



4. Capturing Berserkería and Amor: Untranslatability and code-switching in Junot Díaz's *This Is How You Lose Her*

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Abstract In this chapter, I analyze the code-switching between English and Spanish in Junot Díaz's 2012 short story collection *This Is How You Lose Her* alongside Emily Apter's (2013) concept of the *untranslatable*. I argue that these two approaches are comparable both in their attention to individual words and phrases and in their carving out of a highly site-specific kind of (comparative) literature. In their attention to global trajectories and to the ways these trajectories can be mirrored in a single untranslated word, they gesture toward a multivocality which resists "neo-imperialist cartographies".

Keywords code-switching | untranslatable | Apter | Díaz | World Literature

INTRODUCTION¹

Junot Díaz, who was born in the Dominican Republic in 1968 and migrated to the United States as a child, has published two short story collections, *Drown* in 1996 and *This Is How You Lose Her* in 2012, as well as one novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2008.² While all of his fiction is written in English, Spanish plays a prominent role, as he injects Spanish words, phrases, and whole sentences into his prose, in most cases without italicizing or translating them. Much of what has been published about Díaz is about him as a decolonial writer, as demonstrated by the 2016 publication

1 I would like to thank Patrick Durdell for his help on several drafts of this chapter.

2 In 2018, he also published a children's picture book, *Islandborn*.

of the edited volume *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination* (Hanna et al., 2016b), and some writing has focused on his use of code-switching.

Drawing on these previous studies on code-switching in Díaz's body of work, I will be analyzing the Spanish in Junot Díaz's fiction in conjunction with Emily Apter's concept of *untranslatability*. Apter has written about what successful practices of translation and of comparative literature look like, and discusses what can be gained from their overlap. Both when dealing with translations and when carving out a future for the discipline of comparative literature, we need "an approach to globality that fully activates the Untranslatable" (Apter, 2013, p. 38). And activate the untranslatable Díaz does. Díaz is not a scholar or a translator, and his and Apter's works differ in genre, readership, and style. But I would argue that it is precisely the job of comparative literature – that discipline which has as its focus the comparison of literature from different epochs, cultural realms, and languages, as well as comparing literature to other art forms – to also compare across the divide between fiction and theory. As I hope will become clear over the course of my analysis, this divide is not as pronounced as it may appear. While it is generally acknowledged that theory can be used to illuminate literature, such as using Apter's work to analyze that of Díaz, I suggest that this can be a two-way street: Díaz, too, can be used to illuminate Apter's points.

Apter's 2013 work is an attempt to make "comparative literature geopolitically case-sensitive and site-specific in ways that avoid reproducing neo-imperialist cartographies" (p. 42). Díaz, meanwhile, insists both that some things are untranslatable and that this is a valid, potent, and indeed normal state of affairs. He does so through the untranslated terms in his books, through the way he speaks in interviews, and through the views he expresses. In a 2008 interview, he explains that, "Since I can remember, English was present in my Spanish. And clearly Spanish was always present in my English. It may have taken me a while to systemize this at the level of narrative. But the technique, the mixture, has always been within me" (O'Rourke, 2008). He goes so far as to say that he approaches both languages from the outside, saying "I'm as much an immigrant to Spanish as I am to English" (Cresci, 2013) and frequently code-switches, saying things like "Qué irony." (Moya, 2016b, p. 392). By including Spanish words in his majority-English texts, Díaz both creates and recreates this linguistic mixture. In doing so, he is not only mirroring how he himself speaks; he is also suggesting that this act of non-translation is necessary – that these words need to be rendered in Spanish since something would be lost if they were translated into English – and that code-switching is a linguistic, socioeconomic, and "racial reality" (Moya, 2016b, p. 395) in the communities Díaz is depicting. Lastly, on an even grander scale, the coexistence of Spanish and Eng-

lish in Díaz's work points to the fact that "it is in fact monolingualism which is the global exception rather than the rule" (Gardner-Chloros & Weston, 2015, p. 184).

Besides code-switching, there are other ways this phenomenon of mixing languages and alternating between them has been problematized. One such related term is *translanguaging*. As Mi Sun Park (2013) writes:

Translanguaging is similar to code-switching in that it refers to multilingual speakers' shuttling between languages in a natural manner. However, it started as a pedagogical practice, where the language mode of input and output in Welsh bilingual classrooms was deliberately switched. (p. 50)

Translanguaging has, in recent years, also migrated into spaces other than the bilingual classroom. Manuela Guilherme (2019), for example, describes how "Translanguaging [...] highlights the creative potential of 'language' use, in the context of linguistic diversity, without being attached to codes, that is, 'language' without 'languages,' an explosion of linguistic swirls" (p. 50).

While translanguaging could thus also prove useful for a discussion of literature, I find the concept of code-switching particularly meaningful in my engagement with Díaz's work. Using that specific term and analytical perspective makes it possible to add to the discussion around code-switching that people like Cecilia Montes-Alcalá have created both around Díaz and in the wider context of U.S. Latinx literature. Lourdes Torres (2007), writing about code-switching, describes U.S. Latinx literature as "an example of a contact zone where English and Spanish confront each other and comfortably or uncomfortably coexist" (p. 92). By using the term *code-switching*, I can both contribute to that discourse and show ways in which my own analysis is indebted to it.

I will now give an overview of Apter's work on untranslatability before moving on to examine Díaz's code-switching from different angles: Firstly, I will analyze how it intersects with the text's sexualization (and simultaneous subversion of sexualization) of its female characters. Secondly, how it can be seen as an attempt to decolonize Dominicanidad. And thirdly, how it creates a partial, layered understanding for the reader of the text. All these aspects are part of the two levels of untranslatability in the text: the level of individual words and phrases in Spanish and the level of these characters' particular, post-migrant, lived realities. It is the first level which creates the latter, thus rendering the characters' lives, shaped as they are by questions of language and belonging, intelligible to the reader. In the end, I hope to have shown that Apter's untranslatability and Díaz's code-switching are related in their effort to carve out the particularity of linguistic realities found

in geographical settings, in individuals' lives, and in particular words. Their two projects, while different in their realization and their focus, both pay attention to global trajectories and to the ways these trajectories can be mirrored in a single untranslated word. They thus act in tandem, and one can be used to illuminate the other.

APTER'S UNTRANSLATABILITY

Emily Apter opens her 2006 book *The Translation Zone* with a list of twenty theses on translation, among them: "Nothing is translatable", "Translation is an oedipal assault on the mother tongue", "Translation is the traumatic loss of native language", "Translation is plurilingual and postmedial expressionism" and "Everything is translatable" (pp. xi–xii). The title of the book refers to "a field in which philology is linked to globalization, to Guantánamo Bay, to war and peace, to the Internet and 'Netlish,' and to 'other Englishes' spoken worldwide" (Apter, 2006, p. 11). This assemblage of rules shows the breadth of the theoretical reach for which Apter is advocating and which is characteristic of her own work, her ease with contradictions, and her awareness of the multifariousness to be found within a single language such as English. But what she is getting at here is, first and foremost, the disquieting pull between the inadequacy of translation on the one hand and its necessity on the other hand, seeing as scholars of comparative literature need translation unless they are content to work exclusively on literature written in languages they can read. Additionally, in sentences like, "The challenge of Comp Lit is to balance the singularity of untranslatable alterity against the need to translate *quand même*", (Apter, 2006, p. 91), Apter is playful about that which is untranslated in her own writing, making her an accomplice of Díaz not just in her theoretical convictions but even in the style of her prose.

In her more recent book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, Apter (2013) returns to the question of translation, but this time she focuses her gaze on that which she wants translation to leave out, or in the very least to approach carefully: the untranslatable. She argues that "[t]here is a quality of militant semiotic intransigence attached to the Untranslatable, making it more than just a garden-variety keyword" (p. 34). One group of words which falls into this category is words which encompass, though this may not be apparent, philosophical concepts, such as the Russian "*правда*" /pravda/. Though this word has often been translated as 'truth' without much ado, there is much that such a translation leaves out: the fact that *Pravda* was the name of the USSR's government-controlled newspaper, and as such has gained connotations of "that which is philosophically

off-limits in its home country” (Apter, 2013, p. 34); as well as its history as the antonym of *slovo*, which leads to *pravda* connoting “‘word,’ ‘discourse,’ ‘logos,’ and linguistically embodied rationalism” (Apter, 2013, p. 34). As in *The Translation Zone*, such minute considerations lead Apter to far more sweeping claims about the entrenchment of translation in nation states and globality. The discipline of comparative literature, she writes, has to be diligent about these categories and their implications, so that it may become capable of a “kind of socioeconomic mapping” (Apter, 2013, p. 40). When Apter writes that “[e]ven the term ‘translation,’ which in a sense signifies language in a state of non-belonging, or nationalism degree zero, is nationally marked” (Apter, 2013, p. 36), she subverts the assumption that translation (which is often understood to hint at assimilation, sameness, intelligibility) is a marker of belonging. Rather, she links translation to a non-belonging, and we can go one step further and link non-translation, such as it happens in Díaz’s texts, to a certain kind of belonging, too.

GLOSSARIES AND THEIR ABSENCE

While *This Is How You Lose Her* (Díaz, 2012) includes neither translations nor a glossary, this was not the case in Díaz’s earlier work. His first short story collection, *Drown*, published in 1996, includes a two-page glossary at the end, in which Díaz explains some, but not all, Spanish terms used in the stories. Since these are written not just in an informative tone, but in his signature voice – for example, *fulano* is explained as “Tom, Dick and Harry all balled into one” (Díaz, 1996, p. 165) – the glossary feels like an extension of the literary text of his book. In his next work, the novel *Oscar Wao*, there is no glossary. The novel is, however, littered with footnotes, some of which explain the Spanish words used. While it may seem like a progression or gradual change on the part of Díaz – that he included a glossary in his first work of fiction, footnotes in the second, and then no translation at all in his third, the Spanish thus becoming less and less marked and translated – it was, at least in part, the publisher’s decision to add these paratexts. The glossary was “[a]dded at the insistence of his publisher”, reports the *Financial Times*, noting Díaz’s “annoyance at the inclusion of the glossary in *Drown*” (McDermott, 2014).

This points us to several things: Firstly, that we often cannot disentangle the author’s and the publisher’s wishes, especially when it comes to paratext. And, secondly, that this fiction is a product not just of Díaz, and not just of his publisher, but of the literary marketplace more widely. In her book *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies*, Mimi Sheller (2003) outlines some of the ways the Caribbean has been consumed by the Global North. Her far-ranging analysis,

which includes foodstuffs, sex tourism, and medical experiments, also touches upon literature. Drawing on bell hooks, Sheller argues that, “Ultimately Caribbean literature [...] becomes a commodity valued for its ‘flavour’ while the first-world subject is positioned and consolidated ‘as a consumer’” (p. 187). While I agree with Sheller’s insight that the U.S. literary marketplace is one sphere in which the Caribbean is first exoticized and then consumed, publishing houses also need to make Caribbean literature palatable in order to sell books; and it becomes palatable and intelligible when elements which are assumed to be foreign to an American audience are either translated or explained. There is therefore an interesting pull here, one in which literature needs to be consumable at the same time as it is foreign enough so that readers will want to consume it in the first place. While the latter market need makes room for Díaz’s untranslatables, the first one necessitates a kind of translation of those untranslatables. Apter’s keyword *site-specific* can help us here, as it can draw our attention not only to the lived realities of Díaz’s characters, but also to the specificity of the U.S. literary marketplace at the time of the publication of his books, a marketplace which is itself in flux.

The shift in Díaz’s intertextual self-translation can also be attributed to a publishing landscape in which multilingual, heteroglossic fiction is increasingly common and sought after – for example, Preti Taneja’s (2017) *We That Are Young* includes Hindi sentences, while Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2013) *Americanah* includes Igbo. This shift extends to American fiction by writers whose first language is Spanish. While earlier classics – such as Sandra Cisneros’ 1983 novel *The House on Mango Street* and Julia Alvarez’ 1991 novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* – only sparingly include words in Spanish, later U.S.-Latinx literature, such as Sandra Cisneros’ 2002 novel *Caramelo* and Eduardo C. Corral’s 2012 volume of poetry *Slow Lightning*, draw more heavily on Spanish. Even so, the verve with which Díaz employs multi-register code-switching remains the exception. The U.S. publishing landscape, then, has become increasingly accepting of, and welcoming to, fiction with untranslated elements. It is not just Díaz’s Dominican New Jersey but the U.S. publishing landscape which is a specific site reflected in the text, and which determines how specific aspects of characters’ lives are depicted.

INSTANCES OF SPANISH IN DÍAZ’S FICTION

In *This Is How You Lose Her*, all stories except one are narrated by Yunió, who is also their protagonist. One way of grouping together different instances of Spanish is by distinguishing between Spanish that is a direct quote – that is, Spanish that is commonly used by everyone in Yunió’s “nabe” (short for ‘neighborhood’) – and

Spanish that Yunior as a narrator chooses for the stories. There are clear quotations such as:

They beat the anti-Pura drums daily. Ella es prieta. Ella es fea. Ella dejó un hijo en Santo Domingo. Ella tiene otro aquí. No tiene hombre. No tiene dinero. No tiene papeles. Qué tú crees que ella busca por aquí? (Díaz, 2012, p. 104)

It is also possible to make out some terms which everyone in Yunior's community of Dominican-Americans uses and which are often intelligible to readers of English, such as terms for family members (*Mami, Papi, hijo*), terms of polite address (*Señora*) and words for the characters' Latin American places of origin (*ecuatoriana*). Instances of Spanish which fall outside these categories and which are therefore Yunior's own choice, such as in the passage where he states that Rafa's "swagger was more or less where it had been before the illness: a hundred percent loco" (p. 93), can be more difficult to classify: Is "loco" in this sentence Yunior's own linguistic contribution and a conscious choice? Or is there consensus on "loco" as an untranslatable in his linguistic community and someone else has used it to describe Rafa's swagger, making it a kind of quote? Considering such particular questions can make us more aware of the dynamics at work in a given situation, such as the dynamics that may have influenced Yunior's perception of Rafa. But ultimately, the different voices of Spanish come together to form Yunior's very distinctive narrative voice, in which he, the people whose lives he narrates and their shared experiences are intertwined and given a stage. I will now examine how the untranslatability of Spanish informs some key aspects of Díaz's text.

UNTRANSLATED SEXUALIZATION

One aspect of Yunior's distinctive narrative voice is the highly sexualized manner in which he describes women. Sometimes he does so using only English, as when he starts the short story "Alma" with the following sentence: "You, Yunior, have a girlfriend named Alma, who has a long tender horse neck and a big Dominican ass that seems to exist in a fourth dimension beyond jeans. An ass that could drag the moon out of orbit" (Díaz, 2012, p. 45). However, Díaz sometimes uses Spanish words to refer to women's body parts in sentences otherwise completely in English. This happens both when focusing in on sexualized body parts, as in the line, "M'ija has tetas now, the woman whispers to her neighbor" (p. 9), and when body parts stand in for supposedly annoying traits such as talkativeness, as in the line, "She's

a talker, a fucking boca” (p. 11).³ By rendering these body parts in Spanish, Díaz pronounces them even further than they would be through sexualization alone; the word seems to be as divorced from the sentence surrounding it as the body parts described are from the woman to whom they belong. Díaz has been criticized for this sexualizing aspect of his fiction. One example of this is Alicita Rodríguez’s satirical poem “How to Know You’re a Woman in a Junot Díaz Novel”. She writes:

There will be mention of your ass. Your big ass. An ass so big it could alter the movement of the planets. / Sometimes it might be called your *culo*, which makes it more exotic [...] / But you will be punished for your power by being called puerca instead of Paula, fea instead of Felicia, and sucia instead of Sofia. (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 80)

Despite the legitimacy of such complaints, Díaz’s focus on female bodies is not as straightforward as it first appears, and he subverts the sexualization of women at the same time as he seems to partake of it. When Yuniór calls his girlfriend “a talker, a fucking boca” (p. 11), he is describing his sadness at her having lost that trait, at no longer talking to him as freely as she used to. And the woman Yuniór quotes as saying “M’ija has tetas now” (p. 9) is traveling from the U.S. to the Dominican Republic to see her daughter for the first time since she was a child, excited to see her all grown up. That the woman would choose “tetas” as proof that her daughter is now a woman speaks to the physical and sexualized way society charts a girl’s progression to womanhood; a mechanism so thoroughly embedded and normalized that it takes Díaz’s inclusion of this line, with the forcefulness of the body part untranslated and divorced from the rest of the person, to put it into relief. The untranslated word here, then, has the function of rendering visible; namely, of rendering visible the routine ways in which women are often depicted even in representations less overtly sexual than Díaz’s.

3 In 2018, multiple women raised allegations of verbal abuse and sexual misconduct against Junot Díaz. I find it important to acknowledge and believe these allegations. The question they raise is whether we should continue giving academic legitimacy to Díaz by working on him. While I cannot answer this question for anyone else, I have decided to continue working on Díaz because, I would argue, he subverts patriarchic norms and notions at the same time as it seems he has wielded them against others. Reading his fiction *alongside* the allegations, then, can arguably engender a fruitful debate about cycles of misogyny and their repercussions both in fiction and in life.

YUNIOR'S SPANISH AS DECOLONIZING DOMINICANIDAD

In non-mainstream U.S. publishing, there were code-switching precursors at earlier points in time. In her 1987 code-switching book of semi-autobiographical critical theory, *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa writes in a mix of different registers of English and Spanish: “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (p. 3). What unites these code-switching texts veering between English and Spanish is that they have been concerned with the position of Spanish in the context of maintaining Latinidad in the U.S.,⁴ a relationship that is constantly being navigated in *This Is How You Lose Her*, where the focus is on Dominicanidad. As in the texts of some Latinx writers before him, Díaz’s code-switching disputes the notion of Spanish as a minority language in the U.S. “Spanish is not a minority language. [...] Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world inside my head. So why treat it like one?” (Díaz quoted in Carpio, 2016, p. 266). What makes the situation more complex is that Spanish, too, is a colonial language which was brutally enforced. Rather than lessening the impact, this colonial history of the language arguably means that using Spanish becomes an even more pronounced decolonizing move, as it hints at past colonial struggles while arguing that the current fate of Dominican immigrants in New Jersey bears some similarity.

Another connection between past colonialism and present marginality can be found in the dichotomies of linguistic purity characters impose on one another. Díaz’s code-switching questions the dichotomy between Dominican immigrants who speak perfect Spanish and the ones who, because they lack perfect Spanish, are not seen as Dominican. In Díaz’s New Jersey neighborhood of London Terrace, speaking Spanish is a prerequisite for being considered Dominican, even though many do not speak it well. In “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” Yunior is dating a recent female immigrant from the DR who is “always trying to prove you’re not Dominican. If I’m not Dominican then no one is, you shoot back, but she laughs at that. Say that in Spanish, she challenges and of course you can’t” (Díaz, 2012, p. 193). Here, it becomes clear that masculinity and Dominicanidad, for Yunior, are linked: doubts about the former are seen as threats to the latter.

For Yunior, who is “neither black nor white, neither American nor Dominican, neither Spanish-speaking nor English-speaking” (Moya, 2016a, p. 248), his poor Spanish is a “fissure through which he loses his Dominicanidad” (Irizarry, 2016,

4 See also: “Latino authors negotiate their relationships to homelands, languages, and transnational identifications through the inclusion of Spanish in their works (ranging from a few words to a full-fledged bilingual text)” (Montes-Alcalá, 2015).

p. 164), but it also explains his style of code-switching. The Spanish in which Yuniór narrates is not pointing toward a “pure” Spanish without intermingled English; that kind of Spanish is as absent from his life as “pure” English is from *This Is How You Lose Her*. In their introduction to *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, Hanna et al. (2016a) write of Díaz’s “creolized vernacular, equal parts urban and island slang, that moves seamlessly between English and Spanish” (p. 3). In the case of Yuniór, the English and Spanish that the language of his narration moves between are not monolithic entities that can be disentangled; they are, and have to be, part of the same geographical place in New Jersey and part of the same sentence.

Everyone speaking Spanish in the stories is aware of how this configures them socially and racially, cementing their ties to the DR and making them a community, a “London Terrace multiverse” (Saldívar, 2016, p. 334). But for people who have spent the majority of their life in the U.S., speaking Spanish can also demand an effort, and speaking it to someone else therefore communicates several things: Firstly, in speaking Spanish to someone, the characters acknowledge that the other person has the right to lay claim to the same heritage they do. And secondly, it means that they are willing to put in the effort to speak a language they might struggle with after years in the U.S. Therefore, when a letter proving Yuniór’s infidelity toward his girlfriend Magda turns up and Magda’s father tells him “You no deserve I speak to you in Spanish” (Díaz, 2012, p. 4), this is both a sign of lack of personal respect and an expulsion from the Dominican community.

THE READER: PARTLY UNDERSTANDING

In her article “Now Check It: Junot Díaz’s Wondrous Spanish”, Glenda Carpio (2016) argues that “Díaz’s ‘bilingualism’ [...] aggressively shifts the power balance away from monolingual readers” (p. 272). If Díaz wrote about the Latinx community without using Spanish terms, or followed them up with translations, he would be adjusting to the monolingual expectations of the reader, thereby eliding or con-torting his characters’ daily linguistic navigations. Instead, the reader has to adjust to Yuniór’s bilingual reality. Similarly, in her paper “Radical Code-Switching in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,” Eugenia Casielles-Súarez (2013) coins the term *radical code-switching* to describe Díaz’s way of using Spanish in his work. According to her, his code-switching is radical because “the quantity and quality of the Spanish words and phrases which are constantly inserted in English sentences create hybrid phrases with the result that rather than alternating with English, Spanish becomes part of English” (p. 477). This new, Spanish-infused English serves to “prioritize the bilingual reader and may cause instances of discomfort or

annoyance to the monolingual reader” (Casielles-Suárez, 2013, p. 476). It is certainly the case that Díaz does not pander to a monolingual reader. Many of the terms he uses are not readily comprehensible to a non-Spanish speaker, and sentences like “This is the endgame, and instead of pulling out all the stops, instead of pongándome más chivo que un chivo, I’m feeling sorry for myself, como un parigüayo sin suerte” (Díaz, 2012, pp. 21–22). While a bilingual reader will be able to understand all the words in this sentence, a monolingual reader, too, gleans some understanding from the Spanish passages. Apter’s assertion that there is an “effect of the non-carry-over (of meaning) that carries over nonetheless (on the back of grammar), or that transmits at a half-crooked semantic angle” (Apter, 2013, p. 35) holds true here. Though the monolingual reader does not understand every single word, those un-comprehended words in Spanish are not just a blank; they, too, contribute to a sense of understanding of the text. Just like Apter’s untranslatables, they are not void but their own carriers of meaning. They achieve this by three different ways: Firstly, by being an instance of code-switching, which means that what Yunió is expressing about the endgame and about his failure to pull out all the stops needs language beyond these words. Secondly, there is meaning inherent in the words being in Spanish, a language which Díaz uses to evoke a depth of emotion and ambivalence. The Spanish words the reader has been able to guess at so far resonate in the ones which remain obscure. Thirdly, a rhythm remains perceptible: the word “chivo” appears once and then another time, turning the non-understood sentence into a recognizable example of Yunió’s energetic style of narration. We know that what happened was too tragic to be adequately captured by the word “endgame,” but we also know it was not quite so tragic as to cancel out Yunió’s stylistic swagger and bravado.

It is impossible to picture a sentence like this one merely translated into English. Here we are dealing with not just one untranslatable word like *pravda*, but with an untranslatable sentence structure, and an untranslatable tug between the lack of lexical understanding and another understanding, one that may seem comparatively vague but which achieves the task of pulling us into Yunió’s emotional state and social reality. While a bilingual reader is therefore the only kind of reader capable of knowing what each and every word means, there is something to be said for the monolingual reader of Díaz’s texts. Whether Díaz intends his texts for a bilingual or a monolingual readership or both, the specific kind of understanding experienced by monolingual readers corroborates Díaz’s claim that a lack of understanding by some does not make a language marginal either “in this hemisphere” or “inside [his] head” (Carpio, 2016, p. 266), and Apter’s claim that translation may not always be the best way to carry over meaning.

These two insights – that different languages and language registers can and do exist side by side, and that understanding can happen even in and across lexical gaps – are further emphasized by the fact that Díaz does not just switch between English and Spanish, but between different registers within these languages. While some of the Spanish he uses will be intelligible to anyone with a knowledge of the language, he also uses highly distinctive Dominican slang terms such as “parigüayo,” which, according to a footnote in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, “is a corruption of the English neologism ‘party watcher.’ [...] The kid who don’t dance, who ain’t got game, who lets people clown him – he’s the parigüayo” (Díaz, 2007, p. 20). Díaz’s English, too, moves between different registers, most clearly between standard English, literary registers, and slangy, colloquial English. Additionally, Díaz switches between different pop cultural terrains, as the novel draws heavily on science fiction and comics. Rare is the reader who will understand every single reference. In fact, there is even an online resource, *The Annotated Oscar Wao: Notes and translations for The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz*, which aims to explain every reference made in the novel. The characters’ mobility between languages, registers, and ways of relating is thus one in which no single destination can ever be reached by all of them or shared by every reader; in which the untranslated and the untranslatable remain not only prominent and meaningful, but are indispensable to Díaz’s project of creating understanding in, through, and despite these gaps.

CONCLUSION

The characters in Díaz’s (2012) stories in *This Is How You Lose Her* linguistically navigate their geographic dislocation through code-switching; and for Apter (2013), too, untranslatables are linked to national dislocation (p. 34). In this chapter, I hope to have shown how the concept of untranslatability can be used to create the kind of comparative literature Apter is advocating for: one both cognizant of global trajectories and case-sensitive to the point of etymological considerations. The discipline can be thus reconfigured both through the works comparatists choose to study and through the ways in which they do so. Díaz makes tangible and understandable global trajectories between the Dominican Republic and the U.S., between Santo Domingo and New Jersey. He shows us one way in which these global trajectories can play out by focusing in on the details of how characters in one specific place, the neighborhood of London Terrace, speak to one another, and how a trajectory spanning different parts of the world is reflected in minute, site-specific, linguistic considerations. Meanwhile, in our study of comparative litera-

ture, we too can zoom in and out, and be cognizant both of the global trajectories which have informed the works we analyze and of the specific properties of those works. We can be conscious of how Díaz's fiction is situated within global trajectories between the Caribbean and continental North America, between English and Spanish, between the colonial past and the neocolonial present, and between different forces in the U.S. literary marketplace at a specific point in time. Paying attention to such large-scale processes and the way they are navigated discursively on the level of the text, however, does not preclude or render unimportant a close reading of certain individual words. Both Apter's and Díaz's works are located at this intersection of the expansive and the minute, and they both aim for a non-imperialist agenda through their focus on untranslatability. Díaz's work, then, lends itself to being analyzed alongside Apter, but it is easy to imagine how even works without interlingual code-switching would benefit from a reading emphasizing, as Apter calls it, the site-specific "*Realpolitik* of language conflict" (p. 43).

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