of-salt” is a reference to Genesis 19:26 in which Lot’s wife, Sarah, looks backwards as she flees her home and is transformed into a pillar of salt. Alice Walker is a dominant figure in African American literature and philosophy. James Joyce is a dominant figure in Irish literature. Los Brothers Hernández publish a series of independent Latino/a comic books, most notable of which is *Love and Rockets* (1982–1986). The Warren Commis-

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sion was the unofficial name for the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. Kaneda and Tetsuo are characters in the six-volume manga *Akira* (1982–1990). German ideologues refers to the philosophers writing during the Enlightenment.

11. For an in-depth analysis of the novel's allusions to J.R.R. Tolkien's work, see Lanzendörfer.

12. "Dique" means "supposedly" or "seemingly." It is used primarily by Dominicans in New York, but exists in several other dialects of Caribbean Spanish as well.

13. Díaz makes reference to Glissant in various places, including interviews and the text itself of *Oscar Wao*. An argument could be made for the uses of language and allusion that I have presented here as a form of literary praxis of the Caribbean philosopher's writings, especially the ideas presented in *Poétique de la Relation* (1990) and his theories on language and opacity.

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