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# Anxiety de la historia: Understanding the Roots of Spanglish in the Texts of Junot Díaz

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# **Anxiety de la historia:**

*Understanding the Roots of Spanglish in the Texts of Junot Díaz*

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Submitted on this day:

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# **The Anxiety of History:**

## *An Introduction*

In 2008, Junot Díaz was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his first ever foray into novel writing, specifically, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a novel rife with Spanglish. Its plot centers on a young, geeky Dominican immigrant and explores his family's lineage leading back to Trujillo-era Dominican Republic. Díaz won considerable praise for his first publication, the short-story collection *Drown*, and was named a “major new writer” by Walter Mosley. However, even with the glowing praise surrounding the young MFA-graduate after *Drown*, few could have predicted the explosive popularity of *Oscar Wao*. Besides winning the prestigious Pulitzer, *Oscar Wao* was also awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Anisfield-Wolf Book award, and The John Sargent, Sr. First Novel Prize, among others. Furthermore, *Oscar Wao* was chosen as the best book of the millennium (so far) in a public poll conducted by the literary website “The Millions,” and was one of the “best books of 2007” according to everyone from *The New York Times* to *People*.

Clearly, Díaz has produced a winning combination of “adrenaline-powered prose” (Kakutani) and a “striking voice” (Deresiewicz 2), adored by both the critics and readers alike. As Junot Díaz is aware, however, it often takes more than talent to receive attention in the literary world. In a lecture given at Fairfield University in October of 2009 that I was fortunate enough to attend, Díaz said that “the most universal stories are always the most specific.” Luckily for this Dominican-born author, the specificity of our time is heavily influenced by the fact that for the first time in history, the largest minority group in the United States is that of a (willing) immigrant population. As of 2003, Latino Americans replaced African Americans as

the largest minority group in the country, African Americans having held the title for over two centuries. And, according to the 2007 United States Census, there are currently 45 million Latino Spanish speakers in the United States, making Spanish the second most commonly spoken language in the country.

From its birth, the United States has been made home for immigrants around the world. New York City is famous for its constantly changing immigrant populations historically and today, often segregated in slums or specific neighborhoods, but always dynamic as a new immigrant group comes in to take the place of the old. The old immigrant group, by that time, had assimilated themselves into the United States, into the great “melting pot.” Assimilation was desired and actively worked toward, seen as key to becoming a true “American” and achieving the American dream of social and financial ascent. Native languages were often lost within the space of a generation, if not sooner. However, the question of assimilation poses a newly unique challenge for the Latino American community. Latino history, culture, language, and society being much more accessible to the immigrant population compared to previous immigrant groups, thanks to technology and geography. A shared border with Mexico, frequent border crossing, increased travel options and the internet all distinguish contemporary Latin American experiences from those of prior immigrant groups. A large and ever-growing presence of Spanish, also serves to complicate the expectations typically associated with assimilation.

As a society, we are giving Latino Americans mixed messages in a way that an immigrant population has not yet seen. Society simultaneously tells Latinos to learn English, but uses Spanish in everything from television commercials to voting ballots. America tells them that it is a pluralistic, accepting country and yet threatens to build walls to keep them out. Society hides Latinos away in the back rooms of restaurants and in fields to work the most menial of

jobs, and yet holds the writings of one of their own up as the pinnacle of literary achievement in awarding Díaz the Pulitzer Prize.

How should Latino Americans step into the role of largest minority group in the United States without giving up Latino culture or history, as so many minority groups have (willingly or unwillingly) done in the past as a result of assimilation into the United States? For the first time, the largest minority group in the United States speaks a language other than English—does this mean that Spanish can stand side by side with English in America, or is one destined to dominate the other? Or, are the two languages destined to combine into Spanglish, a force already appearing in advertising, the media, and of course, on the streets?

In defining that which is Spanglish, I rely partly on Spanglish scholar Ilan Stavans, who defines Spanglish simply as “The verbal encounter between Anglo and Hispano civilizations” (Stavans 5). I will take this definition one step further for the purposes of this paper, defining Spanglish as both (1) Spanish and English words and phrases used alongside one another within a single text, as well as (2) Spanish words that have been anglicized and English words that have been Hispanicized. In both cases, the mixing of the two languages is the key element.

Junot Díaz is writing in and about the social and political atmosphere of mass Latino immigration and assimilation and Spanish proliferation. However, the age in which Junot Díaz finds himself is also a postmodern one. As a working definition of postmodernism, I refer here to the Oxford English Dictionary, which states:

The state, condition, or period subsequent to that which is modern; *spec.* in architecture, the arts, literature, politics, etc., any of various styles, concepts, or points of view involving a conscious departure from modernism, esp. when characterized by a rejection of ideology and theory in favour of a plurality of values and techniques. Also in extended use in general contexts, freq. used

ironically.

-Typical features of late 20th cent. postmodernism include references to, or the use of, earlier styles and conventions, a deliberate mixing of different styles and media (often with self-referential or parodic intent) and the incorporation of images relating to consumerism, mass-communication, etc.

(“Postmodernism, *n*;”)

Certainly multilingualism is a type of “plurality of values and techniques,” and what better way to “mass communicate” than with a combination of Spanish and English, the two most widely spoken languages in the United States?

However, in Díaz’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Spanish and English are not the only two languages within the text. Díaz seems to speak of myriad of “languages” from the slang of the streets to the lingo of sci-fi novels to literary allusions, and when I asked him after the event at Fairfield if the colossal escalation of Spanglish from his first publication, *Drown*, to *Oscar Wao* was a conscious one, he answered in the affirmative, but said that *all* languages and layers of discourse had been “amped up” up in *Oscar Wao*. Nevertheless, it is for his use of Spanglish that Díaz has received the most attention; after all, it was the Latin American Studies department at Fairfield that had invited Díaz to their “Open Visions Forum” *not* the English department. It is also Spanglish (and/or Spanish) that is the most widely used language of “otherness” within the text—in other words, a language not readily accessible to all readers, as well as a signifier of membership in a numerical minority and in a subculture.

As the definition of postmodernism also suggests, conscious awareness of that which came before is another salient feature of the postmodern condition (“postmodernism includes references to, or the use of, earlier styles and conventions”). Literary theorist Harold Bloom expanded on this idea in his book *The Anxiety of Influence*, published in 1973. Díaz certainly

works within this postmodern framework by “mixing” the “different styles and media” of his predecessors. Bloom suggests that writers influence one another whether they care to admit it or not, and I have found resounding influence on Díaz’s work in two texts in particular: *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas (1967) and *Mumbo Jumbo* by Ishmael Reed (1972).

*Down These Mean Streets* is the autobiography of Piri Thomas, a Puerto Rican American who grew up in “el barrio” of Harlem. His autobiography has often been compared to Díaz’s first publication, *Drown*, (although the influence certainly extends to *Oscar Wao*) because they both deal with many of the same issues associated with being of a Latino and Spanish speaking background and living in or around New York City. Both texts speak to the toughness of the streets, a labyrinth of drugs, sex, and abusive relationships. Both works also have a characteristically sparse style saturated with the lingo of the streets and Spanish swear words. The intertextuality (the shaping of one text’s meaning by another text) that exists between Thomas and Díaz functions on both political and literary levels: Thomas’s text is an earlier testament to the Latino American experience in America as well as a record of the way people spoke on the streets at a specific moment in history. However, where Thomas in *Down These Mean Streets* ultimately struggles with his identity as a person of color between the whiteness of America and the racism against African Americans, the protagonists of Díaz’s stories struggle more with their immigrant status. African American slang and cultural practice are still abundantly present in the work of Díaz, however, from the use of the “n-word” to “street cred,” Díaz’s characters often filter their “otherness” through traditionally African American practices.

As a famous African American postmodern writer, Ishmael Reed, Pulitzer Prize nominee, and his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* serve as a poignant lens through which to read Díaz. The novel sticks out initially as an influence on Díaz for its use of an “epidemic” that was sweeping the

nation during the Harlem Renaissance known as the “Jew Grew” epidemic, a condition which initiates wild dancing in its victim, in many ways similar to the way the *Fukú Americanus* of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* seems to haunt its victims. Moreover, Reed acts as an influence on Díaz as a writer of the then-largest American minority group (again, the novel was published in ’72, in the midst of the Black Arts Movement) satirizing both American culture at large as well as African American subculture during the Harlem Renaissance. In many ways, therefore, Díaz is doomed to appropriate this culture and repeat Reed’s style of satirizing by utilizing a form of looking backwards in order to move ahead: *Oscar Wao* takes place in Trujillo-era Dominican Republic for much of the novel, and the echoes from *Down These Mean Streets* come straight out of the Spanish Harlem Renaissance. Where Díaz differs, however, is that instead of moving towards a Latino Arts Movement, Díaz argues that Spanish and Latino participation in literature is part of the latest in the *American Arts Movement*.

The Black Arts movement gave Reed a platform to stand on—a platform further backed by the Harlem Renaissance and the long history of African Americans in the United States. Reed was attempting to change an already existing community, a community complete with a long line of literary artifacts to prove its reality. Junot Díaz is aware that in order for a community to sustain itself within a modern nation, it must have a corresponding print tradition. Benedict Anderson lays out the integral part of print-culture in the imagining of a community in his aptly titled book, *Imagined Communities*. In his text, he explains “the struggles in late-twentieth-century Europe by certain ‘sub’ nationalities to change their subordinate status by breaking firmly into print—and radio” (Anderson 45). Díaz’s struggle in grappling with the anxiety of history (an inherent part of his subordinate status) is also made manifest by his attempt to break into print culture.

Particularly apt for discussion of Díaz is Anderson's theorizing of the importance of linguistic communities. He writes, "In the process, they [language-speakers] gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community" (Anderson 44). In Díaz's texts, this process is made doubly so by his use of multiple languages within a single book. Readers are aware both of the language that they know and the associated community, as well as the language they *don't* know and that imagined community. Paradoxically, Díaz receives attention for his "otherness" in the use of his Spanglish and pushes for Spanglish as an inherent part of the American community.

This paradox stems from the anxiety of history, a condition of a postmodern existence perhaps felt most distinctly by Latino Americans, given their unique position within the United States, and it stems from the discomfort felt in attempting to assimilate while retaining a cultural identity. While both Reed and Thomas, as well as a plethora of others, serve as enormous influences on the work of Díaz, enough so that Díaz often deliberately mixes references to their texts, just as Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* suggests, I propose that it is the anxiety of history that ultimately has the greatest influence on Díaz as a writer. Because of his place as a Latino immigrant writer at this specific point in history, and because of his ample references to Dominican history throughout his work, the anxiety of history presides over Díaz in particular, but also presides over all postmodern writers. In this postmodern world saturated with the anxiety of influence, Díaz sees multilingualism and mixing as the answer to how to create the next great American novel, with Spanglish as the ultimate mixing tool. Ultimately, it is that

anxiety of history that makes the Spanglish in Díaz's works his greatest and most critically-acclaimed device.

Latino culture, Latin American history, African American culture, Spanish language, and Bloomian theory all contribute to the anxiety of history. Under its firm grasp, Díaz has produced both *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The anxiety of history is neither a positive nor negative influence on the author, but rather a useful lens through which to view Díaz's literary style and content, as well as the enormous critical and cultural acclaim he has garnered. Through this lens, a deeper and richer understanding may bring into sharper focus not only the writings of Díaz and his predecessors, but also the nature of personal and cultural identity in this postmodern world.

**“More of a Puerto Rican than the most Puerto Rican there ever was:”**

*Piri Thomas’ Down These Mean Streets and the texts of Junot Díaz*

Junot Díaz is intent on “updating” his reader. His collection of short stories, *Drown*, has frequently been compared with Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets*, an autobiography from the ‘60s set in Spanish Harlem, and often pointed to as one of the first texts to utilize Spanglish. The comparison is not surprising, as the two books share a long list of commonalities, to the extent that the commonalities start to look more like an echo than a coincidence. Hispanic Studies Professor Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert sees the connection as a strong one, subtitled her article on Díaz’s *Drown* “Revisiting ‘Those Mean Streets’.” The article, which appears in a collection of essays titled *U.S. Latino Literature: A Critical Guide for Students and Teachers*, examines *Drown* in the context of its Latino forbearers: “Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), in particular, comes to mind when linking *Drown* to a literary tradition. In many ways *Drown* is a sort of throwback to the Nuyorican literature of the 1950s and 1960s” (165).

Both *Down These Mean Streets* and *Drown* link the stories of Latino immigrants coming to America with the rough-edged quality of “gangster” life. And, of course, both texts make ample use of Spanish. There is also a myriad of plot-related and stylistic similarities between *Down These Mean Streets* and *Drown*, as well as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, although the latter shows a decidedly more sophisticated look at “those mean streets.” Most significant is Junot Díaz’s departure from the literary style of Piri Thomas. Ultimately, Thomas’ characters work towards assimilation, an effort that is mirrored in their linguistic choices. Díaz’s,

on the other hand, are still struggling with the anxiety of history, thus fundamentally changing the way they interact with American culture and language.

*Down These Mean Streets* and *Drown* share many plot elements. For example, in “Fiesta, 1980” of *Drown*, Yunior deals with the fact that he knows about his father’s affair, just as Piri does in the chapter “But Not For Me.” Both texts make sure to illustrate how drugs influence life on the streets: Díaz most prominently in “Aurora,” Thomas throughout the text, but his detailed description of withdrawal from heroin takes place in the chapter “Hung Down.” *Machismo* runs rampant through both texts, with blatant sexism and obvious maltreatment of women appearing various times in both texts. In fact, Thomas faced an outcry for censorship upon the release of his autobiography, specifically for its “sexual explicitness” (Thomas, “Interview”). While it should be noted that Díaz presents his reader with the strong female character of Lola in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, in terms of literary influences, one would be hard-pressed to find where women fit into Díaz’s literary tradition. Harold Bloom says of precursors in *The Anxiety of Influence* that “...the triumph of having so stationed the precursor, in one’s own work, that particular passages in *his* work seem to be not presages of one’s own advent, but rather to be indebted to one’s own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one’s greater splendor” (141). By this definition, Díaz seems to see no need to indebt himself to the female writers that came before him.

Neither does Díaz seem to be concerned with situating himself within a Latino literary tradition. Rather, he seems to be aligning himself most closely with other Pulitzer Prize winning authors, most of them white. Many of his stories and texts take place in various New Jersey towns and locales named after white writers, such as Paterson and the Walt Whitman Bridge. Beyond physically situating his stories along a line of locations named after white writers, he

also places himself within this tradition using ample literary references throughout his texts. The title of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* immediately suggests Oscar Wilde and Hemingway (for his short story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber”), and further reading of the text elicits references to Charles Dickens and Saul Bellow. Díaz seems to be allying himself with a white American male literary tradition. And yet he writes unabashedly in a combination of Spanish and English. Díaz appears to be suggesting that Spanish now exists in the American vernacular in a way that fits in with the dominant culture, rather than as part of a subculture. Both the narrators and specific characters in both *Drown* and *Oscar Wao* use Spanish without any attempt to offer English definitions, and speak in it to all sorts of characters regardless of their personal history with the language. The epitome of this technique being that the book speaks to its English-speaking readers in Spanish throughout the narration without definitions.

This shameless use of Spanish throughout the text is one of the single most significant differences between Junot Díaz’s books and *Down These Mean Streets*. In Thomas’s book, the sentences written or spoken by a character in Spanish are almost always directly followed by an English translation. Furthermore, Thomas as a character is aware throughout the book that any character he speaks with outside of his family probably does not know or understand Spanish. For example,

‘when I was a kid—I mean, younger, I used to sell shopping bags in the *Marketa*.’  
‘The what?’  
‘The *Marketa* on 110<sup>th</sup> Street and Park Avenue. It, er, runs all the way up to 116<sup>th</sup> Street.’  
‘Ummm, I see.’

(Thomas 99).

In this example, Thomas as a character is aware that his listener does not understand Spanish, and therefore must explain it in order to make himself understood. In the following example, Thomas as a narrator and writer does the same for his presumably English-speaking reader; “For me, it would be *la silla*, the chair” (242). Thomas’s direct translation of a single Spanish word for the benefit of the reader stands in direct contrast to Díaz’s unapologetic style, as with this quote from the story “Aurora” in *Drown*;

’Where have you been? I ask. Haven’t seen you around.  
You know me. Yo ando más que un perro.  
Her hair is dark with water...

(49).

Díaz uses Spanish in full sentences, with no contextual clues as to what that Spanish might mean. This Spanish sentence means “I walk more than a dog,” and unless the reader has at least an intermediate understanding of Spanish, the meaning would be lost on them completely. However, Díaz seems totally unconcerned with that fact; he seems to say that Spanish is simply a part of life on the streets, just as drugs are. Also, Thomas always uses italics when writing in Spanish, thus “othering” the Spanish words from the rest of the text, while Díaz makes no such distinction.

Furthermore, Thomas demonstrates that the use of Spanish *can* be a point of shame:

I’m not a stupid man. I saw the look of white people on me when I was a young man, when I walked into a place where a dark skin wasn’t supposed to be. I noticed how a cold rejection turned into an indifferent acceptance *when they heard my exaggerated accent. I can remember the time when I made my accent heavier, to make me more of a Puerto Rican than the most Puerto Rican there ever was. I wanted a value on me, son*

(153, italics my own).

In this case, the use of Spanish is shameful when used in exaggeration, as Thomas' father begrudgingly admits, specifically to avoid labeling as African American, a fate at the time even worse than being a Latino immigrant.

Thomas expresses a similar feeling in an interview with Spanglish scholar Ilan Stavans:

I remember the first time I went to the South with my friend Billy. I sat in the front of the bus and when the bus got to the Mason Dixon line, our driver got off and a new driver got on. Immediately, he said "all the colored to the back" and all the coloreds got up and went back and I just sat there. And he said "I want all of you colored people to go to the back" and I said "look I am *puertorriqueño*" and he looked at me and said "I don't care what kind of nigger you are" and he put his hand into his side pocket. Using the better part of my discretion and with a great nudging on my arm from Billy, because he knew we would be killed, I grudgingly but with dignity went to the back of the bus and sat for the rest of the ride staring at the back of his head determined that I would never forget this incident. And they'd call me "nigger!" and if it wasn't nigger they'd call me "spik"

(Thomas, "interview").

Thomas is outraged that he would be labeled as an African American. Moreover, the quote seems to insinuate that derogatory terminology applied to people of color is inevitable, but what is truly offensive is being called the *wrong* derogatory term. So while Thomas and his characters in *Down These Mean Streets* filter their "otherness" through Spanish, Díaz does just the opposite and filters his characters' sense of "otherness" through African American culture and linguistic practices. This pattern suggests that "otherness" must be filtered through the smaller minority group, whatever that may be at the time. While Díaz argues with his use of Spanish that Spanish is something that is becoming and/or will become part of the dominant American culture, African American culture is the lens through which he demonstrates his distinctiveness. Thomas, on the other hand, shows his uniqueness from African Americans by using, exaggerating, and explaining his own Puerto Rican culture.

Perhaps most noteworthy is the fact that *Down These Mean Streets* includes a glossary at the back of the book which includes every Spanish word or phrase used in the text. The glossary not only suggests that the average reader of Thomas' text is unfamiliar with Spanish, but that the reader should not be expected to either figure out the definition of the Spanish word through context or be bothered to look it up in a book other than Thomas' itself. Spanish words are an inconvenience that must be dealt with within the book itself, or the text is not worth reading. Also suggestive is the fact that Thomas' glossary not only includes Spanish words, but English slang words. The two intermix with one another in the glossary in alphabetical order; there is no "Spanish" section and "slang" section, the two are one in the same: "fuzz: cop or detective" is book-ended by "*fundillo*: ass, behind" and "*guiso*: an angle; having something good going for you." Here, Díaz and Thomas seem to agree, that Spanish represents a specific type of English slang. The difference being that Thomas feels a need to explain it while Díaz does not. It is not surprising, then, that Díaz chooses to include it frequently in his text: besides providing authenticity that he is, in fact, a member of the Latino minority, it also provides proof that he is a member of the streets. Furthermore, Díaz wishes to point out that the streets have changed, most prominently in locale.

It has already been pointed out that *Down These Mean Streets* takes place in Spanish Harlem, while *Drown* takes place in various "exits" off the New Jersey turnpike. Based on this knowledge alone, we already know that the settings are similar in that they are a step away from the core of New York City. It is important to note that setting, particularly settings in and around New York City, is something of which Díaz is distinctly conscious. In the event at Fairfield, he said "The DR is to America what New Jersey is to New York. They are both living in the light of somewhere. It is the marginality of elsewhere that produced great art" and goes on to say that

in order to produce great art, one should “be in a New Jersey state of mind.” Díaz’s quote about the marginality of place as producing great art may or may not be true, but what does seem to be true for this postmodern era is a thirst for literature from marginalized voices. Díaz himself may be implying this in the quote, or he may not, but Paravisini-Gebert points out in her article that it is no accident that there was such a feeding frenzy around the signing of Díaz as a writer. That it “speak[s] of the fury to bring selected Latino voiced to a market avid for marketable minority voices” (164).

The fact that both *Down These Mean Streets* and *Drown* found their way to publication demonstrates that both authors fit this description, though Díaz has been met with much more critical acclaim than Thomas. However, the distance in time between Thomas’s publication and Díaz’s publications may also speak to this difference. Díaz as a writer during the postmodern era has certain social, political, and cultural advantages that Thomas did not have as a modern writer. On Georgetown University’s “Po-Mo Page,” a chart of modern values versus postmodern values describes the modern view on ethnicities as “Faith in, and myths of, social and cultural unity, hierarchies of social-class and ethnic/national values, seemingly clear bases for unity” as distinct from the postmodern ideal of “Social and cultural pluralism, disunity, unclear bases for social/national/ ethnic unity” (Irvine). These definitions help to situate Thomas and his text as modern and Díaz as postmodern. Thomas’s response to an employer’s questions about his hometown of Harlem demonstrates his modern view of “hierarchies of social-class and ethnic/national values:” “It’s split up in different sections, like the Italian section and Irish and Negro and the Puerto Rican section. I live in the Puerto Rican section. It’s called the *Barrio*” (100). In essence, Thomas still sees his ethnic group as of one among many, as was common during the modern era. So while he may have been marketable as a minority and immigrant

voice, he did not necessarily stand out among other minority or immigrant voices. Furthermore, minority voices were simply not as marketable during the 60s; as the Po-Mo Page points out, the individual was honored during the modern era over the multiple, the person over the population. Whereas Thomas received acclaim for his individual voice (e.g. Daniel Stern's review of *Down These Mean Streets* in *The New York Times*, 1967: "Gutter language, Spanish imagery and personal poetics...mingle into a kind of individual statement that has very much its own sound..."), Díaz achieved it for his individual voice, but a voice that represents part of an ever-growing minority population.

In introducing Junot Díaz at the "Open Visions Forum" at Fairfield University, Rev. Jeffrey P. von Arx, President of Fairfield University, said "Latin Americans are no longer merely neighbors but cultural tributaries flowing into the U.S." Time and again, Díaz is identified as a Latino writer, a Dominican writer, a Spanish-speaking writer. This quote by von Arx immediately situates Díaz as an "other," originating outside of the U.S and "flowing in." His word choice is striking: the image of "cultural tributaries" resembles the representation of the melting pot, complete with the liquid quality of the end result. The fact that the tributaries are "flowing" designates the immigrant population as a continual surge pulled along in the current towards the oceanic United States. Finally, the image of the river or tributary suggests that a physical connection still exists between the place of origin and the cultural delta, a long line of water between the US and Latin America, saturated with the salts of Spanish, Latino culture, and Latin American history.

The Open Visions Forum goes further in linking Díaz with his fellow "cultural tributaries." The two professors chosen for the panel discussion with Díaz were both Puerto

Rican, and, as was mentioned in the introduction, the Latin American Studies Department was hosting his visit. Von Arx went on to say that through Junot Díaz, we can “understand the immigrant experience and how our culture is evolving.” It is no wonder that Díaz’s writing is inundated with the anxiety of history: the anxiety of history is constantly being thrust upon him. As a writer, Díaz is asked not about the intricacies of his craft but rather is called upon to explain what it means to be a Latino immigrant in the United States. He is therefore aware that one of his greatest tools as a writer lies in his grasp of the Spanish language. As Paravisini-Gebert points out in her review of *Drown*, “reviewers and readers agree that the collection’s true originality lies in having created ‘a non-literary vernacular, compounded of African American slang, loosened Spanish and standard American storytelling’ for his ‘cool and grimy’ portrayals of contemporary urban American” (166).

It is no surprise, then, that in the eleven years that it took *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to come out after the publication of *Drown*, Díaz took Spanglish to a whole new level. Spanish not only appears on almost every page of *Oscar Wao*, but the way in which Díaz utilizes Spanish has taken a decided turn. Rather than the stark, blunt way in which he used it in *Drown* as an honest way of looking at life on the streets, its use in *Oscar Wao* is infinitely more stylistic and inexorably braided into African American slang. He appears to have “taken back” the Spanish of Piri Thomas and of *Drown*, the Spanish of Latinos as a smaller minority in the United States. However, in doing so, he also appropriates African American culture.

The first sentence of the first chapter of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a prime example of this. It reads, “Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about—he wasn’t no home-fly hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million

hots on his jock” (Díaz 11). In true Díaz style, this single sentence manages to include Spanish, English, African American slang, and the anxiety of history. The word ‘cats’ is straight out of Thomas’ era—he himself uses the term throughout *Down These Mean Streets* (e.g. “Man, I was so hungry, I wondered maybe if I asked—but wait a minute, that cat said *tapita...*” (Thomas 5)), but originates in the American jazz age, an African American-led development. Then there’s Spanish in the use of the word “bachatero” which means (roughly) “carouser.” Finally, there are the beginnings of Díaz’s struggle with the anxiety of history in *Oscar Wao*—he points out the stereotypes associated with Dominicans (baseball players with “home-fly hitter” and playboys) so that he can begin to educate his reader about Dominican history past the few things we already think we know about Dominicans.

This sentence is by way of introduction to Oscar himself, and on the very same page Díaz writer of Oscar

In those blessed days of his youth, Oscar was something of a Casanova. One of those preschool loverboys who was always trying to kiss the girls, always coming up behind them during a meringue and giving them the pelvic pump, the first nigger to learn the perrito and the one who danced it any chance he got

(11).

Here we have the first instance of true appropriation of African American culture by Díaz in his use of the n-word. The n-word has been taken back by the African American community, and it is generally known that it is appropriate to use by African Americans between one another, and inappropriate for anyone else to use at all (although some African American scholars and leaders dispute its use at all). In this passage, Díaz claims his right to use the word by putting in close proximity to a Spanish word (perrito) thus proving his person of color and minority status.

Díaz often puts himself in the bracket of person of color in the text, pitting both African American slang and Spanish against the ignorance of “whitey.” In one of his many footnotes, Díaz explains the Spanish word “parigüayo,” the only time, it should be noted, that Díaz defines a Spanish word for the reader:

the pejorative *pariguayo*, Watchers agree, is a corruption of the English neologism “party watcher.” The word came into common usage during the first American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1934. (You didn’t know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don’t worry, when you have kids they won’t know the U.S. occupied Iraq either.)...

(19).

In a single footnote, Díaz pairs the English-speakers’ lack of knowledge of Spanish with his/her ignorance of Dominican history, two things he hopes to eradicate by writing *Oscar Wao*. This footnote is one of thirty-three that spans the length of the text, twenty-one of which directly educate the reader on the history of the Dominican Republic. It is as if Díaz wrote a book in order to educate Americans on the history of the DR, but realized that he had to make it “cool and grimy” enough to be a bestseller.

This is the anxiety of history: a fixation on cultural and societal history so great that the author can’t help but have it influence his/her textual work. In writing his bestseller, Díaz knew that Spanish would be one of his greatest tools in creating the next great American novel (he himself drew many comparisons of *Oscar Wao* to *Moby Dick* during the Fairfield event), but being a postmodern writer, he also realized that the postmodern era calls for a mixing of styles, and therefore his Spanish could not stand alone. To ameliorate this problem, and to gain authenticity and “street cred” for his work, he chose to incorporate African American slang into his discourse. This is where an examination of Thomas can only go so far in deconstructing Díaz. As an autobiography of a Latino written during the modern era, *Down These Mean Streets*

acts as a poignant representation of immigrant life in America. And, while Thomas also engages in conversations about race and African American life in America, he does so exceedingly consciously; readers witness Thomas' physical and emotional struggle of what it means to be a person of color in America. As a member of the now largest minority group in the country, Díaz holds an entirely different perspective on race, a perspective more closely resembling that of Ishmael Reed's. As a minority voice writing in a decidedly postmodern style, Ishmael Reed serves as a second lens through which we can read Díaz, a lens which will deepen our understanding of Díaz and his struggle with the anxiety of history.

## **“Lord, if I can’t dance, no one shall:”**

*Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo and Junot Díaz*

It’s hard to ignore the influence of Ishmael Reed on Junot Díaz. Reed’s 1972 novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, begins with an explanation of a curse just as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* does. In *Mumbo Jumbo*’s case, the curse is an “epidemic” called “Jes Grew,” which causes its victims to dance wildly and uncontrollably, as if possessed by a spirit. The term originated in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, when a young slave girl named Topsy entertains her white masters by informing them that she “jes grew.” Díaz’s two syllable curse, Fukú, is also clearly a parody of language. Díaz’s humorous play on a swear word also speaks of the intertextuality between the two texts: in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Jes Grew is protected by a group called the *Mu’tafikah*, a slight pronunciation-shift away from the word motherfucker. While the similarities between Jes Grew and Fukú are numerous, understanding the differences between the two curses, as well as the complete texts, is instrumental in identifying the influence of the anxiety of history on Díaz. Ultimately, Díaz’s curse, overall story, and postmodern choices are products of contingencies having to do with a particular historical moment, while Reed’s speaks to the inherent essence of ethnic identity.

The two curses are viewed differently by the reader due in large part to the differing styles and formats of the respective novels: Reed’s novel being postmodern and dense, Díaz’s postmodern yet entertaining and accessible. Reed’s novel, while definitely postmodern in its form and experimental in its nature, most closely resembles a detective novel. Therefore, like most things in the text, Jes Grew is a mystery. Although its effects on the J.G.Cs (Jes Grew Carriers) are enumerated and its history is explained, the nature of Jes Grew defies definition by

human language. As Papa LaBas explains, “JesGrew has no end and no beginning. It even precedes that little ball that exploded 1000000000s of years ago and led to what we are now” (Reed 204). Fukú, on the other hand, has an identifiable beginning, namely, “the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola” (Díaz 1). Therefore, Jes Grew and the version of blackness that it represents is an innate part of the human experience, the universe even. Fukú was caused by a specific agent, the Europeans, meaning there is a specific group to blame for the fukú. Interestingly, the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola has also been argued as the very earliest beginnings of Spanglish, when the native Mexican word *canoa* (boat) was added to a Spanish dictionary (Stavans 69). Furthermore, the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola was also the beginnings of Latin Americans as a people at all.

While Reed deals (literally) in the universal, Díaz sticks to the specific. Whereas Jes Grew affects millions of people across the world, and at one point even effects animals, Fukú is a pickier sort of disease. Although it is suggested in the prologue that fukú may be to blame for things like America’s losses in Vietnam and Kennedy’s assassination, the curse seems to reside in the genes of certain Dominican families. It is for this reason that *Oscar Wao’s* narrator, Yuniors, is telling the story at all; it is what makes the De León family special, despite the notorious bad luck that is symptomatic of fukú. It has already been noted that Díaz personally believes that “the most universal stories are always the most specific,” but to what extent does specificity rely on a minority/majority system? Would Díaz’s novel still be considered specific if it had been written in Spanish and published in the Dominican Republic? Probably not; but Díaz’s novel is entirely specific in the “melting pot” culture of the United States, where the story of a Dominican and his lineage written in Spanglish is exceptional and attention-grabbing.

Ultimately, Jes Grew is revealed to be a positive thing; it represents the undefeatable aspect of the human spirit, and those few characters in *Mumbo Jumbo* who haven't "caught" it are actively trying to do so. In creating an epidemic consisting of characteristics that are inherently black in nature, Reed argues for a reassertion of collective black identity. The fukú and its ultimate message, however, remain a bit more ambiguous. The specificity of the curse relies on a system of minority vs. majority, and yet Díaz seems to want to turn this system on its head with his inclusion of minority language (Spanish) in his text consciously written to be accessible to the dominant English-speaking culture. Furthermore, the approaching racial shift in the United States which projects Caucasians as the minority ("The white majority in the U.S. will be outnumbered by Americans of other races by 2042" (Penny)) will also overturn such a system, a fact that Díaz is undoubtedly aware of. Hence, Díaz's call for an American Arts Movement that actively includes Spanish and Latino culture, rather than Reed's involvement in the Black Arts Movement, a subcultural movement. Despite this, and despite the fukú's negative sounding name, Díaz's protagonist, Oscar, *needs* the fukú to reach the climax of the novel: the loss of his virginity and subsequent death. Analogously, Junot Díaz needs the specificity of Spanish and the Dominican Republic's history to create his universally particular novel. His anxiety of history has helped to make him the literary and cultural phenomenon that he is today.

In terms of their portrayal of female characters, Reed and Díaz are similar. Besides Díaz's self-proclaimed male literary lineage, *Oscar Wao's* literary climax featuring Oscar's sexual climax furthers Díaz's masculine style and lineage. Oscar's sister, Lola, is the strongest female character in any of Díaz's works, but the only chapter in which she gets her own voice (chapter two: "Wildwood") begins in the second person, the only section of the text to utilize the second person. The "you" of this style echo a command format, thus taking away agency from

Lola before she even has a chance to tell her own story. Correspondingly, Reed's female characters are all peripheral and highly sexualized; they are show girls and sexual objects, and most easily fall victim to the spirits of the *loas* (Haitian spirits of a "jes grew" nature) of any character set. In *Oscar Wao*, the ultimate role of women in the protagonist's life is to help fulfill his sexual desire before the end of his brief life. However, in terms of literary styles, *Oscar Wao* follows the traditionally masculine narrative arc of rising action-climax-falling action while *Mumbo Jumbo*'s slapdash style features what Henry Louis Gates identifies as an anti-climax in his analysis of the book in *They Signifying Monkey*: "The nature of the text [that Jes Grew seeks] remains undetermined and, indeed, indeterminate, as it was at the novel's beginning. Once the signs of its presence have been read, the text disappears, in what must be the most humorous anticlimax in the whole of Afro-American fiction" (233-34).

Despite their differences in narrative arc, both *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Mumbo Jumbo* are postmodern in their scope. Reed uses play, irony, and a mixing of media as his choice postmodern formal elements. He satirizes all aspects of African American and American culture, blatantly mocks scholarly modes of writing, and includes everything from photographs to newspaper clippings to poetry throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*. Díaz's parallel postmodern choices are a mixing of high and low culture, play, and a mixing of languages. However, Reed's postmodern choices reflect his response to the anxiety of influence while Díaz's grapple with an anxiety of history. As Gates points out, "The 'Partial Bibliography' is Reed's most brilliant stroke, since its unconcealed presence (along with the text's other undigested texts) parodies both the scholar's appeal to authority and all studied attempts to conceal literary antecedents and influence" (224). Díaz also rejects "attempts to conceal literary antecedents" by deliberately putting references to literary antecedents in the title of his novel and

throughout the text. He is successful in this subversion; he is not, necessarily, in subverting the anxiety of history.

Both Reed and Díaz play via bogus footnotes. Again, however, Reed's deal primarily with literary influences, whereas Díaz's deal with historical impacts. For example, "The Wallflower order attempts to meet the psychic plague by installing an anti-Jes Grew President, Warren Harding. He wins on the platform "Let's be done with Wiggle and Wobble,\*" (Reed 17) is connected to the following footnote: "\**The Harding Era*—Robert K. Murray" in *Mumbo Jumbo*. The reference here is clearly false; Warren Harding's platform never included the words 'Wiggle' or 'Wobble.' By pairing the quote with a legitimate sounding text—a real book, in fact, Reed actively mocks both the scholarly writer and the scholarly reader, who blindly believes any quotation, as long as it's linked with an academic source.

Junot Díaz also dwells on the subject of credibility in writing. At the event in Fairfield, he explained to the audience the cultural phenomenon of believing legitimate-sounding lies instead of "low-brow" truths: "We're more likely to believe an authoritative lie than a frivolous truth, such as one that appears in a comic book" (Díaz "Open Visions Forum"). In order to challenge this phenomenon in his own writing, he both derides traditionally "high-brow" forms of writing, and uses slang, lingo, and other "low-brow" forms of writing in expressing truths. Both of these tactics are utilized in his footnotes, which tease their traditional use with tangential anecdotes, or explanations that are so long that the footnote goes on for pages. However, his footnotes almost always (as has been noted, twenty one of the thirty three footnotes) deal in the history of the Dominican Republic, as with this footnote that starts on page two of *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and continues on to page three:

For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality. A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery, Trujillo (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface) came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master. At first glance, he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would argue, imagined. He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up. Famous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican republic to honor himself...for making ill monopolies out of every slice of the national patrimony...for building one of the largest militaries in the hemisphere (dude had bomber wings, for fuck's sake); for fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands of women; for expecting, no *insisting* on absolute veneration from his pueblo (tellingly, the national slogan was 'Dios y Trujillo');...

The footnote goes on to explain a few of Trujillo's "outstanding accomplishments" and the U.S.'s role in backing this Latin American dictator.

This footnote is representative of the text as a whole: nobody escapes ridicule, and there are enough levels of language, from literary allusion to contemporary slang, pop culture references to historical facts, that Díaz is banking on the fact that most readers will catch at least one reference and be in the dark on at least one other. To begin, the first line makes fun of the reader for their probable ignorance of Dominican history. Most likely, Díaz is calling out white readers, and other non-Dominican readers, since presumably Dominican readers would have some knowledge of their country's history. As has been discussed, he is also clearly making fun of scholarly writing (here, historical scholarly writing in particular) with his blatant use of vulgarities (e.g. "for fuck's sake") intermixed with traditional words used to describe historical

occurrences (e.g. “political, social, and economic life”). And, of course, he is making fun of Trujillo (e.g. pig-eyed, ‘Dios y Trujillo’ etc.) However, this excerpt, as well as the text as a whole, exhibits a sort of disgusted fascination with Trujillo. In many ways, Trujillo dictates the course of the text and Díaz’s writing in much the same way that he ruled the country: ever-present and inescapable. Even from the grave, Trujillo seems to maintain a power over his Dominican citizens, including Junot Díaz fifty years after the end of his reign.

In this way, Trujillo plays his part in Díaz’s anxiety of history. Through footnotes such as this one, Díaz ensures that the reader leaves *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* with at least a brief, wondrous understanding of Dominican history. However, he writes that history in such an entertaining way that the reader is tricked into feeling that these truths are coming out of the literary equivalent of the comic book. Unlike Reed, whose novel *Mumbo Jumbo* is considered to be an extremely difficult text to master (*The Signifying Monkey* includes a key to *Mumbo Jumbo* so that baffled readers such as myself can understand its intricacies even after several read-throughs), Díaz writes in such an entertainingly accessible way as to ensure that all readers have at least some access to his novel, and the history it seeks to reveal. Younger readers (those who will have an immediate understanding of Díaz’s use of the word ‘ill’) to older readers (for whom the reference to DC Comic’s character ‘Darkseid’ from the original Superman will have particular resonance) will connect with *Oscar Wao* in different ways, but each in a way that draws a specific imagery and connotative correlation, demonstrating the universality and timelessness of Trujillo’s evil ways.

Díaz’s footnotes do for the Dominican Republic what Jes Grew does for Haiti in *Mumbo Jumbo*: they put it on the map. Reed also feels the anxiety of an ignored history, but (perhaps since his personal heritage does not directly correlate with this specific history), the anxiety

becomes more of a point of humor rather than a source of tension. *Jes Grew*, which apparently has its roots in Haiti, remarkably resides on the same island as the Dominican Republic. Here, the managing editor for the New York *Sun* of *Mumbo Jumbo* acutely explains to Hinckle Von Vampton the politics of the media's perspective on the history of third world countries and their current day repercussions: "We have our orders about this Haiti thing. Americans will not tolerate wars that can't be explained in simple terms of economics or the White man's destiny. Your headline has done considerable damage. Our switchboard is overloaded with questions from the populace concerning Haiti. Some of them don't even know where it is" (Reed 58). This is Díaz's fear as well: that most Americans don't even know where the Dominican Republic is. *Oscar Wao* works to eradicate this ignorance, and perhaps even encourages readers to do their own research on the DR, just as the news of Haiti in *Mumbo Jumbo* has provoked some characters to overload the newspaper's switchboard with further questions.

In writing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz preempts the question that he assumes many white Americans may be asking, as the white character Thor asks in *Mumbo Jumbo*, "But what does Cortes and Pizarro or the others have to do with me?" (Reed 86). Reed's answer to this is "You carry them in your blood as I carry the blood of Montezuma...the costumes may have changed but the blood is still the same, gringo" (Reed 86). Heir to the legacy left behind by their European ancestors that first unleashed the fukú on Hispaniola, Díaz calls to white Americans to care about the history of the oppressed, the history of the minority that will soon leave that title behind them. As his ultimate plea for attention, Díaz puts a personal "I" on the political situation through the voice of Yunior, *Oscar Wao's* supreme narrator and, arguably, a stand-in for Díaz himself. Not only does Yunior link *Oscar Wao* to *Drown*, where he is usually the main character in the essay-like short stories, but the name

Yunior closely resembles a Spanish pronunciation of Junot—"Yuno." The use of the author's own voice is a postmodern device that Reed also uses, as in the following example that interrupts the main plot line: "(Thermuthis cried the way 1 of my relatives from Alabama described as 'crying proper.'—I.R.)" (Reed 185). Reed makes no attempt to hide that this is the author's own voice, that the narrator is I.R.—Ishmael Reed. Nevertheless, in *Mumbo Jumbo* this moment reads more like one more exploration into the possibilities of a postmodern text, a furthering of the idea of mixing styles and mediums by mixing the actual author's voice with the narration. In *Oscar Wao*, however, the effect of the personal is quite different. Yunior, who occasionally interrupts the main plot line to insert personal commentary (Footnote 15, for example, in reference to 'El Hollywood:') "A favorite hangout of Trujillo's, my mother tells me when the manuscript is done" (Díaz 114)) or Díaz's interruptions, depending on how you want to read them, dares the reader to put a nonfictional face on the events in the novel. Ignoring the history of the Dominican Republic means ignoring me, says Díaz.

The Pulitzer Prize board, at least, gave Díaz plenty of attention. They, along with the many readers that made *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* a *New York Times* Bestseller, put Junot Díaz on the literary map. And therefore, as per Díaz's novel, put the Dominican Republic on the geographical and sociopolitical map for thousands of Americans.

Ultimately, Díaz places his emphasis on the role of the Dominican Republic in the twenty-first century, and the role of Spanglish in the American Arts Movement, rather than stretching the boundaries of subculture literature, as Reed does. By putting *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in dialogue with another postmodern text written by a writer of color, *Mumbo Jumbo*, the anxiety of history is made distinct from the anxiety of influence, as first iterated by Harold Bloom in his book of the same title. I argue that the anxiety of history actively aids in

Díaz's current role as a literary and pop culture icon, but still retains many of the challenges associated with the anxiety of influence. Therefore, a final, purely theoretical approach to Díaz and his texts is necessary in order to complete the picture of Díaz's immense popularity and literary renown.

## **“Good Art Doesn’t Know Shit about Assimilation”**

### *Defining and Concluding the Anxiety of History*

In explaining the concept of the anxiety of influence in the introduction to his text, Harold Bloom writes, “My theory rejects... the qualified Freudian optimism that happy substitution is possible, that a second chance can save us from the repetitive quest for our earliest attachments” (Bloom 8). Bloom here refers to Freud’s model of neurosis, that the neurotic fails to escape the attachments of his or her childhood and is therefore doomed to repeat said childhood attachments, while the healthy person learns from these childhood experiences and is able to move toward adult attachments. Bloom applies this idea to poets and poetry, the childhood attachments analogous to poetic precursors and earlier writers. He contends that escape from the influence of these attachments is impossible, and therefore the anxiety of influence is inevitable. In coining the term anxiety of history, I choose to return to Freud’s original terminology of childhood attachments, which for Latino immigrants often means attachments to a country, culture, and language other than America and American English. However, I agree with Bloom in contending that complete freedom from these attachments is impossible to achieve, therefore creating the anxiety of history. In Freudian theory, the healthy person learns from the experiences of history and can therefore let go of these attachments. Junot Díaz attempts to cope with the anxiety of history by educating his reader about the history of the Dominican Republic. He fails, of course, due to the nature of the anxiety of history.

The anxiety of history is a symptom of our postmodern age, in part due to the current statistics of minority populations in the United States, but also because of the nature of postmodernism itself. Georgetown University’s website dedicated to defining that which is postmodern lists the facets of postmodernism. In regards to history, the site says that

postmodernism means “Suspicion and rejection of Master Narratives for history and culture; local narratives, ironic deconstruction of master narratives: counter-myths of origin” (Irvine). Since master narratives for history and culture are rejected, that leaves the individual, or in this case the author, to redefine history and culture. The task of redefining history, in addition to the inherent attachment to it, also contributes to the anxiety of history. Furthermore, the po-mo page also lists “Disruption of the dominance of high culture by popular culture. Mixing of popular and high cultures, new valuation of pop culture, hybrid cultural forms cancel "high"/"low" categories” as a facet of postmodernism. Formerly, the history and cultural practices of minority cultures would not have disrupted high culture, but since Latino culture and Spanish have worked their way into popular culture, they now occupy space in many parts of American culture. Moreover, popular culture has long been influenced by African American culture, which helps to explain why African American minority culture influences Díaz and plays into the anxiety of history.

Eric Lott, author of *Love and Theft: Black Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, argues that the influence of African American culture on American culture extends back to the time of slavery, particularly in the use of blackface minstrelsy. Lott writes:

...the minstrel show worked for over a hundred years to facilitate safely an exchange of energies between two otherwise rigidly bounded and policed cultures, a shape-shifting middle term in racial conflict which began to disappear (in the 1920s) once its historical function had been performed. It appears that during this stretch of American cultural history the intercourse between racial cultures was at once so attractive and so threatening as to require a cultural marker or visible sign of cultural interaction

(6)

Díaz is using literature as a space for a “safe exchange of energies,” the energies of the American melting pot and Latino culture and language. Of course, this is not to say that Díaz is performing

a contemporary version of blackface, a derogatory performance based on mockery, but rather that Díaz is aware of the anxiety of history's influence on popular society that urges them to participate in Latino culture. This paragraph could easily be read with a contemporary spin by simply changing the details of African American culture to Latino culture. Díaz is looking for a middle ground, as Lott argues was the position of blackface minstrelsy, in order to safely weave together two "rigidly bounded and policed cultures" whose mixing is at once both exciting and terrifying to the American working class.

Lott goes on to say that "minstrelsy not only affords a look at the emergent historical break between high and low cultures, but also reveals popular culture to be a place where cultures of the dispossessed are routinely commodified—and contested" (8). Díaz is working within the realm of popular culture by writing his accessibly postmodern novel, and by so doing simultaneously commodifies Latino culture and contests its current place in American culture. His use of Spanglish is the contemporary equivalent to the breaking between high and low cultures which Lott argues minstrelsy provided. Again, while Spanglish is certainly not literally equivalent to minstrelsy, it certainly *is* equivalent to the idea of a middle ground between a society and its largest minority group, impelled by the anxiety of history.

In attempting to overcome his own anxiety of influence, Junot Díaz utilizes a mixture of languages as a postmodern device, the epitome of which being the use of Spanglish in his literature. However, in so doing, Díaz demonstrates the anxiety of history which still holds a firm grasp over his writing style, and which he ultimately fails to avoid. That being said, it may also be the anxiety of history that has brought him so much critical acclaim and popularity as a writer. The fact that Díaz has received countless awards for his work, the most prominent being the Pulitzer Prize, reveals that the anxiety of history not only affects Díaz as a writer, but the

United States as a society. Junot Díaz has a need to express his cultural and linguistic history, just as his literary public has a craving to receive it. If either of these phenomena existed on their own, they would not represent a cultural trend. However, since they exist together, the anxiety of history is proven to be both postmodern in its application and universal in its scope.

To use Junot Díaz's own words in explaining his thoughts on the topic, I quote him now from the event in Fairfield. Partly in response to a question regarding his advocacy for the local, Díaz, in typical Díaz style, said, "good art doesn't know shit about assimilation." From this quote it can be interpreted that Díaz wants it both ways: he wants to be recognized as the next great American author, but doesn't want to face the assimilation that this might include. It is my belief that his answer reflects the thoughts of many Latinos now living in the United States, and speaks to the specificity of our time. In a country on the verge of having a white minority population within the next half-century, Latinos who will, according to current statistical projections, make up the majority, are asking Americans to meet them halfway. Their ability to do so sets them apart from any previous immigrant group that this country has yet been made home to.

A meeting in the middle is what *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Drown* call for, and in that way sets them apart from their predecessors *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas and *Mumbo Jumbo* by Ishmael Reed. Thomas was fighting for the recognition of a Latino race in a racist society. *Down These Mean Streets*, which is his autobiography, attempts to paint a picture of life in America for a Latino immigrant, to humanize the Spanish-speakers on the street that his public may have encountered but know nothing about. But Thomas is painfully aware that his public may not speak a word of Spanish, and therefore provides his reader with a glossary of Spanish terms. He is aware that his reader may know very little about Puerto Rico, his homeland, and therefore generalizes it, paints a picture of it as just another sandy and palm tree-

covered paradise. Thomas grew up in a world where he was judged for being less than white. His battle is for recognition of his heritage and uniqueness in a prejudiced society. Díaz wants more from his public. He expects his readers to get online and look up a Spanish word if they don't know it. He leaves every reader of *Oscar Wao* with an intermediate understanding of Dominican history. He challenges Americans with the fact that they probably don't know about their country's own role in Trujillo's dictatorship, shoving it in their face and daring them to learn more. Good art doesn't know shit about assimilation, and you don't know shit about the Dominican Republic. But you can learn about it by reading *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and be entertained at the same time.

Reed, on the other hand, wrote *Mumbo Jumbo* during the Black Arts Movement, and was therefore part of an existing effort to attempt to create a strong minority voice. The Black Arts Movement gave rise to the Black Panthers and poets Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni—it was an effort to solidify a community within the broader community of the United States, and to amplify pride of black culture and heritage. *Mumbo Jumbo* as a satire attempted to both assert the inherent essence of blackness and enrich the society by critiquing it. Reed envisions black society as complete and full-bodied society within a society. Conversely, Junot Díaz argues for just the opposite. He envisions a society that speaks Spanish *and* English; a society that knows about American *and* Latino history. His movement is the American Arts Movement, not the Latino Arts Movement. A society on middle ground.

And he doesn't seem to be letting up on this objective. The March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010 issue of *The New Yorker* contains a story by Díaz titled “The Pura Principle”—his first piece of fiction published since 2007. Yunior is back in “The Pura Principle,” and so is Spanish. His latest story contains almost a full paragraph in Spanish, the longest I've seen him stretch the use of

Spanglish to this point: "...They beat the anti-Pura drums daily. Ella es prieta. Ella es fea. Ella dejó un hijo en Santo Domingo. Ella tiene otro aquí. No tiene hombre. No tiene dinero. No tiene papeles. ¿Qué tú crees que ella busca por aquí? They terrorized Mami with the scenario of Pura getting pregnant..." (Díaz 64). From *Drown* to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to "The Pura Principle," the trend seems to be an increasing number of Spanish words and phrases with fewer and fewer contextual clues provided to decipher their meaning, moving steadily towards a more balanced form of Spanglish. Díaz is working within a specific trajectory, and in order to fully understand his work one may eventually need to learn the entire language of Spanish, and not just a few keywords.

The literary community appears to be more than willing to meet Junot Díaz halfway. And the United States seems also to be working toward such a meeting. *Dora the Explorer*, a Spanglish television cartoon for children is currently one of the most popular on air, grossing over \$1billion yearly ("Dora the Explorer"). The United States military has adopted a campaign slogan "Yo Soy el Army" ("I am the Army") (Feldman). And countless words of Spanish have subtly become part of American English, from *amigo* to *burrito*, *lasso* to *hasta la vista*, it seems that everyone in America can speak at least a sliver of Spanish, or perhaps more accurately, Spanglish.

Nevertheless, Spanglish as a literary and cultural phenomenon still angers and upsets many people, particularly academics, on both sides of the border. Nobel Prize winning poet Octavio Paz has been quoted as defining Spanglish as "ni es bueno ni es malo, sino abominable/ neither good nor bad, but abominable" (Stavans 4). Paz saw Spanglish as a bastardization of the language of Cervantes. His perspective seems to be echoed by the Oxford English Dictionary,

which as recently as April 4 2010, defines Spanglish as “a type of Spanish contaminated by English words and expressions, spoken in Latin America” (“Spanglish, *n*”).

Of course, there exist scholars who are advocating for Spanglish as an authentic part of the Latino experience, and therefore a legitimate mode of expression; most prominently, Ilan Stavans, author of several books on Spanglish and translator of the first chapter of *Don Quixote* into a Spanglish version. Junot Díaz and his works of fiction certainly lie at the center of this tempest, and yet his response seems to be much calmer, true to the nature of the eye of the storm. Spanglish is neither good nor bad, but *happening*. “Good art doesn’t know shit about assimilation.” Ready or not, here we come.

Spanglish may be the most visible by-product of the anxiety of history, but it is not the only one. The anxiety of history propels Díaz to write in Spanglish, and in using Spanglish he compels his readership to imagine a community, as Anderson suggests, of the future. An America where Spanish and English mingle and mix to form Spanglish, the perfect signifier of a community on middle ground. An imagined American Arts Movement. A community where histories are valued rather than ignored. A community of equals: linguistically, racially, and culturally. Imagine.

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