

An Exploration of Wild Tongues:

Code switching and Intersectionality in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*¹

While it's certainly invaluable to view art and other media through particular theoretical paradigms—critical race theory, gender and feminist studies, postcolonial theory, queer theory, etc.—the applications of these theories cannot exist in isolation from one another in the real world. It is nearly impossible to talk about gender without talking about race, for instance, or to talk about class without considering the relevance of imperial history. The ever-present junction between the social, genetic, and political within one's identity was developed into an all-encompassing theoretical paradigm defined as intersectionality: the way in which “race, class, and gender are all interlocking categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life; they simultaneously structure the experience of all people in this society...they are overlapping and cumulative in their affect on people's experience” (Patricia Hill Collins). Intersectionality offers a nuanced exploration of identity formation within and beyond the novel.²

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Diaz makes obvious our intersectional realities, which inform not only our self-perceptions, but also our perceptions of others and the world around us. One way in which Diaz draws attention to intersectionality is through his

¹ I usually come up with my title once I'm done writing my essay. This title alludes to an article written by Gloria Anzaldúa, which is a work I address later on.

² My introductory paragraph explains the theoretical paradigm of intersectionality. Throughout my paper, I use this lens to make sense of why Junot Diaz code switches between English and Spanish in his novel. If you're writing a theoretical paper, it makes sense to address your lens early. Since this is a research paper, my specific thesis will appear later, after I've explained relevant terms and contexts.

employment of a polyvocal narrative— even though the main narrator of the novel is Yuniór (a ‘friend’ of the protagonist), certain chapters are told by other characters, like Oscar (the protagonist), Lola (Oscar’s sister and Yuniór’s love), and Beli (Oscar’s mother). The different narratives allow readers to access multiple veins of Dominican identity, which resists the notion that Díaz’s novel perpetuates a single story³ of Dominican-ness.⁴

Díaz takes polyvocality a step further by using code switching, or the seamless alternation between two languages, in order to draw attention to intersectionality within the text. In her article, "In the Contact Zone: Code-Switching Strategies by Latino/a Writers," Torres explains how “XXX” (Torres 76). According to a 2000 U.S. Bureau Census report, “Spanglish is spoken by approximately 35 million people in the United States,” and yet it is often still perceived as the “hispanization of the entire Spanish-speaking society or a takeover of English”⁵ (Stavans 556). Writers like Díaz demonstrate that code switching is not a hazard to either language, but a creation of a new tongue; it is not just a literary tool, but also a reality for millions of Americans today.

³ The notion of a “single story” comes from Chimamanda Adichie, a novelist from Nigeria. Although I didn’t provide a footnote to highlight this connection, it would have been a useful tool for me to use. You can always use footnotes to provide context or nuances for your reader.

⁴ This paragraph is used to express how Díaz used the *form* of his novel in order to inform his content. Since multiple people are given a chance to narrate the story, readers must be aware of how stories change based on *who* tells them and *how* they are told.

⁵ I use Lourdes Torres’s article to explain how common code switching is in vernacular speech. It supplements my idea that Junot Díaz’s choice to code switch is deliberate and worthy of exploration. This paragraph also introduces the idea that language use is an important part of identity alongside race, gender, sex, class, etc.

Torres also delves into different kinds of code switching...⁶which render different levels of accessibility and readability for monolingual and bilingual readers.⁷ Cushioned Spanish includes common Spanish nouns, places and foods (casa, taco, etc.) with which monolingual readers are likely to be familiar, or Spanish followed by a direct translation. Language that gratifies the bilingual reader, however, includes Spanish phrases that lack a direct translation or sufficient contextual meaning. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Diaz employs cushioned Spanish for the monolingual reader, while also gratifying the bilingual reader through passages that are not cushioned or translated. When Junot Diaz reflected on his use of code switching, he remarked: “XXX” (Torres 83)— but in this essay, I will argue that his code switching does much more than that.⁸

Lourdes Torres suggests that using cushioned Spanish is considerably dangerous. That is, if a monolingual reader can access a text, or a culture, without having to exert any cognitive effort, the text perpetuates “XXX” (Torres 78)... Since language cannot be separated from the history that shaped it (nor can language be separated from the narratives it continues to shape), Diaz’s alternations between English and Dominican-Spanish draw attention to the intertwined histories of the nations that speak these languages. By employing code switching, Diaz enhances the intersectional nature of this book by reminding his readers of the mutability of languages, which further reflects the mutability of identity⁹. Diaz switches codes in order to demonstrate

⁶ Some material was cut from this paper, as indicated by all ellipses.

⁷ This topic sentence tells my reader that there are different ways to switch codes. The paragraph goes on to explain how we can differentiate between different codes and *why* differentiation is important to understanding communication and identity.

⁸ The use of “I” allows me to start my own conversation with Junot Diaz. It also empowers me to take credit for my original idea!

⁹ An intersectional lens considers the multitude of factors that make up one’s identity. Here, I’m reiterating that language use (and the history of that language) is one of those factors.

how the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic (DR) and the dictatorship of Trujillo continue to inform contemporary Dominican diaspora identities.¹⁰

Diaz's act of switching from Dominican-Spanish to English renders the separation between the U.S. occupation of the DR and Trujillo's rise to power impossible.¹¹ Trujillo never would've risen to power if it weren't for the training he received from the U.S. National Guard during its occupation of the DR in 1916-24 (Derby 114)...The U.S. government approved of Trujillo because he catered to U.S. financial interests (Pulley 30)... The culture that arose out of Trujillo's reign—the one Diaz represents through his use of Dominican-Spanish slang—is directly related to the U.S. culture that nurtured it—the one that Diaz represents through his use of English.

...

Whether we are conscious of it or not, we switch codes within our own language depending on *who* we are talking to or *what* we are talking about.¹² This reality reflects how we not only practice multiple languages within our own tongue, but how we can embody different identities through different expressions of language.¹³ In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,

¹⁰Underlined is my thesis. It might seem odd that it appears this far into my paper, but this is a research paper. I used the first couple of pages to explain key terms and to ground my argument in scholarly contexts. I took time to explain why an intersectional lens is so useful: it draws attention to all of the factors that make up identity, including language use.

¹¹ This is a topic sentence. It lets my readers know that I will be addressing both A) how Dominican and American histories are inextricably linked, and B) how code switching expresses this linkage and impacts identity.

¹² Using "we" can be dangerous in some papers— it's always best not make generalizations. With that said, I used "we" because I wanted to challenge my reader to think about ways in which code switching is relevant to their style of communication.

¹³ This is another reference to intersectionality. Although language might not be the first thing that comes to mind when we are asked to talk about our different identities, this paper is meant to illuminate how interrelated language, history, and identity truly are.

code switching brings the relationship between language and its history to life. It demonstrates how the intersection between the colonization and occupation of Hispaniola continues to inform contemporary Dominican diaspora identities. Diaz's code switching speaks to the larger intersections at work that have all come together to form a new language, Spanglish, which is arguably a language of resistance in the face of both the colonization of the DR by Spain and the occupation of the DR by the US. In *How To Tame a Wild Tongue*, Gloria Anzaldúa asks: "XXX" (Anzaldúa 55).¹⁴

Upon finishing *Oscar Wao*, I find that Anzaldúa's question embodies the intersections between language and identity, and language and history, that Diaz threads throughout his text.¹⁵ While there are many more intersections present, language clearly serves as a conduit for Diaz to express Trujillo's machismo and racist sentiments that pervade contemporary Dominican culture and diaspora. Ultimately, Diaz's narration does not embody *one* history, but a multiplicity of histories that are still being fleshed out in identities today.

¹⁴ If you're having trouble ending your paper, try incorporating a quote from another scholar. Your reaction to a quote can be an effective way to reiterate your argument.

¹⁵ I used "I" again because I wanted to end the conversation in the way that I began it (owning my ideas). It also draws attention to the ways in which I've personally grappled with the scholarship.

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