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Humanities and Theology

“Ghetto Nerd at the End of the World”

the Decolonized Chronotope, Liminality, and Dialogics in
Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Abstract

Narratives focusing on People of Color often suffer from neocolonial treatment with narrow focus on race at the expense of character development, working with stereotypical monoliths rather than complex individuals. These types of narratives tend to use Whiteness as a “neutral” reference point. In this thesis, I demonstrate how novelist Junot Díaz crafts *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* around a universe that explores narratives and value systems that normalize and center around People of Color. I examine how Díaz presents a multigenerational nebulous investigation of decolonial liminality through the lens of what I term the “decolonized chronotope,” a device for analyzing texts and their cultures in a way that addresses and delinks from colonialist power structures. I analyze the novel dialogically by looking at the interplay of the underlying diaspora, the oscillations—or shifts—between genre, language(s), time, space, perspective), and what the novel’s various internal interactions convey about the larger whole. Using theories from M.M. Bakhtin, alongside Gayatri Spivak, John Muthyala, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin, among others, I deconstruct the oscillations that power the decolonized chronotope, as well as examine the nature of diaspora, hegemonic cultural control, and colonialism in the novel.

Keywords: Junot Díaz, contemporary literature, decolonized chronotope, decolonial imagination, heteroglossia, New Jersey, Dominican Republic, Afro-Latinidad

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Introduction

“You guys know about vampires? ... You know how vampires have no reflections in the mirror? There’s this idea that monsters don’t have reflections in a mirror. And what I’ve always thought isn’t that monsters don’t have reflections in a mirror. It’s that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn’t see myself reflected at all. I was like, ‘Yo, is something wrong with me? That the whole society seems to think that people like me don’t exist?’ And part of what inspired me, was this deep desire that before I died, I would make a couple of mirrors. That I would make some mirrors so that kids like me might see themselves reflected back and might not feel so monstrous for it.” –Junot Díaz on October 19, 2009 at Bergen Community College, Paramus, New Jersey

The initial direction for this thesis came about during a conversation with my partner last winter. I suggested it, half-joking, half-wistful. What a fun idea, and what a shame that I could never use it. His response was unequivocally positive. A great concept, he declared it. I tried to explain that people like me do not get to voice ourselves in this way, that artists like Díaz can only be celebrated like this in special corners. Mid-explanation, I felt a cloying, nauseous sensation. I, who have fought the reductive gaze in my personal and academic lives, was trying so hard to silence myself—but for whom? As Sara Ahmed states in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, “The personal is complicated, and mediated by relations that make any person embody more than the personal, and the personal embody more than the person” (Ahmed 198). I based my decision to include such personal notes—to write this with myself as a detectable backdrop—on Ahmed’s concepts of emotion in discourse, on the postcolonial and feminist traditions of self-inclusion, on wanting to write myself (and people like me) into discourse/relevance, on the ethnographic approach of acknowledging the author’s background and biases. However, the largest, most influential factor stemmed from a core concept of this thesis: I could not defend the hypocrisy of dissecting the construction of neutrality in a tone that claims to be exactly the thing that I aim to critique. I chose to write this thesis with my younger self in mind, hoping to commit to writing what I wish I had known years ago: that we People of Color, we immigrants’ children, we female-identified people, we who do not fit the hegemonic wish-image of wealthy White cisgender maleness, are worthy of space in everyday life as well as in culture. As Zora Neale Hurston wrote in her 1950 article “What White Publishers Won’t Print,” “[F]or the national welfare, it is urgent to realize that the minorities do think, and think about something other than the race problem. That they are very human and internally, according to natural endowment, are just like everybody else. So long as this is not conceived, there must remain that feeling of insurmountable difference, and difference to the average man means something bad” (Hurston 1023). So why should our voices be relegated to faraway spaces, where they become echo chambers, affecting little change outside of those circles? This is a concept with which I have struggled for a long time, and I suspect that this may be one of those lifelong deals. I, along with many others, have internalized so much toxicity, which the hegemony continues to promote. To celebrate myself in totality is a deliberate act. Decolonial love—“the kind of

love that [can] liberate [people] from [the] horrible legacy of colonial violence”—does not just happen (Moya).

Junot Díaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* explores a normalizing presentation of the central characters’ complex identities through constant oscillations between genres, standard national English, standard national Spanish, slangs, accents, registers within languages, perspectives, types of references (folklore, gossip, science fiction, comic books, history, and more), main text to footnotes, time, and place. Most of these oscillations take place within the first person semi-omniscient narratorial voice of a character called Yunior, whose distinct style regularly gives way to those of the characters whose lives he relays—typically while he discusses them—as well as an authorial voice expressed by standard literary language; and, at times, Lola takes over to expand on topics beyond Yunior’s reach, such as her experience with her mother Belicia’s breast cancer, her complicated relationship to her mother and to her own selfhood. The regularity of these oscillations mirror the kind of liminality—here, an ambiguity that acknowledges binaries and defined categories without adherence or reliance on them in order to develop or possess meaning—inherent in many diasporic experiences, which I express as the nebulous betweenness of inhabiting multiple identities with infinite expressions. It is not concerned with negative definitions, such as being “non-White” rather than a “Person of Color.” In this thesis, I speak of liminality as a realm of its own, rather than a fixed space between positions. Through both style and content, Díaz engages with liminality through the lens of decoloniality, which Walter D. Mignolo defines as “confronting and delinking from [...] the colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo xxvii).

For my analysis of the novel’s decolonial engagement with multi-valenced elements, I chose to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of heteroglossia, oscillation, and chronotope. Heteroglossia, literally “many tongues” denotes the use of multiple registers, styles, voices, and perspectives in a single text and/or utterance (Bakhtin 259-275, 300-331). Oscillation denotes the constant shifting of perspective and language in a text, and chronotope refers to a *time-space* or universe within a literary work; a text can house more than one chronotope. While semiotics—particularly Gerard Genette’s theories regarding transtextuality—offered a solid beginning, they felt reductive in their approach to meaning, building on established significances and signs, which did not allow me to question the established system(s) of meanings beneath them. In the end, a semiotic approach to Díaz’s novel kept turning into something cut off from the multiplicitous analysis that I wanted. Using semiotics to dissect such a layered, multi-valenced text quickly turned into analysis based on “neutral” concepts, whose perceived neutrality is inevitably steeped in the dominant White value system(s), which felt entirely contrary to goal of a decolonized analysis. The reason I address this matter here is because, for many, semiotics would constitute the natural fallback option for a text like this. There is no one way to analyze a text, and semiotics did not allow me to explore as many avenues as I felt were necessary to grasp the work’s

liminality. Bakhtin's theories offered a frame wherein the text's many layers could be analyzed in wider and more contexts, some of which seemed wildly disparate, if not outright contradictory. Bakhtin's theories allowed me to link the many sides of this novel, to explore the work as a series of intersectional constellations *within* its liminality. In short, I needed a theoretical base that was as open and as layered as the text in order to analyze the text with a wider scope, particularly in regards to the decolonial gaze.

Though Díaz's novel speaks directly to U.S. Latino/a community/ies, particularly those with roots in the Caribbean, I have analyzed it as something with a wider reach. Through the lens of what I term the "decolonized chronotope"—which is a method involving a universe that seeks to unlink from and confront interconnected structures of oppression stemming from coloniality—I view the text as both a work unto itself and as a kind of rough template. The scope and intensity of its heteroglossia characterize the decolonized chronotope. Often, the ability to name more than a few mainstream authors of Color proves a hard task. Whiteness, particularly its cisgender¹ male iteration, dominates literature. We need only look at many U.S. university syllabi, at bestseller lists, at who is referenced, to observe this privileging of White narratives and voices. (While this may be difficult to prove, let me ask: can you think of any equally widespread literature that de-centralizes the hegemony—especially, Whiteness and maleness—and instead centralizes marginalized people, portraying them as full characters in their own right, down to the diction?) Essentially, I view the decolonized chronotope as a device for normalizing otherness by re-centering its focus on marginalized subjects; and, this involves oscillations, or shifts, and engagement with liminality, all of which I will elucidate in further detail later on. Consequently, this decentralizes the hegemony in that narrative, and by erasing its position as base and center, we remove the hegemony's ability to oppress within the narrative (which was never directly about the hegemony anyway). In other words, the decolonized chronotope lets us put the hegemony in their place—which is *out* of narratives principally regarding marginalized people, or at least not front and center. For this reason, I view the decolonized chronotope as a theory that can apply to narratives regarding many marginalized groups, not just the Latino/a community. Another aspect of it is to stress the need for solidarity. There is a reason that this theory applies to so many groups—due to the interrelated nature of the structures of oppression, domination touches many lives in a number of different ways.

To me, this application, this jump from Latino/a to other groups under the umbrella of People of Color felt natural. Growing up as an ethnic minority in the U.S., you learn to interpret images of yourself everywhere, because images conveying someone of your own (or similar) background(s) are few and far between, which means that you often must look elsewhere, identify with other groups, if

¹ Cisgender denotes identification with one's sex, which creates an overlap between social and biological identities. Antonym: transgender.

you want to envision yourself in society. For example, as a child, I grew up watching shows like “Family Matters,” “The Fresh Prince of Bel Air,” “In Living Color,” “Sister Sister,” “Taina,” and “The Bernie Mac Show.” Though these shows center around Black, Latino/a, and Afro-Latino/a experiences, there was an element of normalized otherness, of voice-giving that felt natural to me, even though my background does not include those identities. When it comes to racial or ethnic otherness, in a system that suppresses non-hegemonic voices, many of us People of Color often seek out our faces in each other’s. (There is a particular phenomenon among Asian Americans identifying with Black culture. In many parts of the United States, Black culture has the most visibility and cultural capitol among marginalized groups.)

Bakhtin also provided a theoretical base that allowed me analyze the novel in its polyphonic totality and its overlapping movements towards decentralizing Whiteness and recentralizing People of Color. I did not have to cut off any parts to make sense of it. Rather, it’s making a pattern from the text rather than applying a strict pattern to it. It was always centered on the work, including the parts that seem at odds. In a wider context, Bakhtin’s theories appealed to me, because they did not require a text to mold itself to something but instead considers every part integral. As Sara Ahmed argues in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, emotions do (and should) have a place in academia (Ahmed 12-13), and I did have an emotional motivation, as well. As someone who lives with diaspora, I am constantly asked to cut myself into pieces so that others may understand me, as if somehow, understanding me in my totality is an impossible task. I was born and raised in New Jersey, and my ethnic background encompasses Korean, Chinese, Mongolian (far back), and Taiwanese Aboriginal (though we’ll likely never know for sure, since it may have been kept secret for so long). With a list like this, the tension comes from all sides, not just from hegemonic push back. This novel accounts for those tensions between non-hegemonic groups, as well, further de-centralizing Whiteness in cross-cultural relations. Back in the 90s, children like me were mistakes, because we made no sense, we had no site of natural belonging—or, at least, that was my understanding. I could never fully participate in the Chinese American community, sometimes because of my mother’s ties to Taiwan, as well as my father’s Korean heritage. I had similar problems the other way(s) around. Even the ability to find these communities was sometimes based on luck. I had a few classmates with similar situations, though we were not overly close. And none of us belonged anywhere unless we could divide our identities on command and in different configurations depending on the environment. Throw in any other aspects, such as sexual orientation or religion, and then you have a real mess. Though I did not have the words for it then, I always had the feeling that we could never be all of ourselves—even now, I am not sure what that would mean, what that would look like. This is part of the trauma of diaspora.

So, naturally, upon my first reading of the novel several years ago, I felt overjoyed. I felt stabbed. I felt released. Something shifted permanently. It was a portrait of diasporic totality, the most hopeful of

oxymorons. The incorporation of marginalized perspectives, modes of speech, language, the joining of disparate elements, the critique of the hegemonic value system that deemed those elements disparate in the first place—I didn't know it, but I had been waiting my whole life to read this book. While I acknowledge the novel's thematic and stylistic connections to many other notable authors and creators—such as Toni Morrison, Spike Lee, James Baldwin, Isabelle Allende, Marilyn Chin, Jorge Luis Borges, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez—the combination of New Jerseyan specificity, the fluidity and span of its layeredness, diasporic engagement, and liminal focus spoke to both my academic and personal sensibilities in a unique way. For me, Bakhtinian theories regarding dialogic production of meaning felt like the perfect framework, as this model does not rely on the marginalization of any one aspect in order to produce sufficient analysis.

As someone who has experience reductive categorization her whole life, this novel appealed to me not only personally but creatively and academically. The choice to analyze this novel was inspired by Junot Díaz's wholistic approach to narratives regarding marginalized voices. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* explores the liminality of diasporic life not as a zone defined by some position between defined identities but more as a complex web. Díaz's exploration of liminality offers another model; not only do dichotomies lose their authority, but the very systems upon which those dichotomies and associated values base themselves are called into question. The majority of available popular narratives on diasporic life in the U.S. feels reductive, as characters' whole storylines and personhoods are often primarily defined by their race, unless those characters are White. While race constitutes an important factor, we do not lead "single issue lives," and portraying People of Color as entirely preoccupied with the same issue (albeit via different iterations) is reductive and unhelpful ("Learning from the 60s" 134–144). That type of narrative keeps us beholden to the idea that race is our greatest definer and that our lives are defined solely by race-related suffering. This constructs the concept of monolithic otherness, which denies the existence of intersections between race, ethnicity, nationality, disability, LGBTQ+ identity, mental health, socio-economic situation, individual personalities, and so on. Different intersections generate can vastly different experiences, e.g. a young middle class Cuban American lesbian goth in Palisades Park, New Jersey will likely experience life differently from an old working class Korean American man with hearing impairment in that same town, though there will no doubt be some common threads. Reductive narratives also minimize, if not outright denies, the tension between and within marginalized groups, struggles that have no direct connection with the hegemony, further solidifying the idea that White people must be present everywhere at all times, even in issues that do not concern them. Furthermore, this kind of narrative reinforces the idea that it is we People of Color who "turn it into an issue," inflicting worry upon ourselves, when in reality, it is the dominant structure of White supremacy that makes race our problem. In other words, Díaz's novel not only gives us space to breathe but it structures that space.

Additionally, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* works from a point of equal standing. Díaz does not talk “up” to a White audience, aiming to explain the cultures in the book and thereby establish the legitimacy of his characters and their environments. The author is not here to explain whole cultures to the reader but to relay a story. He does not italicize the Spanish or explain the many comic book or folkloric references. The references, the language, the settings exist as they are. Familiarity and understanding will enrich the reader’s experience, but otherwise, the reader can usually infer significance through context. Moreover, understanding all of the references is not paramount to the experience of the novel, anyway. In the end, the novel does not concern itself with defining the liminal space but instead centers itself around seeing liminality in terms of fluid constellations, around the interactions between constantly shifting various points. For example, any one character may contain several identities, but the ways in which they interact highlight different aspects of that character or of their environment. These interactions provide the point of fascination and reveal more about both the interacting subjects and the system in which they exist.

In this thesis, I make a dialogic analysis of Junot Díaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* with specific emphasis on the centralized and rounded representation of marginalized voices in wider contexts via the crafting of complex personhood and the questioning of dominant histories. In short, I analyze the interactions between the text’s style and content, particularly their engagement with liminality enacted through heteroglossia, oscillations, and the decolonized chronotope. On a theoretical level, I base my work on Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotope, heteroglossia, and polyphony; Gayatri Spivak’s worlding; John Muthyala’s reworlding; Walter Benjamin’s wish-image; and, Theodor Adorno’s analysis of the production of culture. The decolonized chronotope, as I call it, powers the text’s multi-valenced, dialogic approach to constructing personhood and relaying narratives regarding marginalized voices. In this thesis, I also explore the mechanisms that power the decolonized chronotope in the text, which are oscillations between genres, perspectives, language(s), and so on, and diasporic expression, which provides the text’s underlying need for multiplicity. Furthermore, I will examine how Díaz creates resistance by working dialogically—which invites multiplicity—rather than dichotomously—which functions reductively—thereby rejecting hegemonic value systems (which determine the values of the subjects upon which dichotomies are based).

Background

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao follows the narrator Yunior's account of his own experiences and those of the fictional de León family, specifically Oscar, Lola, and their mother Belicia. At its core, the novel is a multigenerational fictional memoir. The settings alternate between northern New Jersey and the Dominican Republic, as well as timelines throughout the 20th century with references to periods as early as thousands of years ago. A polyphonic novel, the language alternates between registers, national languages, regional slangs, and hybrid expressions (e.g. Spanglish), with references that span popular culture, literature, mythology, folklore, history, and "nerd" subcultures, such as Dungeons and Dragons. The novel serves as a confessional for Yunior, who feels guilt about his roommate and friend Oscar's suicide attempt and eventual death; it also creates wider a historical context and de-centralizes Whiteness during the long interludes involving Belicia's backstory, as well as chapters narrated by Lola, detailing her misfit teenage years and her mother's cancer. The novel explores themes of diaspora, colonialism, colorism, racism, sexism, and other systemic issues with close ties to White supremacy and structures of oppression. Junot Díaz's decolonial work belongs to a relatively new (in the scope of Western literary history) tradition that has manifested across media.

Author Junot Díaz, was born in 1968 in the Dominican Republic and raised in northern New Jersey. He currently lives in Boston, where he is the Rudge and Nancy Allen Professor of Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. First published in 2007, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* was Díaz's first novel and second book. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008. His other works include the acclaimed short story collections *Drown* (1996) and *This is How You Lose Her* (2012). Díaz has received a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship, the PEN/Malamud Award, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the PEN/O. Henry Award. He is also the fiction editor at *Boston Review*. Díaz's style is an eclectic one, mixing science fiction and fantasy references, history, romance, violence, and unmarked comingled variations of Spanish and English.

Engagement with Some Experiences of People of Color in the U.S. and Related Issues

While the novel's privileged audience is the Afro-Latino/a community of the Greater New York area, the text also mirrors some of the experiences of many People of Color, including immigrants and subsequent generations. Because traditional history and literature have not had room or concern for these voices, the space had to be constructed in an entirely new way. Following the patterns of authors or voices who symbolize the exclusion of People of Color would only serve to perpetuate that exclusion, forcing writers of color to write in a specific way and, consequently, only to be celebrated for their ability to write as white authors do. Through the combined use of real and unreal elements, such as folklore, science fiction, fantasy, historiography, gossip, vernaculars, standard national languages,

multiple timelines, and real locations, Díaz makes a space for overlooked or expressly ignored voices, a space of their own, which traditionally has not often happened.

Setting

The novel's many settings provide the everyday backdrops for the magical realism—it is through these locations that we understand the connections to our own world. Although specialized knowledge is not required to progress fluidly through the book, the specific settings add more layers of significance to those in the know. Partial knowledge of the novel's various aspects plays a crucial role, as it mimics the experience of immigrating and adjusting to a new environment, of not always knowing the direct meaning of certain words or phrases but gaining understanding through context. In this way (and many more that I will cover later), Díaz creates a text that forces readers to constantly grasp for meaning based on context, as well as an environment in which objective knowledge becomes less important than the attempts at comprehension. Paterson, New Jersey, for example, will carry different connotations depending on who you are and where you live(d). Growing up in northern New Jersey, I had a vague awareness of Paterson through friends who lived there or stories in the news; I understood it as a city with a largely Black and Latino/a population, some income inequality (like many towns in my immediate area), and a fantastic camera store. For others nearby, Paterson, New Jersey may have carried a reputation for violent crime and poverty (Mitchell). This is, in part, due to its representation in local media. According to U.S. Census data in 2000—a year that hovers near the novel's primary timeline—the income per capita was \$13,257, just a few thousand above the weighted poverty threshold calculated for individuals under 65 (“Money Income [1989 and 1999] and Poverty [1999] New Jersey, Counties and Municipalities,” “Poverty thresholds 2000”). According to Neighborhood Scout, a website that evaluates an area's general profile, the safety level of Paterson was evaluated as 16/100. The annual number of violent crimes averaged 1,202 (“Crime rates for Paterson, New Jersey”). For contrast, the city of Fort Lee, nearly three times as large and only roughly 14 miles away, received a rating of 86/100 (“Crime rates for Fort Lee, New Jersey”).

The more general settings New Jersey and the Dominican Republic have significances of their own. Placing much of the work in the Dominican Republic, alongside many other countries (and territories) in the Caribbean, allows the novel to engage with diaspora and significant historical shifts. The state of New Jersey, too, eludes easy description and is constantly in flux, which speaks to the novel's engagement with liminality and oscillations. With its vast socio-economic, racial, and ethnic diversity, the state seems to morph as you drive through it: marshland, highway, seaside, farmland, mountains, lakes, abandoned factories and warehouses, waterfront luxury condos, mom and pop stores, big box stores, bilingual signs changing languages to suit their areas (at times shedding English altogether). There are whole areas that are home to Turkish, Armenian, Hungarian, Cuban, Philippino populations, and more. Similar to Queens, New York, northern New Jersey has no one face. Northern New Jersey

has housed waves of immigrants throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, many of whom worked in New York but could not afford to live there. Edgewater, which the novel mentions briefly, was a poor Irish community in the 1800s; and, by the 1990s, it became home to a thriving Japanese community. For readers who are aware, the setting of northern New Jersey communicates a significant aspect of diaspora: the constant shifts, the impossibility of nailing anything down definitively.

Spanglish (and other half-half languages)

The term “Spanglish,” a combination of “Spanish” and “English,” is a major feature in the novel. This type of mixed speech is one of the common side effects of diaspora. This type of mixed speech also embodies the division of diaspora and conveys how it affects life on multiple levels. Spanglish reflects a need to be both Spanish and English but also the impossibility of fully being both. Each part depends on an understanding of both parts in order to be fully understood. In this way, Spanglish holds great significance for my reading of the novel.

Latinidad

At certain points in the thesis, I use the term “Latinidad,” which roughly translates to “Latinity.” Before proceeding, I must acknowledge the problematic nature of the root word: Latin. Many argue that this term is reductive, as it homogenizes the many peoples and cultures of South America and Central America. Furthermore, this monolithically defines them by a European imperialist connection rather than by something rooted there. However, not everyone feels denigrated by this root word. The ability to describe a Latin American background in Spanish words is a powerful thing. Admittedly, not everyone in Latin America speaks it—Portuguese and local dialects are also abundant. This brings us to a vital point, however. Latinidad, though it has its reductive aspects, has the capability of creating a cultural connection that spans the many languages and cultures there. Rather than use an English word, the word “Latinidad” communicates the ability to express that cultural personhood on that person’s own terms (assuming that they are native Spanish speakers and/or have a significant relationship with the language), even if those terms were originally part of colonial violence.

“Latino/a” versus “Latin@” versus “Latinx” versus “Hispanic”

Firstly, I chose not to use the term “Hispanic,” as it refers to a common language, includes Spain, and is by no means interchangeable with “Latino” or any variant of that word, as that refers to geographic location and excludes Spain. “Hispanic” simply describes a person whose background stems from a Spanish-speaking country. This term excludes many areas in the Americas, where regional dialects are more prevalent, as well as whole countries, such as Brazil, which *is* Latino/a but whose national language is Portuguese.

As for the other listed terms, whose purpose is to increase inclusivity, there are arguments both for and against every one of them. Ultimately, I chose Latino/a. Although, the term Latino/a still suggests a strict gender binary as evidenced by the divisive slash, it feels the most easily understood and the least visually distracting in an academic paper.

Latin@ (pronounced “Latinat” or “Latinao,” similar to the Portuguese “ãõ”) is one of the popular choices on the internet. Initially, this term felt like a good middle ground, offering inclusivity with its blurred boundary between “a” (feminine) and “o” (masculine), while still acknowledging the possibility of non-binary gender identification. However, I was concerned that incorporating the “@” symbol into the text so many times could distract from the text itself. Even though I strongly believe in inclusivity, this thesis does not focus on queer studies, and it felt like I would be making too strong a point for a non-central argument in the text.

Latinx (pronounced “Latin-ex”) is a term of contentious debate. Among the arguments against it, Latinx can be difficult to pronounce and to transition from academic and online text into everyday situations, e.g. “Nosotrxs vamos a lx escuela” versus “Nosotros (o nosotras) vamos a la escuela.” In removing the gender entirely, it can also remove a degree recognition for those who *want* to be identified by their gender. In regards to gender inclusivity, this factor may exclude transgender individuals who *want* to be identified by their gender. Among the arguments for it, Latinx is the only option that does not require any participation in the gender binary whatsoever, providing the widest range of inclusivity, and can be interpreted as an anti-colonialist term. Additionally, Latinx allows people to celebrate their Latinidad without having to involve gender at all, completely eliminating any engagement with the gender binary.

However, Spanish has a long history as a gendered language. One of the arguments against these terms is that forcing gender to disappear entirely may have U.S./English imperialist connotations. English is a magpie language and became gender neutral roughly a thousand years ago (Barrett and Nñ). On the other hand, we ought to acknowledge that the Spanish language was forced on the Americas and the Caribbean, though in the time since then, its roots have grown deep. If the Spanish-speaking world officially implemented Latinx, certain kinds of language, poetry, and humor that play with gender—and that only work in Spanish—would no longer make sense and, subsequently, disappear.

There are also proponents for the traditional gender neutral term “Latino,” which grammatically includes both male and female. The supporters argue that changing the meaning behind the masculine gendering is more important than changing the actual word. However, words are powerful. They do

inform how we behave and how we receive information. So, I did not feel completely comfortable proceeding with the traditional gender neutral term “Latino,” either.

Clearly, this is a highly complex topic, and as a non-native Spanish-speaker, I do not feel that I have the authority to call for total gender neutrality or for total adherence to the traditional gendered system. In the end, I chose Latino/a, if only due to its establishedness and its high readability to inclusivity ratio.

Theory

Building on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality—which concerns overlapping social identities and relevant systems of oppression, discrimination, or domination, I analyze the novel dialogically. Using a modified version of Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotope, which literally translates to *time-space* and is basically universe wherein time and space are equally important and interdependent; furthermore, the chronotope is a literary device used as “an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring” (Bakhtin 425-426). This is essentially a tool for analyzing discourse without resorting to dialectics. I modified Bakhtin’s term and created the “decolonized chronotope.” The decolonized chronotope, then, is a time-space or universe wherein the novel unfolds, which privileges and centers around otherwise marginalized voices. Oscillations, or shifts, between genres, chronotopes, language(s), and settings support the decolonized chronotope by allowing it to resist facile, hegemonically-motivated categorization, which leaves room for the liminality that shapes the lives of the characters. Diaspora, then, powers those oscillations. Diaspora functions on two levels: one, it is a force that divides people, at times, against their will; two, once divided, it is a force that unites those who live diasporically, creating communities, speech patterns, and even languages, e.g. Caribbean Creole. Essentially, diaspora creates both the need for hybridized expression due to gaps in language comprehension *and* unique cultures that unite individuals based on a shared experience of this inherently liminal state of being. These cultural developments arise to meet the diasporic need for new types of expression able to accommodate constant shifts between ways of talking, ways of seeing, and so on that are inherent to diasporic life.

For literary analysis and direct analysis of the novel, I use Bakhtinian theories to provide a tool for observing the numerous interactions between the novel’s many shifts. For the aspects dealing with systemic oppression within and in relation to the novel, I refer to Gayatri Spivak, John Muthyala, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Emma Pérez, and Audre Lorde. Drawing on all of these theorists, I analyze both the resistance (carried out by the novel and by extension, author) and the forces that are being resisted (White-centric historiography, colonialism, and so on). To elucidate the issue of White-centric historiography and the White supremacy underlying this long tradition, I refer to the colonial imagining of the world as conveyed by Spivak’s “worlding.” Tying into that branch of analysis, I draw

on Adorno's theories regarding the production of culture that allow this worlding to continue by promoting hegemonic culture—revolving around Whiteness—through what I call the hegemonic wish-image, a version of Walter Benjamin's "wish-image," which denotes a utopian image containing something highly desired and unattainable; and, I will explain the hegemonic wish-image in further detail in "The Production of Culture: Whiteness as 'Neutrality,' the Hegemonic Wish-Image, and Worlding." To examine the resistance to this White-centric cultural narrative, I refer to John Muthyala's "reworlding," which is an effort to de-centralize Whiteness in historiography and recentralize marginalized histories and voices. Additionally, I draw heavily upon Emma Pérez's own theory the "decolonial imaginary," which denotes a resistance to colonialist power structures through alternative envisionments, and I interpret Muthyala's "reworlding" as an application of the decolonial imaginary. I chose to include historiographical and critical approaches in addition to literary analysis so as to convey wider contexts for both my own analysis. Additionally, I would be remiss if I analyzed diaspora and the decolonized chronotope without also addressing the interrelated power structures that both seek to suppress decolonized narratives and that created the need for them in the first place.

For dealing with manners of intersectional resistance in language, I refer to Audre Lorde, specifically her theories on the Master's House, which states that the hegemony—dominant White culture—cannot be dismantled with its own tools, i.e. methods. Specifically, I draw on Lorde when analyzing the novel's use of standard national English, standard national Spanish, slangs, literary language, diverse references, and unusual use of gossip, footnotes, and general commentary. Díaz engages fluidly with non-hegemonic expression (e.g. science fiction, folklore, gossip, slang) as well as hegemonic expression (e.g. standard literary language, standard national Spanish, standard national English). This accomplishes three things: first, this comingling of expressions creates an equivalence between them. Second, this tacitly highlights the arbitrary nature of the division(s) between these types of expression. Third, this calls into question the hegemonic authority that created these divisions in the first place. So, not only does Díaz create an environment in which standard literary language co-mingles with all of these other types of expression, but through this mixing, Díaz forces standard literature language, a hegemonic type of expression, to express the voices of those that the hegemony would normally seek to oppress. In short, Díaz strikes dominant White culture with a heavily modified version of its own weapon. Díaz carves out his own path using non-hegemonic tools, such as Spanglish, historiography that decentralizes Whiteness, Dominican folklore, nerd references, unmarked polyglossia, i.e. non-italicized shifts between national languages. These elements convey the depth and general feeling of liminality expressed in the narrative. The meat of the plot, the characters, the settings all had to be mirrored in the language used to convey them. Without that mirroring, the novel might as well have become yet another colonized tale of diasporic life: Black and Brown struggles through a White lens, a white(washed) telling of a story that isn't even about White people. By creating equivalence between hegemonic (literary language) and non-hegemonic expression, by not marking the shifts between them,

Díaz also creates equivalence not just for those those modes of expression but also for all who use them. It is saying, “English is not always the most suitable language. Whiteness is not always the most suitable point of reference.” This in itself is radical.

The Decolonized Chronotope

Given the constantly shifting liminality of the novel's main characters (Dominican Americans and marginalized individuals) and settings (the Dominican Republic and New Jersey), Bakhtinian dialogic analysis seemed the most appropriate route. The book itself feels dialogic rather than dichotomous, and to me, Bakhtin offered a theoretical base that allowed for the analysis of multiplicity without the reductive nature of dialectics. However, I struggled to find a precise term that communicated Díaz's applied intersectionality and diasporic expression as normalized but defining features. Using Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope as a base, I then incorporated the *decolonial imagination* (which I will elucidate later on), resulting in what I termed a decolonized chronotope.² As applied to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the decolonized chronotope indicates the imagining into being of "dissident ethnic, gender, and racial identity within Americanness" (Hanna et al 323). In the decolonized chronotope of this novel, the diction oscillates constantly between registers (of language), national languages, slangs, dialects, characters' voices, characters' perspectives, times, places, genres, historical and nerd references. These aspects mix in a way that forces the reader to recognize them as integrated parts of the same whole. For example, the second chapter is titled "One: Ghetto Nerd at the End of the World 1974–1987." This kind of multiplicity decentralizes the hegemony³ and instead centralizes marginalized voices with particular emphasis on non-reductive presentation. This concept roots itself in the practice of multiplicity rather than dichotomy, allowing for the co-existence of many perspectives and even contradictions.

Additionally, the decolonial imagination presents a perspective rooted in "different, fragmented, imagined, non-linear, non-teleological ... resistance to racialized categories of state and empire" (Schechter 4–5). In turn, this perspective "holds the potential to challenge or transcend many of the political and discursive barriers that have shaped late-twentieth-century historical knowledge" (Quintana 725–726). The decolonial imagination marks the shift away from centering colonialism and Whiteness, which allows marginalized voices to emerge and exert control over their representation in a space typically dominated by White (and often male) voices. The decolonized chronotope, then, is a universe where the decolonial imagination rules; in this universe, marginalized voices define themselves with full complexity rather than allow hegemonic ideals to dictate their value and manner of presentation.

² The term "decolonial imagination" has roots in the work of feminist historian Emma Pérez, who coined the term *decolonial imaginary* in her 1999 book *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. For more on this topic, see Junot Díaz and the *Decolonial Imagination*, 6-13.

³ This denotes the persistent culture centered around the long history of White privilege, which is that of being unmarked in discourse.

The term *imagination* exists in various fields in the humanities, such as the narrative imagination (literature), the social imagination (sociology), and the counterfactual imagination (art history). The definition of imagination I refer to is “a critical faculty for envisioning into existence alternative worlds that have not yet been recognized or conjured” (Hanna et al 8). Simply put, the decolonial imagination is the envisioning of a world in which hegemonic value systems do not apply or are not central. Before advancing into my analysis of the decolonized chronotope further, we must address the *colonial imagination* that it resists. Theorist Aníbal Quijano explains the colonial imagination as an established system wherein the hegemony produced “the imaginary of dominated people” (Quijano 438) and “imposed itself on all of the ‘ways of knowing , producing knowledge, images, and system of images, symbols [and] modes of signification’” (Hanna et al 8). Simply put, the colonial imagination provides the basis for Gayatri Spivak’s concept of *worlding*, which is basically creating the discourse based on the imaginary of colonized peoples, though I will discuss this in further detail in a later chapter. In turn, the colonial imagination operates on the basis of the *hegemonic wish-image*, a term I created based on Walter Benjamin’s concept of the *wish-image*, which denotes a collective utopian aspiration. “Pipe dream,” a similar concept from playwright Eugene O’Neill is a near equivalent, but this literary version of the term connotes a sense of judgment and does not address the kind of hegemonic influence that I aimed to convey. This hegemonic wish-image’s continued existence depends upon the unwavering perpetuation of worlding, which can also be defined as the enactment of colonial imagination in general discourse. In turn, cultural products continue to define ideals according to the hegemonic wish-image and its underlying ideologies. Here, I refer to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s theory of *cultural production*, which roughly indicates the enactment of the colonial imagination in cultural products. In this system, colonialist ideology (built on White supremacy, racism, colorism, sexism, and so on) is able to both produce and promote itself, maintaining its power through consumption and discourse. Over time, repeated exposure solidifies its purported superiority and validity. I will expand further on this topic in the chapter “Cultural Production and Reworlding.”

In a decolonially imagined space, people ordinarily marginalized by hegemonic structures appear centrally and on their own terms. They form the substance of their own narrative; they have space to explore the fullness of their characters; and, they need not present themselves in ways compliant with the hegemonic value system, e.g. a character need not bear White features or appear stereotypical in order to be worthy of a reader’s sympathy or connection. Through the decolonized chronotope, the novel exists in a universe that actively resists the colonial imagination, worlding, and hegemonic cultural production. The decolonized chronotope in this novel, then, is the writing into being of an alternative universe whose value system is based on the decolonial imagination. Furthermore, the decolonized chronotope here arises not just through content but through presentation. Although the decolonized chronotope is largely characterized by the interplay between its many aspects, it is language that carries the heaviest responsibility, that of presenting the novel’s universe. Language, then, forms a key factor in

crafting our potential perception of a decolonized universe, as not only the content resists colonial centering but also the style, particularly in the comingling of hegemonic and non-hegemonic types of expression.

In terms of mechanics, the decolonized chronotope relies on oscillations, defined as the “continual shifting in distance between author and language” (Bakhtin 302). Essentially, these shifts can occur in both style and content, such as the narrator’s voice giving way to a character’s voice, or epistolary sequences in a memoir. In the novel, these oscillations occur between numerous aspects, such as genre applied in the text (e.g. magical realism, memoir, confessional, historical fiction, gossip), referenced genres (e.g. science fiction, anime, comic books), other characters’ perspectives relayed via the narrator, switches between narrators Lola and Yuniór, timelines, locations around the Dominican Republic and New Jersey, standard national Spanish, standard national English, and local slang(s) in both languages. Oscillations in the novel often happen concurrently, e.g. the narrator Yuniór describing an event while shifting between English and Spanish and diving into another character’s perspective. Furthermore, Bakhtin explains this blending of disparate types of language as the basis of style:

The novelist working in prose (and almost any prose writer) [...] welcomes heteroglossia and language diversity of the literary and extraliterary language into his own work not only weakening them but even intensifying them (for he interacts with their particular self-consciousness). It is in fact out of this stratification of language, its speech diversity and even language diversity, that he constructs his style, while at the same time he maintains the unity of his own creative personality and the unity (although it is, to be sure, unity of another order) of his own style (Bakhtin 298).

The novel’s style(s) and its relationships to its own more theoretical and emotional aspects, as well as social critique, connect through the decolonized chronotope. To illustrate how the decolonized chronotope functions, we can view it as an ocean, in which the oscillations form the waves, and diaspora the tidal force (an element of gravitational pull). Applied to the novel, the decolonized chronotope depends on constant shifts to convey itself; this creates a kind of performative diaspora, in the sense that it replicates for the reader the liminality inherent in diaspora. For example, the oscillations between Oscar’s childhood experiences in 1980s Paterson, New Jersey and Belícia’s childhood experiences in 1950s Baní, Dominican Republic matter equally much. Although these experiences occur in different spaces in the novel’s timeline(s) and in different geographic locations, together, they reveal something about the nature of diaspora by *showing* rather than *telling*.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the decolonized chronotope performs two functions: one emotional, one critical. First, it emulates the experience of diaspora by fluctuating between times, spaces, and perspectives to convey the experiences of the main characters, their relationship(s) to each other, and their relationship(s) to their historical context(s). This I will explore in a later chapter, “Diaspora, Trauma, and Expression.” Second, I use the decolonized chronotope as a way to identify

and interpret the colonial “forces at work in the culture system from which [they and the text] spring” (Bakhtin 426). The decolonized chronotope sets up an intersectional dismantling of the complex, interrelated hegemonic structures, such as patriarchy, capitalism, racism, colorism, Euro-centric historiography, all of which find roots in the colonial imagination and worlding. One important aspect to keep in mind is the dynamic between the tone and the events that unfold. While the novel’s chronotope is decolonized, the characters still suffer from hegemonic oppression. This is because the point is not to present a decolonized utopia but to present realistic events in ways that centralize those involved. The characters’ decolonization comes in the manner of their presentation; the language used to describe them, the diction they themselves use, the unmarked (unitalicized) Spanish and slang, and the everydayness of the language defining our contact with this universe. As such, the decolonized chronotope works in conjunction with extreme heteroglossia manifested in the numerous, overlapping oscillations.

Underneath all of this lurks the pain of diaspora, without which the oscillations and the chronotope would cease to exist. To live with diaspora is to inhabit a state of permanent liminality between identities; it is a state of constant loss regarding one side or the other(s). To fully inhabit one identity, the other(s) must be suppressed or unaddressed in some way. The impossibility of living out all of one’s identities fully and simultaneously constitutes a significant part of diasporic trauma. The oscillations between registers, languages, perspectives, timelines, locations, and narrators allow the text to embody Bakhtin’s definition of the polyphonic novel: “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Gardiner 24). The plurality often exists within Yuniór’s own narration. Rife with moments of surrender to other perspectives and modes of expression, Yuniór’s narrative voice regularly yields to constant oscillation. In “Chapter Three: The Three Heartbreaks of Belícia Cabral 1955-1962,” Yuniór describes the moment where teenage Belícia decides to go dancing at her first real club El Hollywood, where she ends up meeting her politically corrupt boyfriend-to-be: “There it was, the Decision That Changed Everything. Or as she broke it down to [her daughter] Lola in her Last Days: All I wanted was to dance. What I got instead was *esto*, she said, opening her arms to encompass the hospital, her children, her cancer, America” (Díaz 113).

We begin with Yuniór’s introduction and titling of this event in Belícia’s life. The language morphs from Yuniór’s slang (“broke it down”) to literary titling (“Last Days”) to Belícia’s voice, which appears without quotation marks. The italicization of “*esto*” emphasizes the meaning behind it in this context rather than the fact of it being in Spanish. Belícia opens her arms, as if to hold it all, though we know that she cannot partially because they’re either physically too big (“the hospital”), abstract (“America,” birthing and raising “her children”), or impossible (“her cancer”). This gesture illustrates more literally the impossibility of grasping the totality of one individual’s diasporic experience. The gaps between

the listed words, their seeming disparateness, mimic the jumps and gaps inherent in diasporic life—missing parts or parts of you that cannot be inhabited in certain situations. Unnamed spaces, those gaps speak more powerfully than any open illustration what would fill them. They appeal to an understanding beyond words. Some things are too complicated or too difficult to be verbalized.

As mentioned previously, the decolonized chronotope affects not only the novel's content but also its presentation. Along with time and space, Díaz blends the genres of memoir, folklore, eulogy, confessional, magical realism, science fiction, fantasy, and historical fiction. Díaz also makes numerous footnoted references to aspects of “nerd” culture (science fiction, fantasy, comic books, anime, playing games) and historical events that centralize non-Euro-centric historiography. For those in the know, the “nerd” references provide examples of how much of popular culture relies on the narratives of immigrants, People of Color, the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized groups. Comic books have a long history of representing both the hegemony and marginalized identities. Wonder Woman began as a lesbian superhero birthed fatherlessly from clay who could only be defeated by a fellow woman. Superman's narrative closely mirrors many immigrant narratives about diaspora, isolation, and the impossibility of fully inhabiting all of your identities. The X-Men are commonly interpreted as a metaphor for the secretive support networks between persecuted minorities, particularly the LGBTQ+ community. For those outside of that knowledge, those references contribute further to the decolonized tone by integrating non-hegemonic expression and standard literary language; this, in itself, illustrates the oscillatory overlaps in another stylistic way. The connection between science fiction and narratives about marginalized People of Color appears throughout the novel in both the body of the text and in footnotes. The following footnote details the narrator Yúnior's own musings on protagonist Oscar's nerdy obsessions.

Where this outsized love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know. It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or 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 scenarios could have satisfied. Maybe it was that in the DR he had watched too much Spider-Man, been taken to too many Run Run Shaw kung fu movies, listened to too many of his abuela's spooky stories about el Cuco and la Ciguapa? Maybe it was his first librarian in the U.S., who hooked him on reading, the electricity he felt when he touched that first Danny Dunn book? Maybe it was just the zeitgeist (were not the early seventies the dawn of the Nerd Age?) or the fact that for most of his childhood he had absolutely no friends? Or was it something deeper, something ancestral?

Who can say?

What is clear is that being a reader/fanboy (for lack of a better term) helped him get through the rough days of his youth, but it also made him stick out in the mean streets of Paterson even more than he already did. Victimized by the other boys—punches and pushes and wedgies and broken glasses and brand-new books from Scholastic, at a cost of fifty cents each, torn in half before his very eyes. You like books? Now you got two! Har-har! No one, alas, more oppressive than the oppressed. Even his own mother found his preoccupations nutty. Go outside and play! she commanded at least once a day. *Pórtate como un muchacho normal.*

(Only his sister, a reader too, supporting him. Bringing him books from her own school, which had a better library.)

You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest (Díaz 21-22).

The passage begins with the narrator's admission of *agnosis*, or "not knowing," subverting his own power over the narrative in favor of a more open-ended search for information. Yuniór then equates "nerd" culture (Spider-Man) with Dominican folklore (el Cuco, la Ciguapa) creating commonality via their striking otherworldliness and clarifying his privileged audience by his decision to not explain el Cuco (a man-shaped creature that kidnaps and eats misbehaving children) and la Ciguapa (a woman-shaped creature with blue or brown skin, backwards feet, and long hair who can kill or permanently bewitch with a look). Immediately after, Yuniór launches into more personal areas, referencing Oscar's love of libraries, his childhood loneliness, his Dominican background, all of them equal contenders for the reason why Oscar became so obsessed. By reiterating *agnosis* in the ensuing sentence, the text points rather to no one reason but to the idea that Oscar's nerdiness likely occurred due to a complex web of influences. As Jennifer Harford Vargas states in her essay "Dictating a Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form as Ruin-Reading," these regular dives into *agnosis* signal a vital power structure within the novel itself (Hanna et al 201–227).

Moving beyond the silence into speech and text is, for the oppressed, a liberatory act, but that act must also recognize the silence within its own production. Neither author nor narrator can produce a story that lays claim to full and complete meaning because doing so would produce a dictatorial story. Having a story but not a 'full story' ... is the most accurate and effective story you can have under a dictatorship and against dictatorship. Creating a counter-dictatorial narrative or a so-called *zafá* against domination, the novel suggests, necessitates a plurality of possibilities that are precisely impossible under dictatorship, for a dictatorship is univocal and does not allow multiple referents or traces of meaning to exist. It seeks to stabilize and control all meaning and action. (Hanna et al 219).

This highlights the dynamic between the hegemony (univocal) and the marginalized (heteroglossic). The sentences that follow dive into internalized oppression that stems from the hegemony and colonialism, an unmarked transition between English and Spanish, unmarked childhood experiences (kids bullying their bookish peers, parents telling kids to play outside), and yet another personal detail about Oscar (his book-loving sister is his only ally). Finally, Yuniór claims the X-Men for Oscar and other "smart, bookish boy[s] of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto." This line, in particular, likely hits home for many native New Jerseyans. During my own childhood, something about New Jersey always felt limiting, as if the Hudson created some invisible forcefield between us and the shine of Manhattan. While similar phenomena may exist in other states, something about the proximity to New York makes the yearning for greater possibilities especially difficult to ignore. Díaz even addresses it in a later chapter as "a particularly Jersey malaise—the inextinguishable longing for elsewhere" (Díaz 77).

In this passage, the answer to the root of Oscar's nerdiness is not as important as the discussion around it; agnosis guides this internal conversation rather than a dialectic reduction, which presupposes the existence of a truth—and that effort produces narrow, short-sighted answers. As José David Saldívar states in his article “Junot Díaz’s Search for Decolonial Aesthetic and Love,” “notably Yuniór’s negative aesthetics—including his text’s intentional gaps, *paginas en blanco*, and blanks—expose the limitations of his own systems of thought and entice readers to articulate thoughts that are absent” (Hanna et al 323). The decolonized chronotope highlights the importance of perspective and context but also that of agnosis. Presenting information while leaving room both openly and tacitly critiquing the problematics of historiography as we know it: a White-centric endeavor that has systematically erased the voices and narratives of People of Color around the globe—and that continues to do so today. However, the application of the decolonial imagination in the novel is not meant to replace the hegemony as yet another dogmatic system of values. The whole point of the decolonized chronotope is to forge a space with room for agnosis, a theme that reappears often in the form of the diction of doubt, questions, and the request for readers to determine knowledge for themselves, such as narrator Yuniór’s reflection on the legacy of suffering in the de León family.

So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a *fukú*? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you’ll have to decide for yourself. What’s certain is that nothing’s certain. We are trawling in silences here. ... A whisper here and there but nothing more (Díaz 243).

In the same breath, so to speak, the narrator provides three options and then throws them all in the air. The emphasis is not on reducing the situation to some truth (“[Y]ou’ll have to decide for yourself.” “We are trawling in silences here.”) but on realizing that one may not exist, or that if it does, its complexity cannot be captured in a single term (“What’s certain is that nothing’s certain.”). The liminality in the novel exists in both style (constant oscillation) and subject (Oscar’s diasporic identity, plus the conflict between his nerdiness and the iterations of young masculinity around him), which exemplifies the decolonial imagination at work throughout the novel.

The oscillations cultivate a borderlessness emblematic of the decolonial turn in the novel, by which I do not mean that construction of a definitive new value system, but the entering of a space where uncertainty is not only condoned but also exists as something actively in focus and explored. These oscillations, this border blurring illustrates the liminality of the novel not as a monolith but as a complicated web with areas of complex overlap. Through this practice, we can begin to understand that what may feel like contradiction can actually be real and logical combinations. The oscillations mimic the constant shifts common to diasporic life and expression, which are often packed full of seeming contradictions. In this way, the oscillations also push us to question what causes us to perceive something as a contradiction; we are forced to look at the nature of those borders and the hegemonic value system that dictates their presence in the first place. It is only through this removal of borders

that we can even begin to create an informed context that de-centralizes Whiteness and places value on the novel's subjects by allowing them to tell their own stories (albeit mostly through the narrator). Only by refusing the boundaries imposed by the hegemony can Díaz create new value systems that more accurately reflect the humanity of his characters and the weight of their stories.

Admittedly, the novel touches on certain aspects of abjection—the human reaction of horror or nausea “to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other”⁴—especially in regards to its borderlessness (Kristeva 1–31, 188–206). However, this has less to do with grotesquery of the subject matter itself and more to do with the grotesquery of the hegemony that the text rejects. Furthermore, the concept of abjection relies on defined boundaries, which then define the movement across them as transgressions. Julia Kristeva's work on this topic, compelling as it is, depends too much on dichotomous structures, on viewing liminality in a definitive way, to apply to this novel. This novel is not about transgressing boundaries or creating violations. Rather, it focuses on questioning the reasoning behind those boundaries' existence in the first place and about exploring the complexities within liminality itself.

The language appears to resist coloring the novel as carnivalesque, which is a style that subverts dominant structures through chaos, humor, and often, grotesquery. Instead, Díaz fleshes out complex characters through language steeped in an everydayness, even when spectacular events arise. Admittedly, certain similarities exist. Díaz creates an environment that re-structures the positions of power. As Harford Vargas states in her essay, Yuniors position as narrator gives him the most power over the narrative, creating a kind of dictatorship, whereas the infamous dictator Trujillo becomes a seldom seen caricature, often relegated to footnotes. At first glance, this structuring may appear carnivalesque, but that would indicate something organized and hegemonically sanctioned with a specific time frame, after which the status quo resumes. In this scenario, the participants understand that the established power structure will continue the following day. The carnivalesque, then, is a practice that allows the hegemony to keep their power by creating the illusion of losing it temporarily in order to appease those subjected to their rule. Everything in the carnivalesque happens because the hegemony allows it.

The decolonized chronotope, on the other hand, can only exist if it strips away the value systems and control exerted by the hegemony. Additionally, the novel revolves around the everydayness of the text's characters and communities—its successful portrayal relies on their normalization in the text. A carnivalesque representation would paint the characters and/or the plot as cartoonish or grotesque in some way. By contrast, the decolonized chronotope conveys rounded characters with an everydayness in complex situations with whom/which we can sympathize. The actions and language work together

⁴ For more on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, see Dino Franco Felluga's webpage at Purdue University.

to depict a decolonized value system to shift towards normalization rather than a self-contained, heterotopia. Furthermore, the decolonized chronotope does not exist only temporarily within a narrative—it cannot appear as a feature in a narrative that otherwise bends to hegemonic ideals. Then it stops being the decolonized chronotope and becomes a device for othering, which contradicts the very basis of decoloniality. This is precisely why *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* cannot be carnivalesque.

Furthermore, this novel would not work inside of the standard literary voice, i.e. the “universal” whitewashed voice. Díaz does not attempt to translate the diasporic Dominican American experience for White audience—or Spanish, or nerd references, or local slangs, for that matter. In countless interviews, Junot Díaz has had to defend these choices, particularly regarding his extensive use of Spanish in the novel. Often, the journalist frames this as an exclusionary tactic. The idea that Spanish somehow excludes readers is based on some highly problematic assumptions founded on the idea that English and Whiteness are everyone’s neutral (“universal”) while everything else is specialized or requires some extra work to relate to. While English and White culture may dominate U.S. popular culture, for many people, those particular elements are not *their* neutral. The question is steeped in White privilege. The fact that many journalists and their editors considered this question about Díaz’s use of Spanish vital to their articles reveals a lot about the ongoing insidious, indirect hostility towards People of Color and other marginalized groups in both reality and discourse. To write in a “universal” voice would have been equivalent to arguing for the character’s humanity rather than presenting that humanity as fact from the start with normalized, rounded characters. Writing in a “universal” literary voice would have undercut the atmosphere of inclusivity and the complex, intersectional social critique of the hegemony and of its interconnected structures of oppression. Writing in this way would also have bolstered the hegemonic value system by using its tools and, in so doing, tacitly seeking its approval by forming the novel as an explanation awaiting an answer. Just as we cannot expect to dismantle the Master’s House with the Master’s own tools, we cannot expect a narrative like this to fully function while beholden to a value system that only rewards Whiteness or proximity to it (“Dismantling the Master’s House” 110–114).

The Production of Culture: Whiteness as “Neutrality,” the Hegemonic Wish-Image, and Worlding

“Do you understand what it’s like to live in a nation where you are made marginal and inconsequential in the historical narrative that you are taught from your first day of school? In the Americas, to be a person of colour is to be made utterly inconsequential to the nation’s history. If you are black, your history begins with slavery, and your agency is denied; they don’t teach about slave rebellions or black revolutionaries. You learn about yourself as entirely shaped by outside forces: white people owned you, then some white people decided to free you and wasn’t that nice of them? and then you’re gone until the civil rights movement. That is the narrative they teach; in which you had no consequence, no value, no impact until less than a century ago. If you are indigenous, you are represented as disappeared, dead, already gone: you do not get to exist, you are already swallowed by history. If you are any other race, you are likely not present at all. To live in a land whose history is not your own, to live in a story in which you are not a character, is a soul-destroying experience.” (“I love Hamilton, but something about the way white fans engage with the musical really bothers me”)

Inhabiting a narrative where you do not exist is not only a toxic reality but also one of the functions of the hegemonic wish-image, which is to deny representations that deviate from it, resulting in tacit invalidation (or even express devalorization) of marginalized people. In a speech he made at Bergen Community College, Junot Díaz refers to this as a toxic lack of “mirrors.” While the above quote is actually from a blog post about the hit Broadway play *Hamilton*, it elucidates the particular situation of discourse performing and creating the marginalization of People of Color. I discovered it through a post the Medieval People Of Color Tumblr account (“This criticism of how Hamilton places its title character in context might be legitimate if Hamilton weren’t, well, what it is.”), which quoted a Vox article (Romano) quoting The Quintessential Queer Tumblr account, which changed its name to “A Singularity in Blue” (“I love Hamilton, but something about the way white fans engage with the musical really bothers me”). Arriving at this by means of “cyber telephone” matters. This exemplifies how different voices can produce their own network and system of references, coagulating into more complex, cohesive arguments later on before reaching larger audiences.

These networks explore issues with an immediacy only possible in online journalism, blogs, videos, social media, and other non-peer reviewed outlets. In the digital sphere, content creators need only their own permission in order to proceed. This aspect has as many strengths as it has faults. As with all things internet-related, inaccuracies can tear through cyberspace at an alarming pace, making it difficult to assess information. However, this self-authorization allows for more voices to surface. The way that the above quote was “telephoned” into my browser (and, for that matter, into discourse) speaks to the type of underground information networking that happens when people are shut out of mainstream discourse. Similarly, the novel’s numerous oscillations between the main text and footnotes, anecdotes, gossip, conjecture, gaps, and admissions of agnosis recreate this phenomenon of unofficial information

gathering and grassroots reporting. Additionally, this speaks to the depths within the novel's liminality, particularly in how the diction critiques the worlding manifested in hegemonic historiography and the hegemonic value system(s).

CREATING "NEUTRALITY" VIA HEGEMONIC WISH-IMAGE

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry is inextricably linked to Gayatri Spivak's theory of worlding, as they both have a base in capitalism, and I will explain this later on in the chapter. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, cultural products are tailored to the dominant, mainstream tastes, which in turn, determine the tailoring of yet more products and so on: "Culture monopolies are weak and dependent in comparison [to technology-based industry, e.g. steel, petroleum, and electricity]. They cannot afford to neglect their appeasement of the real holders of power if their sphere of activity in mass society [...] is not to undergo a series of purges" (Adorno and Horkheimer 95). That is to say that we are complicit in the tradition of misrepresentation existent in cultural products by the practice of consuming them. The products that we consume are published based on tastes determined by sales records. The products that appeal to the most profitable demographic will, inevitably, matter most to the publishing house, as it is a business and must attain profits in order to continue. Although this demographic is complicated by intersections with class and gender, the uniting theme is Whiteness; and, on a cultural level, this is the most highly valued, and therefore, centralized perspective. Companies and individuals alike unconsciously produce cultural products with a White bias—and, in turn, safe profit margins—which forces the White gaze to become the universal, and therefore, neutral one. Whiteness, in all its iterations, becomes the "neutral" perspective and, by extension, the dominant one.

A side effect of this White—and predominantly male—cultural dominance is the suppression of other voices. Non-white voices become "non-neutral" or non-universal, and consequently, they do not attract as many contracts or publishers. These writers and artists of color are forced into a metaphorical ghetto, labeled as content-creators for "specific" audiences only, perpetuating the idea that the experiences of People of Color (and women) cannot be understood or appreciated without some special knowledge, unlike White (and often male) narratives. This undercuts the fact that understanding White perspectives is a learned process rather than an innate, natural ability. This unconscious White bias exists in mainstream culture and even in many subcultures. For example, a 2015 study at the University of Southern California, which analyzed the 30,000 characters who appear in the 700 top grossing films between 2007 and 2014, 73.1% are white. According to the study, the breakdown for People of Color was: 12.5% Black, 5.3% Asian, 4.9% Latino/a, and 4.2% Other (Smith et al 3–7). While these numbers roughly reflect the racial breakdown of the U.S. population according to the U.S. census, the numbers are slightly faulty, as the census does not report on the Latino/a population, which

encompasses people of indigenous, Black, White, and Asian descent. While the census confirms this—“Hispanic origin is considered an ethnicity, not a race. Hispanics may be of any race.”—the lack of more complex options creates an uncertainty regarding how to document identity, e.g. an “Afro-Latino” individual historically has had to decide between “Black” or “Hispanic” or “Other” (U.S. Census Bureau). (The 2020 census may offer more complex options, such as selecting all options that apply rather than deciding which identities to record.⁵ However, for the moment, we still have the problem of inaccurate data reporting and reductive, if not incomplete, options.) So, firstly, simple quantification is not a flawless analysis of the current situation. And, secondly, the lack of data on the Latino/a population of the United States throws off the rest of the data, which appears to show a White majority by a large margin. Spanish is the second most commonly spoken language in the United States with upwards of 37 million people speaking it in 2013 alone (Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera). Even if we ignore those numbers and go by the 2015 census data, it is a worthwhile to ask *how* the 16.9% characters of color are presented in those movies. Often, People of Color are in the background or play secondary characters whose only function is to be (or provide) a punchline (often, at their own expense) and to further the development of a White character who may not even be central to the plot.

Additionally, it is short-sighted to argue that representation reaches a fair level once it is proportional to the national population. According to the above study, we currently operate in accordance with that model—and we still have advocacy groups, people within the industry, and non-industry individuals fighting for more and better representation. The dominance of Whiteness in culture mimics the dominance of Whiteness in the daily realities of People of Color. To advocate for this proportional model ignores the systemic nature of the hegemonic wish-image and the on-going legacy of colonialism. This proportion model operates on the basis of quantification at the national level—it does not account for areas where Whiteness is not the norm. That is to say, it operates within the framework of a dichotomous problem solving approach—either the problem is quantitative or qualitative. This can create faster but often incomplete solutions that do not always consider wider contexts. An additional flaw with the proportional model is the tendency to reduce individuals to one aspect of their identities, when in reality, a single individual encompasses intersections of many identities. Beyond the primary reductive flaw in the proportional model of reducing people to a single aspect, it does not account for the fact that roughly half of the U.S. population is female. If the breakdown in the study exists in alignment with the national population, approximately 50% of the culture industry, top-down, should be run by women—and that is simply not the case.

To represent People of Color (in cultural products) as minorities because they are minorities in the national population is to ignore the areas where they constitute at least 50% of the population, if not

⁵ For more on the 2020 U.S. Census and the options for racial and ethnic identification, see Jens Manuel Krogstad and D’Vera Cohn’s article “U.S. Census looking at big changes in how it asks about race and ethnicity,” as well as D’Vera Cohn’s article “Census considers new approach to asking about race – by not using the term at all.”

the outright majority. For example, San Francisco has well-established Asian American and LGBTQ+ populations. To operate according to national statistics, then, is to shape cultural products based on a “one size fits all” national experience for a country of 330 million+ individuals. There is no one type of representation that fits everyone, hence the need for perspectival multiplicity. The proportion model also re-marginalizes people, as it supports inadequate representation based on a reductive, quantitative analysis. It communicates that the only experiences that deserve exploration are White ones. It flattens local or regional differences, suppressing the experiences of people who may not actually be minorities for their area, yet they are represented that way simply because of a national statistic. The biggest problem with this model is that supports the hegemonic wish-image with seemingly objective data, which represents White experiences as as universal, when in reality, that is entirely not the case.

Those who fit the model of the hegemony are also not asked to identify with characters or perspectives embodying something with marked difference. This not only creates a systemic lack of narrative imagination, but it also makes it difficult to identify common ground. In this pattern, everyone must be able to identify with Whiteness, to fit within their cultural system, but the reverse is rarely (if ever) endorsed or considered. In effect, this proportion model encourages a lack of nuanced, intersectional perspectives. If we view airtime as units of attention, and if we view units of attention as proof of value, then we immediately see the connection between the hegemony’s value system and the problematic lack of (and, when present, often appalling) representation. This proportion model is not only symptomatic of ongoing White supremacist discourse—it feeds into a vicious circle that helps to perpetuate it.

Furthermore, the proportion model creates complacency and constructs a Norman Rockwell-esque Americana. (Admittedly, some argue that Rockwell’s work references the *production* of idyllic imagery more than any genuinely held view on Rockwell’s part (Halpern 1–11). However, for the purposes of this essay, we will consider the connotations of the imagery produced rather than the background of its production.) This creates a hegemonic wish-image that masquerades as a mirror through sheer force of will (on the part of the hegemony). To represent anything else is to centralize another perspective, even if only briefly. The hegemonic system cannot allow for multiple centralizations. If the hegemony allows other voices to speak, then it would no longer be the only voice in the room. A core component of the hegemony’s power stems from the ability to be the only “reliable” source of information. To allow dialogic expressions of information would be to open itself to critique. If those critiques expose any gaps in the hegemonic narrative, then its whole system becomes visible. This visibility, then, indicates failure, as the hegemonic system works best when hidden in plain sight, i.e. in discourse. This hypothetical centralization of other identities—however temporary—would reveal multiple perspectives and ways of being that do not support the reductive hegemonic value system. Suddenly, the hegemonic wish-image, the ultimate aspiration, would lose value. The dominance of the hegemonic

wish-image relies on constant retelling in order to maintain its status as mirror rather than fabrication. This internalization forms a large part of what perpetuates the hegemonic wish-image. One example of this type of internalization is colorism, a systemic prejudice with deeply colonial roots. Colorism is the prejudice against individuals with dark(er) skin, usually among people of the same minority group(s). Skin tone can influence the general social treatment of an individual—in certain places, it can even have a direct impact on an individual's quality of life, e.g. housing, job opportunities, healthcare. In the novel, colorism receives multiple casual mentions, conveying the presence of this prejudice in everyday life. The everyday tone of these mentions subverts the idea that systemic hate must manifest physically in order to qualify as violence. Colorism has significant impact on the main characters, particularly Belicia who lives through the Trujillo regime (a regime noted for its anti-Black racism, and specifically anti-Haitian agenda). The passage below describes Belicia's experience with colorism at her high school in the Dominican Republic. Her position as a scholarship student already gives her a status below her peers, but this is an unmarked difference obscured by the school uniforms. However, her dark skin marks her (to the other students) in a way that is immediately visible.

She would never admit it (even to herself), but she felt utterly exposed at El Redentor, all those pale eyes gnawing at her duskiness like locusts—and she didn't know how to handle such vulnerability. Did what had always saved her in the past. Was defensive and aggressive and mad overreactive. You said something slightly off-color about her shoes and she brought up the fact that you had a slow eye and danced like a goat with a rock stuck in its ass. Ouch. You would just be playing and homegirl would be coming down on you off the top rope. Let's just say, by the end of her second quarter Beli could walk down the hall without fear that anyone would crack on her. The downside of this of course was that she was completely alone. ... Despite the outsized expectations Beli had had on her first days to be Number One in her class and to be crowned prom queen opposite the handsome [white] Jack Pujols, Beli quickly found herself exiled beyond the bonewalls of the macroverse itself, flung there by the Ritual of Chüd (Díaz 83-84).

The passage exhibits several oscillations that bolster the replication of this experience for the reader. The diction shifts from standard literary language, as if providing an expository shot from afar. Quickly, Yuniór's voice begins to take over ("mad overreactive," "just be playing," "homegirl") before shifting again, this time into the language of science fiction ("exiled beyond the bonewalls," "Ritual of Chüd"). The need to use a hodgepodge of expressions further illustrates the diasporic themes in the novel. However, this also demonstrates the constant shifting inherent in the decolonized chronotope, which aims to explore layered liminality rather than to define anything concretely, so it makes sense that the diction undergoes so many frequent changes. Additionally, the usage of the word "gnawed" feels key to understanding Belicia's experience here. To gnaw implies biting without actually consuming anything. First, this nods to a common trope that exists in both literature and real life: the application of food-related language to describe the physical appearance of women, particularly women of color, e.g. "almond eyes," "caramel skin," or "chocolate skin." Second, this illustrates one of the effects of colorism in an everyday setting—the stares consume her though they who stare will not take her in. She

is both hyper present (due to her dark skin in a predominantly light-skinned environment) and shut out (due to the social construction of the undesirability of her dark skin). Colorism can affect the genders differently, but racial prejudice against women of color often combines with sexism. Their human value becomes entwined with whether or not they are attractive, which often depends on the lightness of their skin (according to the hegemonic value system). The everydayness of the language conveys the fact that colorism is an everyday reality for Belícia, rather than some particular event marked by physical violence. In the absence of Yúnior's outrage, the gap becomes obvious—it becomes clear that outrage *is* the appropriate response. Under the hegemonic feedback loop—powered by the hegemonic wish-image and the cultural production that promotes it—Whiteness simply *is* desirable, and the darker an individual's skin tone, the further away they are from the hegemonic wish-image. Even without the language-related oscillations, Díaz already resists the hegemonic wish-image by virtue of providing frames of reference that do not typically rely on hegemonic valuation, such as the northern New Jersey slang words and science fiction. This move constitutes *reworlding*, a concept that I will revisit in the next chapter.

This kind of multiplicitous representation feels uncommon in the accepted English language literary canon, contemporary literature, and popular culture; and, the few representations that *do* exist are often hit or miss. British novelist Nikesh Kumar spoke about this topic in an interview with the U.S.-based Public Broadcasting Service, “I realized that white people think that people of color only have ethnic experiences and not universal experiences. . . . That really annoyed me. I’m not just eating mangoes all the time with my aggressive mother. . . . I want my otherness normalized” (Santhanam and Crigger). In the face of this dearth of representation, we calibrate our expectations accordingly. We understand, consciously or not, the hegemonic wish-image and the value system upon which U.S. dominant culture is based. This does not necessarily equate to full acceptance or condoning. However, due to the structure of cultural production, the hegemony continues to sell its wish-image, and due to the liminality of the alternatives, we continue to consume and practice the wish-image. As Adorno and Benjamin point out, we continue to consume hegemonic culture, and it continues to create a climate (through continuation of its wish-image via cultural production) in which we find it favorable or acceptable (Adorno and Horkheimer 94-136). More books, then, continue to be published, because of the established need. The needs and perspectives outside of this have yet to be tested as extensively. However, this remains an important task, as intersectional, broadened cultural engagement has real world implications. For many people in the United States, cultural products may provide the only (or primary) source of contact with individuals from marginalized groups. Increasingly, People of Color and other marginalized groups have become content creators, and representation has improved in both quantity and quality. It is worth mentioning here that the flaw with Adorno's argument about cultural production is most apparent in this aspect: while cultural production is not completely democratized, the means of cultural production are no longer (as) monopolized. Consequently, these shifts have

influenced public tastes and, in turn, have opened up for more inclusion. In a similar vein, the novel's wide net for information systems and engagement with agnosis resist both Dominican dictator Trujillo's violent regime depicted in the novel (which, like all dictatorships, obsessively control information and meaning) and the U.S. hegemonic value system (which influences our perception of value and meaning).

WORLDING: HEGEMONIC WISH-IMAGE ENACTED

As mentioned in the Background chapter, worlding is the application of the colonial imagination, which supports the hegemonic value system and, in turn, the hegemonic wish-image. In his book, *Reworlding America: Myth, History, and Narrative*, John Muthyala describes worlding as structure that requires—if not outright forces—marginalized people's complicity in their own erasure. Consequently, People of Color often exist as something easily consumed (in narratives) with race as the main point of contact rather than normalized, rounded character development. To explore only the character's race (or gender, for that matter) as the work's focus would be equivalent to composing a faceless portrait. At best, it generates some awareness of an existence. At worst, the blank space allows hegemonic audiences to fill it with a colonial imaginary. Works that focus solely on identity politics can also hinder liminal exploration and multiplicity. It impedes our ability to understand the character as someone fully developed beyond ethnic or racial identity, as someone who can embody vast intersections of identities. As Audre Lorde once said, “[W]e do not live single-issue lives” (“Learning from the 60s” 134–144). As such, it makes sense that the characters' lives do not exist around one single issue, that there is not one single character who is meant to speak for or represent all of the others. This wholistic approach to language mimics Díaz's approach to character development. In large part, this continued othering in narratives meant to explore full characters is due to the worlding of the Americas. As Muthyala puts it,

Worlding the world is a kind of double movement: while it draws the world into the realm of the cognizable by establishing zones of possibility, relation, and encounter within which the world can become “worldly,” it relegates to the margins of social existence those elements that seem to threaten this process. Thus, it legitimizes particular ideas of America at the same time that it delimits peoples, cultures, and values that threaten hegemonic ideas of America (Muthyala 2).

This brings us back to the hegemonic wish-image and its supporting structures. To present marginalized peoples as complex characters is to call into question their marginalization. This undermines the hegemonic value system. To create a work that focuses on People of Color decentralizes Whiteness; it is an act of reworlding. To create such a work is to call into question the structures that have required and allowed their marginalization. To write such a work is reject the hegemonic wish-image and the value system upon which it is based. This resistance to subjugation manifests in aspects of the novel's constant oscillations and references. We ought to note, however, that one marginalized cannot speak for all marginalized voices. Díaz's novel does not exist as a “one size fits

all” answer to the dearth of representations available. His diction points to a privileged audience in mind (Spanish-speaking individuals of Afro-Caribbean descent from or living in northern New Jersey), and while more people or groups may strongly identify with the novel, there still needs to be more perspectives published.

Reworlding through References: Historiography, Magical Realism, Folklore, “Nerd” Culture(s)

Functioning under the decolonized chronotope, the text presents a narrative that de-centralizes Whiteness and the hegemonic wish-image, often with diction of everydayness. Oscillations between voices, genres, times, places, and non-hegemonic histories reinforces this reworlding. This subverts the mainstream expectation of fiction concerning People of Color, which is to focus on their race, thereby reducing characters’ complex personhoods to a single aspect beyond their control. Focusing only on a character’s race tacitly suggests that that accounts for the totality of their personhood. This implies an interchangeability of People of Color, which connotes less individual value.

In effect, Díaz reworlds the Americas within his novel through the implementation of constant oscillations. In contrast to the dichotomous strategies of the hegemony, Díaz accounts for multiplicity, for heteroglossia, and room for agnosis. This expands on José Martí’s decolonial localized solidarity-based ideology, “reimagin[ing] our community of the nation in a way that enfranchises rather than disenfranchises” (Hanna et al 11). In terms of narratorial oscillations, though Yunior is the main narrator (with interludes from Lola), Díaz implements a democratization of expression and perspectives. Yunior’s voice often shifts to tones that do not belong to his character but to those whose lives he narrates. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reveals an awareness of the hegemonic wish-image and the cycle of cultural production. Díaz’s novel adds to the list of counterexamples to the hegemonic wish-image, disrupting the central narrative of the U.S. culture industry by providing an alternative perspective deemed well-executed even by the hegemony, e.g. New York Times Bestseller, the 2008 Pulitzer Prize.

Part of what helps us orient ourselves in the reworlded Americas of the novel is the use of immediate familiar genres and references, e.g. popular culture, nerd culture (science fiction, fantasy, comic books, anime, role playing games), gossip, and folklore. These casual, familiar elements provide a counterbalance to the reworlding and normalization of marginalized people in their own narrative. Here, the text keeps us engaged by using familiar territory as the carrot on a stick to get us through the highly unfamiliar landscape of the decolonized chronotope. Normalizing otherness—even within ourselves—is an experience that is not often replicated on such a large scale, or at least not with the depth, complexity, and open-endedness that the process really requires. Furthermore, stories from (and about) the margins cannot be fully told within the same hegemonic guidelines and structures that are used to oppress them (“The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” 110–114). As Paula M. Moya observes, “the master’s tools are the tools of purity and separation: the impulse to split subject from object; mind from body; sex from gender; and race from class, gender, sexuality, and ability” (Hanna et al 239). In effect, the hegemonic tools are those of reduction. Additionally, using

hegemonic frameworks often further legitimizes the value system upon which they are based, as well as their control over narratives and meaning. Furthermore, sole use of hegemonic language and stylistic tools reinforces the idea that the hegemony's methods are not only best but the only ones present.

Díaz's use of magical realism in relation to historiography is important, as it situates his writing within (or at least very near) the U.S. literary traditions of People of Color, such as Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston, as well as to those Latin American authors who created the genre, such as Isabel Allende, Jorge Luis Borges, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. This points to the author's liminality among literary traditions. Additionally, these aspects—magical realism and history—are just as important to the narrative as his use of nerd culture (comic books, anime, fantasy, science fiction, role playing games). They are all genres of liminality.

There is a reason magical realism, folklore, scifi references are used to render the narrative understandable. They typically describe phenomena that are – on the surface – not part of our consciousness or lived reality. These genres straddle the space between reality as we know it and some kind of otherness. The decolonial imagination and narrative of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* lie so far outside of mainstream U.S. literature the novel's manner of depiction had to be equally far flung. As people living within dominant White culture, we have an easier time understanding superheroes and myths than we do narratives wherein Whiteness is de-centralized. This is part of the function of discourse: turning ideas into unconscious biases. Arguably, even in much of science fiction, fantasy, and comic books, Whiteness remains staunchly front and center. The most famous sympathetic figures in comic books are White: Superman, Batman, Wonderwoman, Aquaman, Captain America, Black Widow—the list goes on. Only in recent years have we witnessed endeavors to change that, such as Ms. Marvel (rebooted as a Pakistani American girl), The Hulk (rebooted as a Korean American boy who *enjoys* his powers), Captain America (rebooted as a Black man), and Thor (rebooted as a White woman).

Science fiction, fantasy, comic books, animation, these provide direct portals to narratives about otherness, perhaps even more so than mainstream literature. They live in the “weird” and the atypical, despite some hegemonic expressions over the years. To identify with characters with supernatural traits is a given in the universes of nerd culture(s) and folklore. These are traditions grounded in the normalization of otherness. So, it is not a particular stretch of the imagination to apply this to the universe of the novel. The lens of nerd culture(s) and folklore forces us to re-evaluate the familiar world with a new gaze. The ability to see connections between seemingly disparate things is precisely the type of vision necessary for “what Díaz calls ‘ruin-readers,’ or interpreters of ... underlying structures and conditions” (Hanna et al 202).

This reworlding generates some of the novel's tension, revealing the discord between how the narrator values the characters and how their environments value them.

A unifying motif in the novel is the Golden Mongoose, who embodies an intersection between diaspora, historiography, fantasy, folklore, and politics in the novel. The following quote appears in a footnote to Belicia's near-death after a brutal beating in a canefield, which she survives with the help of a Golden Mongoose. The footnote appears in the moment where she understands that she has been saved.

The Mongoose, one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers. Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean. Since its earliest appearance in the written record—675 B.C.E., in a nameless scribe's letter to Ashurbanipal's father, Esarhaddon—the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. Believed to be an ally of Man. Many Watchers suspect that the Mongoose arrived to our world from another, but to date no evidence of such a migration has been unearthed (Díaz 151).

This tracks the history of the mongoose as symbol from India to Africa to the Caribbean. Notably, this quote performs reworlding through the telling of a history that does not involve Europe or contemporary U.S. White culture, except for the misnomer referenced by “the other India.” The history revolves around Asian-African ties that migrate to the Americas. The mongoose “[a]ccompanied humanity out of Africa,” affirming the roots of human existence there and, further, referencing Assyrian king Ashurbanipal and his father Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon only by given names, implying that we *ought* to recognize them. Díaz even mentions the mongoose as “an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies.” In other words, the mongoose is a hegemonically opposed figure. The use of “B.C.E.” (Before Common Era) also resists the colonialist legacy of Christianity in the Americas by not using the birth and death of Christ as historical markers against which everything else must be contextualized. Additionally, the mongoose constitutes a figure of liminality and diaspora. The oscillations take us from its earthly diaspora across continents, possibly even another world, to the mentions of the “Watchers” of the Marvel Comics universe, which are an alien race with a strict non-interventionist policy whose sole purpose is to observe and record all knowledge of the universe. Combined with the use of science fiction, folklore, and historiography with non-hegemonic points of contact, the mongoose provides the complex embodiment of the kind of liminality inherent in the decolonized chronotope. Other footnotes throughout the novel work in a similar way, at times appearing as self-heckling, at times appearing as forces for reworlding, often through mentions of historical figures, such as Anacoana.

Anacoana, a.k.a. the Golden Flower. One of the Founding Mothers of the New World and the most beautiful Indian in the World. (The Mexicans might have their Malinche, but we Dominicans have our Anacoana.) Anacoana was the wife of Caonabo, one of the five caciques who ruled our Island at the time of the ‘Discovery.’ In his accounts, Bartolomé de las Casas described her as “a woman of great prudence and authority, very courtly and gracious in her manner of speaking and her gestures.” Other witnesses put it more succinctly: the chick was hot and, it would turn out, warrior-

brave. When the Euros started going Hannibal Lecter on the Tainos, they killed Anacoana's husband (which is another story). And like all good warrior-women she tried to rally her people, tried to resist, but the Europeans were the original fukú, no stopping them. Massacre after massacre after massacre. Upon being captured, Anacoana tried to parley, saying: "Killing is not honorable, neither does violence redress our honor. Let us build a bridge of love that our enemies may cross, leaving their footprints for all to see." The Spanish weren't trying to build no bridges, though. After a bogus trial they hung brave Anacoana. In Santo Domingo, in the shadow of one of our first churches. The End.

A common story you hear about Anacoana in the DR is that on the eve of her execution she was offered a chance to save herself: all she had to do was marry a Spaniard who was obsessed with her. (See the trend? Trujillo wanted the Mirabal Sisters, and the Spaniard wanted Anacoana.) Offer that choice to a contemporary Island girl and see how fast she fills out that passport application. Anacoana, however, tragically old-school, was reported to have said, Whitemen, kiss my hurricane ass! And that was the end of Anacoana. The Golden Flower. One of the Founding Mothers of the New World and the most beautiful Indian in the World (Díaz 243).

From the start, Anacoana is our heroine and the New World begins with her as "One of the Founding Mothers". Anacoana's revolt to her rejection of the Spaniard's marriage proposal to her martyrdom, Díaz centers the anecdotal historical telling around *her* experience, around the indigenous person in a story about colonialism. This move already signals a shift in perspective that exists throughout the rest of the novel. The footnote presents the Europeans here as Hannibal Lecter, as perpetrators of genocide, as "the original fukú" (curse of the New World). This quote also paints a more complex vision of Latin America with the mention of Malinche and the differentiation between her and Anacoana. That there can even be equivalents already resists the hegemonic idea of reductive otherness. Her execution unfolds as much "in the shadow of one of our first churches" as the erasure of People of Color does under the hegemony now (and through the ages). Díaz also makes an intratextual reference ("See the trend? Trujillo wanted the Mirabal Sisters, and the Spaniard wanted Anacoana.") This further reinforces the awareness of hegemonic patterns throughout history, as well as solidifies the atmosphere of the decolonized chronotope in the novel. On another note, this also points to the continued violence against not just subjugated populations but against women specifically as symptomatic of abusive regimes. The irreverent tone of "Whitemen, kiss my hurricane ass!" communicates two things: one, it reflects Yunior's typical diction for comedic effect on a horrific historical event, and that tension generates both critical discomfort and interest; two, it puts the voice of the marginalized group at hand (Yunior and the other central characters of Paterson, New Jersey) who face types of oppression stemming from colonialism, e.g. colorism, racism. The poetic repetition of the opening sentences at the end of the footnote also points to the circle of hegemonic violence and the closed nature of her narrative (she died at the hands of Spanish colonizers, and students may not often learn more than that [if they even learn about her at all]).

From the Afro-Asian roots of the mongoose as symbol to the early colonialism referenced above, Díaz crafts a system of references and perspective that prioritize marginalized narratives and perspectives.

Specifically, he includes anecdotal sections in both footnotes and the main text rooted in Dominican-centric historiography, such as mid-century Dominican actress María Montez (Díaz 87), Trujillo's genocidal right hand Joaquín Balaguer (Díaz 90), and the Chinese presence in the Dominican Republic. The latter actually manifests as two significant characters Juan and José, owners of the restaurant Palacio Peking, a site of importance in the novel. The inclusion of Chinese immigrant characters in the Dominican Republic destabilizes hegemonic narrative control over the relationships between (groups of) People of Color that have little (or nothing) to do with White people. This, in turn, points to the vital flaws that provide the fundament of dominant historiography: univocality and control of meaning.

To illustrate this particular point, we can analyze the death of José. When he dies in Atlanta, his last words are mistaken for “Chinese gobbledygook ... emphasis on the *gook*”, their meaning controlled by the racist medical staff (Díaz 106). In contrast to the general trend of *not* italicizing non-English or non-standard English words, Díaz opts to italicize this particular word. To me, this rare italicization signals not José's otherness but rather the otherness of the White supremacist borrowed vocabulary used to denigrate him. The choice of word also proves an important one. While “gook” was a common insult applied to people of Asian descent during the 20th century, particularly after the Korean War, it possesses some complicated history. The word originates from the Korean 한꺀 (pronounced “han-guk”), which literally means “Korean.” Only the second half survived into English slang, 꺀 (“guk”), which simply means “country” or “nation.” While the resulting bastardization of the word—*gook*—became an insult, the joke is ultimately on those who use it, as they are misusing an actual word. Use of this word exposes two things: first, it exposes the magnitude of the willful ignorance involved; second, it exposes the hegemony's power and ability to control meaning.

In a similar vein, the novel's footnotes further emphasize the subjectivity of historiography. When we declare dominance for one narrative, we de-legitimize, if not erase others, which may exist concurrently with equal validity despite some contradictions. Structuring history around a dominant narrative is to impose a hegemonic value system, which relies on removing legitimacy and visibility from other groups. The hegemony incessantly seeks to secure its place as the *only* voice in the room. However, these intratextual references, the non-hegemonic historiography, the critical footnotes help to reworld the novel, resist hegemonic univocality, and push forward the decolonized chronotope.

Oscillations

Bakhtin identifies oscillations as shifts between types of language (Bakhtin 302). These move us between the different chronotopes and voices within the decolonized chronotope. The unapologetic, unmarked oscillations cannot be reduced to a single voice, because there is no one voice that can represent everyone and everything involved. This constant flux is a large part of what defines the decolonized chronotope. The text “explores the possibilities for linguistic disjuncture and compatibility ... by including a variety of communities ... To read their interactions is to experience the ways in which communities grow proximate and distant from one another through language.” (Hanna et al 265-266). The reworlding in the novel, the decolonized chronotope, ultimately, are at the mercy of the language that presents them. To achieve this, the text oscillates between modes of language, polyglossia (two or more standard national languages in the same text [here: Spanish and English]), perspectives, genres, and settings. Oscillations between settings (e.g. present day New Jersey to 1950s Dominican Republic) happen concurrently with those involving tone (e.g. Yuniór’s English slang to Belicia’s Spanish), perspective (e.g. Yuniór’s perspective to third person omniscient [through Yuniór] regarding Belicia’s life), and genre (e.g. memoir to science fiction).

This pattern of ceaseless and overlapping oscillations resists reductive interpretation and assignment of meaning, which indicates resistance to hegemonic value systems. Rather than working with a reductive dialectic interpretation, this pattern is focused on the interactions between many disparate elements and how they play off of one another. However, these oscillations are never marked, with the exception of the footnotes, as their formatting makes them stand out from the rest of the text. Certain changes do identify shifts in perspectives, as each character has their particular voice. For example, the oscillation between local slangs to standard literary language often indicates the switch between Yuniór’s voice and Díaz’s authorial voice. Still, these are unmarked transitions under the umbrella of the narratorial voice. Throughout the novel, the different elements between which the text oscillates are stated matter of factly, and this everydayness constitutes a vital element of the novel’s reworlding. It is the normalization of otherness. The oscillations provide a complex exploration of the spaces *within* liminality, one that not only acknowledges the coexistence of contradictions but critiques the system that classes them as “contradictions” in the first place. Upon closer examination, the oscillations perform three principal functions to both dismantle hegemonic value systems and create new systems of producing meaning.

First, the oscillations restructure the relationships between elements nebulously, resisting dichotomies in favor of liminal explorations. The imagined division between “high” and “low” culture(s) dissolves in the unmarked oscillations between, for example, standard literary language and comic book references. This reflects the multiplicity inherent in the decolonized chronotope while acknowledging the existing dichotomies that influence the novel.

Second, by resisting dichotomous systems of meaning through practicing heteroglossia, the author tacitly rejects the reductive bounds of a hegemonic value system. 'The oscillations' overlaps and multiplicity form an equivalence between the elements involved, such as languages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, locations, genders, and so on. This is a democratizing act. This renders all elements as legitimate and accessible without sacrificing meaning, nuance, and dynamics between and within culture. They exist in a way that does not need or require dominance. Under dictatorship, information and interpretation are tightly controlled. Somewhat similarly, though nowhere near as deadly for most of its citizens, the U.S. hegemonic wish-image of a homogeneous national identity controls how we assign value. It relies on the existence of a correct choice or way of identifying. Within a dichotomy, things must either dominate or surrender, and there is an implicit lack on either side of what the other carries. With multiplicity, value does not revolve around lack or hierarchies. Multiplicity is complex and liminal, focusing more on spectra and intersections than individual categories. With this lens, elements manifest messily, at times concurrently and in conflict. In a way, this feels like the most accurate depiction of what we might call a lived experience.

Third, the oscillations between the main text and the footnotes further de-centralize hegemonic narrative control by creating areas where the narrator calls his own telling into question and even asks the reader to fill in the blanks for themselves. This cultivates a dynamic of constant questioning, destabilizing any singular historiography, and by extension, whatever value system upon which that might be based. This makes room for agnosis. Although a great deal of historiographical exploration exists in the body of the text, to include paratextual commentary (that both supplements and contradicts information) indicates that there is much more to consider that may not exist in the world of the novel.

This critical liminal approach extends to characterization, as well. For example, the protagonist Oscar is a young, poor, obese Dominican American nerd with the diction of a fantasy novel, a crush on every girl, and a hometown that does not understand him. In his character alone, we witness the cacophonous overlap, the kind of liminality present in the decolonized chronotope. The acknowledgment of complex personhood in regards to a protagonist who is also Person of Color further reworlds the novel by de-centralizing Whiteness and conveying the common experience of the coexisting situations of marginalized existence and full personhood. That is to say, the contradictory experience of being treated as a human with lesser value, though you do not view yourself that way. Oscillations also play with our expectations of the characters in the novel. By portraying them heteroglossically, with complexity, the oscillations highlight their humanity and express the characters often on their own terms (or at least Yuniors'). Consequently, this forces us to confront any

preconceived notions or prejudices about both the characters and their real life counterparts and communities without stating any outright accusations.

These oscillations provide nuanced exploration of identities in an intersectional fashion. As actors of liminality, the oscillations carry out an integral aspect of the reworlding inherent in the decolonized chronotope. Like ocean waves, different elements rise to the surface (diction, syntax, languages, and so on) at different times; though they may appear distinct from one another, as water in the ocean, their borders are undefinable. In other words, these oscillations are interconnected, and we are constantly aware of all of their presences, aware that they exist even when they are not visible. The constant shifts within liminality also reflect the scattered experience(s) of diaspora, a concept that I will expand in a later chapter. In this way, these oscillations do not only provide tools for anti-hegemonic resistance but also actively create diasporic space(s).

In other words, he cultivates a space wherein empathy for diasporic experiences is already established rather than operate from a position of assumed inferiority, making a case for equivalence by translating the experience(s) for White audiences. That is a paradoxical endeavor. If it were normalized, we wouldn't need to render it comprehensible to a broad audience. From the start, this process fails. Díaz writes to his privileged audience unapologetically, addressing marginalized subjects as already normalized. This stylistic choice offers a more genuine connection to the narrative than standard literary language, which would have white-washed the narrative and greatly hindered the liminality expressed in the text's language. In this way, Díaz follows in the footsteps of Toni Morrison, who always "writes specifically for an African Diasporic community. Anyone who can read and can get a hold of her books is welcomed, but ... we people of African descent are her privileged audience. ... Morrison is not attempting to translate black American culture for a white audience, she is no guide, no native informant. That is in itself revolutionary" (Hanna et al 273). To write this way is to state that there is no need for justification, for White audiences to "get it." Switching seamlessly between the various Englishes and Spanishes, Díaz writes unapologetically, which is to say, he writes without explanations and justifications. He does not explain specific phrases or words that appear in Spanish, localized Dominican Spanish (slang or otherwise), or in localized English slang. By doing this, by insisting that they need no explanation, by not italicizing, the author makes no distinction between them and the literary English in the text. Placing these types of language side by side borderlessly communicates tacit equivalence between them all, assigning them the same value. Using hegemonic standard literary language would further legitimize the hegemony, their value system, and their control over the narratives (and associated meaning[s]). By giving the characters individuality without translation, the author automatically precludes the myth of the interchangeable Other. The unapologetic fullness of the characters subverts the hegemonic value system, which would not value them favorably. These characters take up space. They inhabit interests and identities typically cordoned

off for their White counterparts. The decolonization of their representation lies in their normalized representation, which is allowed to encompass both mundane and incredible experiences. This liminal approach to characterization plays a vital role, as characters provide the key points of entry into any narrative: personalities with whom we may identify.

The everydayness of the characters' portrayal also affects the reworlding in the novel. Although their experiences occasionally fall within the realm of extremes or fantasy, the narrator relays these plotlines with a casual finesse. Not only does this reinforce their full humanity, but also this further reinforces the notion of diaspora as a violent force as well as an everyday reality. The novel's engagement with diaspora shows flexibility, acknowledgement of gaps, contradictions, and constant shifts. Partially, this is due to the nature of diaspora as a liminal experience that manifests differently for everyone and affects subsequent generations in numerous ways. (I will expand further on diaspora in another chapter.) Rather than give in to the weight of the false responsibility to be a "representative" for all diasporic voices, a common pitfall and expectation of non-hegemonic narratives, Díaz opts to stay focused on the individuality of his characters. In other words, they get to just be themselves rather than symbols. Similarly, the passage below exemplifies how the oscillations in the text reflect the uniqueness of the characters.

Like Superman in *Dark Knight Returns*, who drained from an entire jungle the photonic energy he needed to survive Coldbringer, so did our Beli resolve out of her anger her own survival. In other words, her coraje saved her life.

Like a white light in her. Like a sun.

She came in to the ferocious moonlight. A broken girl, atop broken stalks of cane.

Pain everywhere but alive. Alive.

And now we arrive at the strangest part of our tale. Whether what follows was a figment of Beli's wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say. Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco. Beyond the Source Wall few have ventured. But no matter what the truth, remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived? (Díaz 149)

The quote opens with a reference to the classic 1986 DC Comics graphic novel by Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns*, which marked a shift in comic books back towards adult readers, complex engagement with otherness, and dark narratives. Even without understanding the significance of this reference, the sentence communicates an equivalence between the power of Belicia and of Superman. Through comparison, their experiences become equated. In this, we see resistance to sexist narratives about women. The text expresses it in her voice: her "coraje" (courage) saves her. Belicia's power feels as raw and as real as "drain[ing] ... an entire jungle [of] photonic energy ... to survive." Agnosis appears several times in Yuniór's commentary ("I cannot say," "páginas en blanco," "no matter what the truth"), pointing back to the text's culture of questioning. The iteration of blank space between Belicia's story and Yuniór commentary also speaks to the agnosis. Additionally, this gap mimics Belicia's

experience, the intensity before the dizziness and (near) fainting. The passage finishes with the rhetorical question that implicates the European colonizers in the Americas, particularly the Caribbean, and the legacy they left behind.

Notably, Díaz does not italicize any of the Spanish or local slangs except to emphasize particular words. And, even so, this always concentrates on the meanings generated by emphasis rather than creating otherness. This move decentralizes English and instead proposes a space that straddles difference between Englishes and Spanishes. Italicization of an entire language's words strongly suggests that its direct receivers are othered in the text, marginalizing those who identify as native speakers or who identify as part of the community that speaks that language. Italicization also creates difference and de-normalizes the language(s) it highlights. In the following passage, Díaz uses a significant amount of italicization but only to highlight the speech of the Golden Mongoose.

So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large for its species and placed its intelligent little paws on her chest and stared down at her.

You have to rise.

My baby, Beli wept. Mi hijo precioso.

Hypatía, your baby is dead.

No, no, no, no, no.

It pulled at her unbroken arm. *You have to rise now or you'll never have the son or the daughter.*

What son? she wailed. What daughter?

The ones who await.

It was dark and her legs trembled beneath her like smoke.

You have to follow.

It rivered into the cane, and Beli, blinking tears, realized she had no idea which way was out. ... [B]efore Beli lost hope she heard the creature's voice. She (for it had a woman's lilt) was singing! In an accent she could not place: maybe Venezuelan, maybe Colombian. *Sueño, sueño, sueño, como tú te llamas.* She clung unsteadily to the cane, like an anciano clinging to a hammock, and, panting, took her first step, a long dizzy spell, beating back a blackout, and then her next. Precarious progress, because if she fell she knew she would never stand again. Sometimes she saw the creature's chabine eyes flashing through the stalks. *Yo me llamo sueño de la madrugada.* (Díaz 149-50).

Belicia's Spanish is not italicized—it is only the Golden Mongoose whose speech is presented that way. This move subverts the U.S. hegemonic othering of other languages. Italicizing the Spanish would signify the othering of the characters who speak it. Italicization would literally give a marked difference, which is precisely what the decolonized chronotope aims to resist. This would have centralized English, marginalizing the characters in the same narrative that focuses on them. Furthermore, italicizing the Spanishes, or even the English slang, would be to re-centralize the hegemonic value system. In the decolonized chronotope of the novel, the hegemony becomes the Other, a non-central entity. (Though, arguably, the hegemony is also highly central in that the marginalized condition of the central characters relies on the existence and history of the hegemony. However, the text implies the matter-of-factly states the existence of hegemonic preconditions rather than centralize them through outright exploration.) Like Trujillo's storyline, the hegemony is relegated to the sidelines, to hearsay, to footnotes, and are subject to the central characters' interpretations. One notable example is Yunió's

moniker for Trujillo, “Old Fuckface” (Díaz 155). The narrator has Yunior has complete control over how we perceive Trujillo and other oppressors in the novel, as all descriptions, all text is mediated through his voice (and, briefly, Lola’s). In other areas, the novel deals more directly with the tension between marginalized voices and authority figures.

What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? Since before the infamous Caesar–Ovid war they’ve had beef. Like the Fantastic Four and Galactus, like the X-Men and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, like the Teen Titans and Death-stroke, Foreman and Ali, Morrison and Crouch, Sammy and Sergio, they seemed destined to be eternally linked in the Halls of Battle. Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that’s too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like.* ... Long story short: upon learning of [Galíndez’s] dissertation, El Jefe first tried to buy the thing and when that failed he dispatched his chief Nazgul (the sepulchral Felix Bernardino) to NYC and within days Galíndez got gagged, bagged, and dragged to La Capital, and legend has it when he came out of his chloroform nap he found himself naked, dangling from his feet over a cauldron of boiling oil, El Jefe standing nearby with a copy of the offending dissertation in hand. (And you thought your committee was rough.) ... But take heart: For every phalanx of nerds who die there are always a few who succeed” (Díaz 97).

This begins with an informally phrased but vital question and goes on to list famous “beef[s]” within western history, comic books, boxing, literature, and popular magazines. Specifically, the referenced rivalries involve legendary boxers George Foreman and Mohammed Ali, novelist Toni Morrison and critic Stanley Crouch, art director Sam Viviano and artist Sergio Aragones. An important aspect to remember is that these rivalries almost all occur between marginalized people, both fictional (mutants and superheros) and real (People of Color). This, again, shifts our center, as the conflict does not directly involve U.S. White culture or European cultures. By using frames of reference involving People of Color in history and culture, Díaz writes another history based on different value systems. Rather than operate according to one historiography, Yunior regularly undercuts his own information with gossip-based diction, speculation, or phrases like “You tell me” (Díaz 242). Particularly in these moments, when we expect Yunior to speak from a place of authority on a history or another character’s personal experience, we witness the polyphony that drives the a perspective This exemplifies, again, resistance to authoritarian modes of information-spreading and valuation, a move that carries extra significance for the novel’s relationship to life under both Trujillo’s dictatorship and the U.S. hegemony. The use of footnotes like the one below further exemplifies the centering of traditionally marginalized voices over hegemonic ones.

Mamá, is that for me? Am I dying? Dime, mamá.
Ay, hija, no seas ridícula. La Inca put her hands, awkward hyphens, around the girl. Lowered her mouth to her ear: It’s Trujillo.
Gunned down, she whispered, the night Beli had been kidnapped.
No one knows anything yet. Except that he’s dead.[19]

[19] They say he was on his way for some ass that night. Who is surprised? A consummate culocrat to the end. Perhaps on that last night, El Jefe, sprawled in the back of his Bel Air, thought only of the routine pussy that was awaiting him at Estancia Fundación. Perhaps he thought of nothing. Who can know? In any event: there is a black Chevrolet fast approaching, like Death itself, packed to the rim

with U.S.-backed assassins ... El Jefe asks his driver, Zacarías, to turn on the radio, but—how appropriate—there is a poetry reading on and off it goes again. Maybe the poetry reminds him of Galíndez. Maybe not ... Here now the famous exchange: ... he goes out like Tony Montana. Staggered out of the bullet-ridden Bel Air, holding a .38 in his hand. The rest is, of course, history, and if this were a movie, you'd have to film it in John Woo slow motion. Shot at twenty-seven times—what a Dominican number ... De la Maza, perhaps thinking of his poor, dead, set-up brother, then took Trujillo's .38 out of his dead hand and shot Trujillo in the face and uttered his now famous words: Este guaraguao ya no comerá más pollito. And then the assassins stashed El Jefe's body—where? In the trunk, of course.

And thus passed Old Fuckface. And thus passed the Era of Trujillo (sort of). I've been to the neck of the road where he was gunned down many many times. Nothing to report except that the guagua from Haina almost always runs my ass over every time I cross the highway. For a while, I hear, that stretch was the haunt of what El Jefe worried about the most: los maricones (Díaz 154-155).

The dictator's death happens only as a footnote, full of conjecture, gossipy diction, pop references, and slang. As Harford Vargas writes, Trujillo becomes a caricature in a depiction of life under his own regime. Yunior performs an anti-eulogy compounded an epilogue: "And thus passed old Fuckface," which ends with the poetic justice of Trujillo's death site becoming nothing of note and, potentially, a cruising site for gay men. As a homophobic, racist, powerful dictator, ending Trujillo's narrative in a footnote solidifies the poetic justice of his marginalization in the novel. On the following page, Díaz places a footnote with a quote from *The Return of the King*, which describes the moment that Mordor falls. As if the narrative were too big for journalistic, historical, or academic references. Stranger than fiction, this type of downfall had to be expressed as something from out of a fantasy novel.

Not to paint a purely painful existence in the novel, Díaz shifts to more playful footnotes that engage with popular culture. The one below, for example, shows Yunior's (and/or Díaz's) musings about the writing process and fact checking.

For Eden it was, a blessed meridian where mar and sol and green have forged their union and produced a stubborn people that no amount of highfalutin prose can generalize. [17]

[17] In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraphs of chapter one, "GhettoNerd at the End of the World") wasn't popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn't change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me! (Díaz 132)

This instantly opens us to the diasporic gaps that occur in everyday life. Yunior (or Díaz) initially confuses two different places in the Dominican Republic. This also resists the idea that descent translates to flawless knowledge, that that contact is somehow hereditary. Yunior (and/or Díaz) does not offer an encyclopedic knowledge of "all things Domo"—he knows what he knows, and that admission is made shamelessly, indicating that that is alright. This also demonstrates an oscillation to a kind of joyful expression with mentions of the "perrito," the common writer's decision to stick with a beloved idea ("just liked the image too much"), and "historians of popular dance, forgive me!" Part of the resistance to hegemonic characterizations is also the portrayal of joy in painful narratives regarding

marginalized voices. The resistance comes in the application of full spectra, which, incidentally, also puts in motion the creation of normalized diasporic space(s).

Diaspora as Device and Feature

“If you ask me if I am fluent in Spanish / I will tell you my Spanish is an itchy phantom limb / It is reaching for words and only finding air. [...] My Spanish is puzzle/ left in the rain / too soggy to make its parts fit together / to look like the picture on the box [...] My Spanish is understanding there are stories that will always be out of my reach.”

–Melissa Lozada-Oliva, “My Spanish”

The word “diaspora” comes from the Greek *διασπορά*, from the words *δια* meaning “across” and *σπορά* meaning “to scatter.” Diaspora is an inherently scattered experience; it requires the simultaneous inhabiting of disparate identities, though specific major elements may be constantly at odds. An individual is at once “foreign” and “domestic,” both and neither, even though that technically makes no sense. To live with diaspora is to inhabit a liminal space; it is to claim constant dispossession; it is to live in a constant state of loss; it is to be at once too much of something and too little of something else. No matter how we live, we always erase some part of ourselves and grieve that loss. Even if an individual chooses to exit this liminality, to fully assimilate, and to solely inhabit their domestic national (and associated cultural) identity, this decision still requires constant engagement with their other identity/ies, even if that engagement takes the form of suppression. At the opposite end of the spectrum, if they grow up without exposure to their non-domestic identity/ies, the trauma still exists as suppression, forgetting, or feeling incomplete. This can happen in a number of ways. Sometimes, a child is adopted internationally and their adoptive parents do not engage with the culture(s) from which the child came. Sometimes, immigrant parents will raise their children as fully assimilated individuals in the hopes that this will give them more opportunities. Sometimes, the non-domestic identity/ies falls away over the course of generations and all that remains are food, place names, and certain habits, such as removing shoes before entering the home. This is diaspora’s fundamental trauma: inescapable liminality. A large part of this trauma lies in the neocolonialist White-centric definition(s) of national identity in Western countries, even in those countries that sprang from immigration.

In the novel, diaspora exists as both structure (form) and feature (content), a detail that complicates the task of unpacking it. Diasporic identity is defined by constant shifts. This is where heteroglossia and oscillation enter the picture. Through the novel’s oscillations between time(s), space(s), language(s), and generations, Díaz re-creates diaspora, its brokenness, and its trauma. Beyond the shifts, specific aspects also convey everyday manifestations of diasporic trauma, such as the types of mixed references and language morphs. The combined use of diaspora in style and content, then, function together to reinforce its permeative nature. This is almost as much for readers outside of diaspora as it is for those within it, though we understand that Afro-Latino/a diasporic readers constitute Díaz’s privileged audience. Furthermore, by assigning the oscillations evenly between the novel’s various aspects, Díaz illustrates the expansiveness of that trauma. Diaspora is not contained to any one timeline, generation, or part of life; like dye in water, diaspora bleeds into everything, even long after the moment of first

contact. This method of expansive oscillatory illustration pulls us into the collective memory of national trauma mediated by the characters' memories. At once, the novel cultivates both distant and personal perspectives, further reinforcing the system of spectra (via oscillations) rather than hegemonic dialectics. These oscillations allow the reader to participate in something that would otherwise be impossible to witness. Consequently, this creates the foundation for emotional connection, even for readers whose backgrounds do not intersect with diaspora. Through the ability to bear witness to the diaspora in the novel, we understand the ways in which that trauma interacts with different life aspects: language, socio-economic status, education, gender, skin color (colorism), and love (of self and others). However, these are just examples and by no means a complete list.

Much of the characters' identities exists in their language, their diction, their expressed frames of reference, and so on. The shifts between English, Spanish, and modes of speech within those languages also engage the concept of Englishes. World Englishes, a term coined by Braj Kachru, denotes the widely used variations of English spoken around the world. To declare *one* English, the variant shaped and practiced by the hegemony, as the neutral standard ignores the 67 sovereign countries and 27 non-sovereign entities who claim it as an official national language ("Countries with English as an Official Language and the Language of Instruction in Higher Education"). Furthermore, this de-legitimizes, if not erases the experiences and expression of immigrants and People of Color by forcibly centralizing upper class whiteness and branding it as the only legitimate English (Kachru 178–205). In a similar vein, Bakhtin maintains that standard language is more invention than fact, a device that reflects hegemonic control over accepted modes of expression.

Language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups of in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth, all given a bodily form. These "languages" of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying "languages" (Bakhtin 291).

For all these reasons, I refer to these variations of English as Englishes—languages in their own right—so as to properly acknowledge the breadth and variety vernaculars within it the English language. Similarly, Spanishes in Latin America can vary widely, and the Spanish spoken in the United States reflects a mixing of these. In an interview with Karen Cresci at *The Buenos Aires Review* on this very topic, Junot Díaz states, "We also have to understand that en los Estados Unidos we have a Spanish that is deeply affected by each other's Spanishes. That un dominicano puede usar palabras mejicanas, palabras cubanas, palabras boricuas. It was important to have that kind of flexibility."⁶ As John M. Lipski of the University of Pennsylvania states, "This situation is truly unusual: in no other

⁶ Author's translation. "We also have to understand that in the United States, we have a Spanish that is deeply affected by each other's Spanishes. That a Dominican person can use Mexican words, Cuban words, Puerto Rican words. It was important to have that kind of flexibility."

part of the world is a population of 40 million human beings who speak the same language reduced to a linguistic colophon without being considered its own dialectology.”⁷⁷ This move re-marginalizes a colossal group of people by removing recognition of their existence in this way.

The novel’s questioning and critical re-centering of what constitutes “standard” expression among shifts in perspective, slang, genre, and setting indicates the shift in value systems underlying the decolonized chronotope of the novel while. The shifts also position the text around a historiography according to an Afro-Latino/a (more specifically, an Afro-Caribbean) diasporic experience. Arguably, this carries significance even for those outside of African diaspora, as the diasporas of the world carry common threads, chief among them a collective trauma that forces enormous shifts in language, value systems, opportunities, and general quality of life. This re-centering of perspective resists colonialist narratives about marginalized difference. These oscillations exemplify the novel’s exploration of diaspora, of liminality. As Glenda Carpio states, “Díaz, writing in an English comingled with Spanish, with a ‘strong tone of Negro American,’ explores the cross-cultural alliances that illuminate not only the African retentions shared across the diaspora but also the linguistic homelessness and creativity that are part of not belonging to English and yet belonging nowhere else” (Hanna et al 266-67). This turns the discourse in Díaz’s novel from black and brown bodies for consumption to black and brown lives understood through black and brown lenses. Here, Díaz takes the nearly universal experience of rejection by childhood crushes and applies it to Oscar’s character, a move that conveys a claiming of humanity for black and brown bodies. (In this case, the girls are actually Oscar’s girlfriends who ask him to choose one and dump the other. He is quickly dumped by both.)

Oscar went home morose to his pre-Korean-sweatshop-era cartoons—to the *Herculoids* and *Space Ghost*. What’s wrong with you? his mother asked. She was getting ready to go to her second job, the eczema on her hands looking like a messy meal that had set. When Oscar whimpered, Girls, Moms de León 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 the little puta respects you.

It seemed to Oscar that from the moment Maritza dumped him—Shazam!—his life started going down the tubes. Over the next couple years, he grew fatter and fatter. Every adolescence hit him especially hard, scrambling his face into nothing you could call cute, splotching his skin with zits, making him self-conscious; and his interest—in Genres!—which nobody had said boo about before, suddenly became synonymous with being a loser with a capital L (Díaz 14–16).

This excerpt demonstrates many of the novel’s oscillations between genres, registers, languages, and accents. Notably, this begins with a statement of possession expressed casually. The *Herculoids* and *Space Ghost* are “his pre-Korean-sweatshop-era cartoons.” Typically thought of in discourse as the

⁷⁷ Author’s translation. Originally: “Esta situación es verdaderamente insólita: en ninguna otra parte del mundo una población de 40 millones de seres humanos que hablan la misma lengua se ve reducida a un colofón lingüístico sin una dialectología propia.”

territory of White demographics, the text claims them for a Dominican American child. This move in itself subverts the borders around Oscar's Dominican and U.S. identities. Here, these shows (and the culture[s] with which they are associated) definitively belong to him, though this claim does not express an exclusive stance. Oscar's relationship to nerd culture and cartoons is not meant to prevent more groups from laying claim to it. It simply argues that Oscar has claim, *too*. This move subverts hegemonic concepts of dominance and ownership. Additionally, this phrase acknowledges the existence of Koreans in same general era and space, even though the narrative focuses on Dominican American characters. This resists the divisions between minorities in discourse.

We move on to a cursory description of Oscar's mother Belicia. Here, the text presents her as just a regular person going to her second job. Without pained language, without providing further information about it, this becomes just a part of the scene rather than a "big deal." By denying the expectation to dramatize her second job and socio-economic status, Díaz normalizes it as another detail in the novel. Furthermore, Díaz chooses to express the question "Tú ta llorando por una muchacha?" with Belicia's Dominican accent (instead of the standard Spanish "Tú *está* llorando por una muchacha?"). Combined with the lack of inverted question mark, ¿, this denotes a polyglossic fluidity, a Spanglishness that points to an everyday aspect of diaspora. Thinking without the inverted question mark is significant; its absence exemplifies the kind of diasporic language blending that occurs as much in the mind as in verbalized practice. The passage dives into further iterations of Spanglish in Lola's line ("Mami, stop it[!]") and in Belicia's line ("see if the little puta respects you.") The text does not italicize the Spanish or mark it in any way. The transitions between languages are equally unmarked. The casual scenario itself—a little boy crying to his mother about a crush—balances any aspects that might otherwise fling it into otherness for some readers. The decolonization of this segment is rooted, again, in normalization and casual depiction.

The constant oscillations also allow Díaz to circumvent the trap of solely focusing on identity politics, a reductive practice that often renders character development secondary to race. As a secondary critique, this move resists a "universal" written voice. The narrator's speech patterns and general style exemplify his multiple cultural identities: New Jersey; the Dominican Republic; his socio-economic class (affected greatly by both of the above categories); his relationship with masculinity/ies. Yuni's own diction carries the same weight as the standard literary language of Díaz's authorial voice, evidenced by their unmarked intermingling. Even the title of the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* conveys this resistance through oscillations between standard literary language and implicit claiming of "Oscar Wilde" (high culture) through the Spanglising of Oscar Wao. The combining of high and low culture also exists in the express focus on a young, poor Dominican American boy from New Jersey. Additionally, Oscar (whose actual last name is de León) actually despises the nickname, which was intended to mock him for his nerdy proclivities and Oscar Wilde Halloween costume. In the title, Oscar

is both present and ignored, as he has no control over his ultimate presentation. This mirrors the lack of control that marginalized voices often have over their own representations, particularly in works that focus on them.

The oscillations also map out some of the effects of diasporic trauma on language. Diasporic language shifts can take numerous forms. Adaptations in the form of modified grammar, mixed vocabulary, and accents are common. As markers of one's origins and/or socio-economic position, these can have an othering effect. In some cases, over time, whole languages can develop, such as Caribbean Creole. For example, the word for a young child is "pickney," derived from the Portuguese "pequeno," meaning "small" ("Minority Ethnic English: Caribbean English"). In the United States, the term Ebonics has existed since 1973 to describe the particular speech patterns and word choices found in U.S. Black culture. The concept of there being another English in the United States actually existed before—Ebonics was previously called "Nonstandard Negro English" in the 1960s (Rickford). The categorical silencing and devaluing of voices using "non-standard" language clearly harbors some colonial roots. The novel's liminality allows it to not only embrace types of language that typically marginalizes its speakers but to render those equal to standard literary language, thereby reflecting the work of the decolonial imagination present in diasporic expression.

Concluding Remarks

The novel's particular brand of decoloniality manifests in the exploration of the nature of liminality, viewing identity as a series of nebulous constellations of intersections. The text identifies connections between disparate subjects and creates networks, even for systems of oppression, indicating a critique not just of the hegemonic value system but the underlying interconnected structures of oppression that historically have made it possible and that continue to support it. The nuanced, open-ended crafting of the novel's marginalized voices conveys the kind of decolonial (self-)love necessary to resist the hegemonic wish-image (Hanna et al 321-323). This decolonial love constitutes a radical act, as it refuses the system(s) that would devalue the things upon which that decolonial love is based.

This re-centering of traditionally marginalized voices occurs in a normalized fashion, resisting the othering so common to these types of narratives. Unmarked oscillations facilitate this critical re-centering, spanning wide spectra of language, emotion, time, space, references, and genres that exemplify decolonized diasporic expression. This allows for the simultaneous perceived otherness (according to the hegemonic value system) and perceived normalcy (created by the novel's diction). Here, Whiteness becomes the de-centralized, if not an afterthought. This deliberately oscillatory approach creates equivalence between perspectives. The characters themselves embody many of the oscillations that occur in the diction. They refuse easy categorization. Díaz crafts individuals who represent themselves rather than the monolith of Afro-Latinidad, thereby producing both resistance to hegemonic valuation and a space for marginalized voices. Additionally, by allowing the reader to participate as a witness, they can form attachments to these characters (by seeing their development and understanding their backgrounds). In this particular climate, apathy feels strange. The text makes plain to the reader that caring about them also means caring about the issues that affect them, generating critical empathy.

The oscillations also create the novel's own particular networks of discourse, "transcend[ing] a variety of personal, geographic, and discursive borders" (Quintana 724). The book is in itself discursive, especially in its treatment of the title character. Oscar is the novel's subject but never its voice. His voice is never in the narratorial voice, though it is often quoted. Rather, the novel focuses on how he is perceived, his backstory, how he affects those around him, and how others affect him. In this way, Díaz resists reductive systems and presents descriptions as perception rather than as objective information. In other words, the text is not after some truth about Oscar. It is, rather, about how the interactions between his identities and his environments shaped him and brought about his eventual death. In other words, the focus is on what his character reveals about the world around him.

However, the reported information in the novel does not carry the full weight of the decolonized chronotope. Part of the novel's exploration of liminality includes the negative space of gaps, silence, and agnosis, "deconstruct[ing] conventional historical methodology, illuminating the way that historiography constructs meaning through silences and/or omissions" (Quintana 724). This points not just to the importance of what information gets said but what gets silenced. The author does not pursue answers but instead acts as a "Watcher" (knowledge-gathering alien observers of the Marvel universe), presenting collected information and, at times, outright asking us to form our own conclusions. As Yuniors describes in one of his many admissions of agnosis, "I'll give you what I've managed to unearth and the rest will have to wait for the day the páginas en blanco finally speak" (Díaz 119).

The novel carries hegemonic approval (The Pulitzer Prize, John Sargent, Sr. First Novel Prize, *New York Times* Best Seller, Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction). However, the work still resists hegemonic valuation with the decolonized engagement with oscillations, constellatory liminality, and the lack of reliance on a hegemonic value system demonstrated by the re-centering and normalization of People of Color and historiography in relation to them. The nebulous liminality allows readers to draw from it what they will, be it entertainment, emotional connection, political resistance—the list goes on. Though the New Jerseyan Afro-Latino/a diasporic audience clearly forms the privileged audience, the liminality gives it a flexibility that opens to many more. Readers with various diasporic backgrounds, readers who are marginalized systemically, or even readers who feel like outsiders in other ways can establish a connection. Like the many comic books that the novel references, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reaches out to those misfit parts of us. It is, at its core, a work of unification, a decolonial love letter.

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