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## “Neither Here Nor There.” The Experience of Borderless Nation in Contemporary Dominican-American Literature

### Abstract

Discussing migrant identities, critics very often focus on the state in-between, the state between the borders, or being neither here nor there, and a migrant group that seems to epitomize this in-between condition is the Dominican-Americans. Consequently, the article seeks to examine the experience of in-betweenness, of being suspended between the boundaries and borders of two countries in selected texts of contemporary Dominican-American writers: Junot Díaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and a short story “Monstro,” and Angie Cruz’s *Soledad*. It aims to analyze how the texts discuss the experience of in-betweenness through hybridity (including intertextuality and magical realism) with the use of tools offered by the neo-baroque esthetics.

**Keywords:** Angie Cruz, Dominican-American literature, hybridity, in-betweenness, Junot Díaz, neobaroque.

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Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can; airports choke with the overdressed; necks and luggage carousels groan under the accumulated weight of that year's cadenas and paquetes, and pilots fear for their planes—overburdened beyond belief—and for themselves; restaurants, bars, clubs, theaters, malecones, beaches, resorts, hotels, moteles, extra rooms, barrios, colonias, campos, ingenios swarm with quisqueyanos from the world over. Like someone had sounded a general reverse evacuation order: Back home, everybody! Back home! From Washington Heights to Roma, from Perth Amboy to Tokyo, from Brijeporr to Amsterdam, from Lawrence to San Juan.

(*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*; Díaz, 2007, pp. 271–272)

The Dominican presence in the United States is fairly recent (post 1961, that is post-Trujillo) and considerably strong (it is estimated that as much as 9% of the population of the Dominican Republic reside in the United States).<sup>1</sup> According to critics, Dominicans constitute a successful group among migrants; they are very well adapted to the new conditions and, as claimed by Sagás and Molina (2004), “many never feel displaced from home because either ‘there’ or ‘here’ they have found a place similar to home with the language, music, consumer goods, and people with which they identify” (p. 9). The critics also claim that the proximity of the Dominican Republic enables the migrants to travel back and forth and maintain relations with their friends and family (Duany, 2011, p. 44). I would argue, however, that contrary to what is claimed by Sagás and Molina, migrants rooted in both countries instead of being at home in both places, do not belong fully to either of them; hence they are suspended between the two countries and occupy the liminal space. Consequently, this article aims to discuss the condition of in-betweenness in selected works by Dominican-American writers: Junot Díaz’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the short story “Monstro”<sup>2</sup> and Angie Cruz’s novel *Soledad*. All of them focus on the experiences of Dominican migrants in the United States and/or in the Dominican Republic.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* covers the lives of three generations of Cabral/de León family in the narration that shifts back and forth between past and present and between the Dominican Republic and the United States; the readers are introduced to the Dominican experiences of Oscar’s grandfather Abelard but they also learn about the contemporary (mostly)

<sup>1</sup> Depending on the source, the number of Dominicans in the United States varies from 800,000 (Duany, 2011, p. 29) to over 1,000,000 (Sagás & Molina, 2004, p. 10).

<sup>2</sup> The analysis of Junot Díaz’s texts is part of a bigger research project – a doctoral dissertation.

American lives of Oscar, his sister Lola, his friend Yuniór and their relatives. *Soledad*, in turn, concentrates on the return of the eponymous character to Washington Heights<sup>3</sup> in order to help cure her mother's coma-like condition. Further on it describes the characters' travel to the Dominican Republic to participate in a soul cleansing ritual. Finally, the science fiction short story "Monstro" depicts the narrator's holidays in his homeland, the Dominican Republic, that coincide with the outbreak of la negrura virus in Haiti. It discusses, among others, the experiences of the return, as well as the relationship between Haitians and the Dominicans.

The analysis of the texts adopts the neobaroque<sup>4</sup> perspective and focuses predominantly on hybridity. Neobaroque, central to the colonial experience (Egginton, 2010, p. 71), is a hybrid, a third quality, that emerged upon the encounter of the European baroque and the New World. Both Lezama Lima and Carpentier claim that the artists from the New World made the baroque "an instrument not of the Counter-Reformation but of *contraconquista* (counterconquest)" through the appropriation of the colonizer's art (Kaup, 2012, p. 5). Another theorist, Salgado (1999) depicted the process as "the survival of Otherness piggybacking on the unsuspecting signs of Empire" (p. 324). He further stated that "through hybridizing strategies, the colonial subject took advantage of baroque elements in the dominant discourse to create sites and terms for cultural resistance and survival" (p. 317).

Homi Bhabha, in turn, believes that hybridity is third space. In one of his seminal works he states the following:

All forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge . . . the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211)

Elsewhere he claims that the third space articulates cultural difference and "it is the 'inter' – the cutting-edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38). Hybridity then is directly linked with the idea of in-betweenness and it is also observed by Bowers (2004) for whom the in-betweenness is inherent in the mixture of two cultures, in the third space that is "constituted

<sup>3</sup> This neighborhood is recognized as typically Dominican American and has the largest population of Dominican migrants.

<sup>4</sup> The terms neobaroque, New World Baroque, and the baroque are overlapping; they focus on certain aesthetics rather than designate a given historical period. This paper uses the term neobaroque due to its comprehensiveness, focus on the hybrid and the Caribbean origin.

from neither one nor the other of the opposing world views, but from the creation of a third which gives equal credence to the influence of the other two” (Bowers, 2004, p. 83).

The in-betweenness has been also studied in the context of diasporic subjects. Homi Bhabha (1994), for instance, claims that the subjects’ simultaneous location in two places makes them unable to establish any fixed identity and consequently positions them in the space in-between (p. 127)<sup>5</sup>. Also Maria Antonia Oliver-Rotger (2015) observes that migrants are “[a]lways in between spaces and cultures that are mutually influencing and changing each other... always from elsewhere, and in a process of constant transformation, not fully belonging to their places of origin, nor to the new culture that fails to understand them” (pp. 16–17). Therefore, it may be concluded that the hybrid constructs imply the simultaneous belonging to both and unbelonging to either of the systems, which reflects the migrant condition.

The texts in question address the liminal position of the characters in a variety of ways. One of them can be found on the level of plot, since the stories introduce characters that somehow do not belong. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* presents Oscar who is rejected by both nations and whose experience is narrated as follows:

The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with in-human cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You’re not Dominican. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy. (Díaz, 2007, p. 49)

Also in the novel *Soledad*, the eponymous character does not identify with their community and considers being in Washington Heights hell and “a prison sentence” (Cruz, 2001, p. 13). Moreover, she perceives the return to the Dominican Republic as a punishment and recalls: “every time I stepped out of line my mother threatened to send me home. Home, República Dominicana home” (Cruz, 2001, p. 228). The Dominican Republic is perceived by the characters as a strange place that intensifies their experience of unbelonging. For example the narrator of the story “Monstro” confesses:

I knew nobody in the D.R. outside of my crazy cousins, and they didn’t like to do anything but watch the fights, play dominos and fuck. Which is fine for maybe a week – but for three months? No, hombre. I wasn’t *that* Island” (Díaz, 2012, p. 109).

The above quotes clearly demonstrate different aspects of unbelonging to different communities: the characters’ homeland, Dominican-American

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<sup>5</sup> Similar approaches can be found in Breytenbach’s idea of the “Middle World” and in Nestor García Canclini’s discussion of the spatiality of the city.

community, or the receiving country, and, consequently, they illustrate the state of in-betweenness. However, the condition of being in between is emphasized by the hybridizing strategies employed by the authors.

The texts offer a whole array of hybrid structures, yet the analysis will focus only on selected aspects. One of the first elements that contribute to hybridity is the language, and more precisely the introduction of Spanish lexical items. The presence of foreign language in a text written by minorities is not surprising though, since being immersed in two cultural codes, the migrants naturally use the elements of both languages. This incorporation is visible, for instance already in the title of Angie Cruz's novel – *Soledad* (loneliness, or solitude), which is the name of the main character. The deeper the reader enters the book, the more examples he/she encounters, and they include characters' names (Gorda, Flaca) and phrases imbedded in English sentences, such as "She tells people I was born con la pata caliente, feet burning to be anywhere but here" (Cruz, 2001, p. 11). Their frequency and subject matter differ among the texts, and also the strategies authors implement in dealing with the Spanish lexical items is not the same. The example taken from *Soledad* exhibits the strategy to explain the Spanish, while the majority of Spanish in Díaz's works is left unexplained, hence making the text not fully comprehensible to the readers.

However, the Spanish language is not the only "foreign" language in the texts; Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and "Monstro" are infused with swearwords, used freely throughout the whole text, for instance "Lola like the fucking opposite of the girls I usually macked on: bitch was almost six feet tall and no tetas at all and darker than your darkest grandma (Díaz, 2007, p. 168) or the fact that Trujillo is often referred to as Fuckface (pp. 2, 216). Yet another linguistic variety is the academic language, the employment of "huge-sounding nerd words like *indefatigable* and *ubiquitous* [Oscar] used a lot of when talking to niggers who would barely graduate from high school" (p. 22) and generally at school he uses an erudite vocabulary incomprehensible to his street friends, wearing "his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens" (p. 21).

The inclusion of Spanish lexical items mirrors the language used by the minorities, and the resulting hybridity is further intensified by the incorporation of different linguistic varieties. It should also be noted that it highlights the characters' exclusion from certain communities, thus stressing their in-between position. Finally, the readers' exclusion from the full understanding of the language enables them to experience the migrant condition.

The linguistic hybridity is not the only strategy offered by the texts, since also intertextualities, that is the incorporation of elements from outside

the frame of the text, can be considered a hybrid. In his discussion, Severo Sarduy (1972/2010) emphasizes its polyphonic character and describes intertextuality as the “network of connection, of successive filigrees whose graphic expression would be linear, two-dimensional, flat, but instead voluminous spatial and dynamic... [and] the mixture of genres, the intrusion of one type of discourse into another” (pp. 280–281). Ndalianis (2004) makes a similar observation in her analysis of the contemporary culture and claims that “[m]edia merge with media, genres unite to produce new hybrid forms, narratives open up and extend into new spatial and serial configurations” (pp. 2–3).

The texts discussed in this article display different manifestations of intertextuality. *Soledad*, for instance, combines regular narration with the dream narration of Soledad’s mother Olivia, which is distinguished from the rest of the text by the use of italics. In her narration, Olivia comments upon the events happening in her family’s life, for instance she evokes the death of her father:

My father died today. I remember when he used to say, Olivia, things don’t always happen the way we want them to, but when they do we should be grateful. He came to my bed and talked to me for a long time. He talked to me like he did when I was a child, when his voice was clear and melodic, his hair still dark, when he only had wrinkles round his eyes. (Cruz, 2001, p. 193)

Interestingly, despite her comatose-like condition, Olivia’s observations are sharp and capture the reality around her. What is more, the title of the novel bears some resemblance to the seminal *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) by Gabriel García Márquez, and there are also references to the mythical Pandora’s box, when Soledad opens a can containing a list of male names, thus bringing their spirits into the apartment. The second novel in question – *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* – offers a whole array of references on various planes as well. Already the title refers the readers to Ernest Hemingway’s short story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” and Oscar’s nickname is an allusion to Oscar Wilde. Oscar gained the nickname “Wao” when he dressed up as Doctor Who for one of the Halloween parties, yet to Yunior he looked like “that fat homo Oscar Wilde” (Díaz, 2007, p. 180). As the narrator recalls, it was

bad news for Oscar, because Melvin said, Oscar Wao, quién es Oscar Wao, and that was it, all of us started calling him that: Hey, Wao, what you doing? Wao, you want to get your feet off my chair?  
And the tragedy? After a couple of weeks dude started *answering* to it. (Díaz, 2007, p. 180)

The next important element in the analysis of hybridity are the two mottos, one taken from the *Fantastic Four* "Of what import are brief, nameless lives... to **Galactus?**," while the second is Walcott's poem "The Schooner Flight." They come from two disparate cultural systems: one from American science fiction, the other represents the Caribbean high-brow culture, thus channeling the readers' attention to the science fictional reading and the Caribbean context.

However, as the story unfolds, the reader encounters even more references from nearly all fields available. The novel refers to different texts of culture, including *The Lord of the Rings*, *Zardoz*, *X-Men*, *Terminator 2*, *Virus*, *Dune*, *The Simpsons*, *Akira*, *Doctor Who*, *The Twilight Zone* or *In the Time of the Butterflies*; it not only evokes the titles but also offers indirect references, like for instance that to *Matrix* in the quote "This is your chance. If blue pill, continue. If red pill, return to the Matrix" (Díaz, 2007, p. 285), or to the biblical *Book of Revelation* in the following quotation "To him they were the beginning and end, the Alpha and the Omega, the DC and the Marvel" (p. 173). Moreover, the novel contains references to fictional and real characters from both Dominican and American culture, such as the Mirabal sisters (p. 83) and Marilyn Monroe (p. 4). Finally, Díaz's novel incorporates different genres, including encyclopedic entries when it discusses fukú or the mongoose, as well as elements of academic text through the use of copious footnotes and the emphasis on the research; it should be noted that the list is virtually endless.

Similarly, the short story "Monstro" refers to the science fiction genre with the trope of infection it employs, the introduction of the zombie phenomenon and the sf characters, such as the Wonder Woman, yet there are also references to the Bible in the quote "Who shall give us flesh to eat" from *Numbers 11:18* (Díaz, 2012, p. 118), written on the back of a photograph. Some references are easily recognizable, others require certain expertise. Díaz's use of intertextualities has been widely discussed by the critics, among others by O'Brien (2012), who concluded that Díaz "forces readers to consciously deal with the challenges of intertextuality and the cultural knowledge it requires by prominently alluding to a variety of cultural knowledge bases and glossing them in very uneven ways" (p. 77).

The discussion of hybrid constructs in the selected texts cannot overlook magical realism (also known as magic realism and marvelous realism, sometimes used interchangeably, yet the terms slightly differ from one another)<sup>6</sup>. Magical realism was first used in relation to the works

<sup>6</sup> This article only briefly mentions the three varieties; a detailed discussion of the term is offered in, among others, *Magic(al) Realism* by Maggie Ann Bowers (2004) or *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community* edited by Faris and Zamora (Zamora & Faris, 1995).

written by Latin Americans – for Carpentier (1995) for instance it was the marvelous “encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American” (p. 104) – in the *mestizaje*, *criollo* culture, and symbiosis (Carpentier, 1995, p. 100). With time, it has come to signify any work with magical occurrences in the ordinary matter. It is especially potent in the analysis of migrant literature, since as observed by Zamora and Faris (1995), it is

a mode suited to exploring – and transgressing – boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic... The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds – in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism. (pp. 5–6)

Carpentier also believed that the spirit of the Latin American culture, namely the mixture of cultures, is impossible to be expressed without the use of magical realism. Thus, it may be concluded that the magical realism has been employed to discuss the migrant condition of in-betweenness.

The texts selected for the analysis offer different manifestations of magical realism. In *Soledad*, for instance, the very dream narration of Olivia may be treated as a magical realist element. Moreover, the characters believe in ghosts that have become an integral part of life, yet “don’t come out during the day because of the tourists” (Cruz, 2001, p. 231). The characters also perform a cleansing ritual described as follows:

We will throw the photographs [of the family members] one by one and watch to see what happens to them, Cristina says. Even if the person is evil or ill, this water has been known to cleanse, rejuvenate change a whole person’s life for the better. The photographs of those that need to be cleansed from all trappings in life will dip and then float. When we see them float we will know they will be OK.

And if it doesn’t float?

It’s not good, Soledad. Let’s just hope that doesn’t happen. (p. 233)

As it may be expected, all the photographs but Soledad’s float back and the girl dives into the water to retrieve it. What happens next is unclear, since the descriptions do not allow for any clear interpretation; does she drown or simply wake up from a dream?

The novel describes also another magical occurrence when Soledad and her aunt Gorda decide to clean Olivia’s apartment and Soledad discovers a tin containing a list of dates and names. Her discovery unleashes the spirits and suddenly the apartment fills with men – “[o]ne by one, at a very slow pace, men with big fat stomachs, nasty teeth, hairy chests, balding heads,



pigeon toes, smelly armpits, long beards, appear" (Cruz, 2001, p. 205) and they feel at home. Soledad tries to make them disappear, yet somehow they are trapped in the apartment.

As far as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is concerned, the novel offers multiple manifestations of magical realist strategies. As early as in the title, the reader encounters the word *wondrous* that immediately refers to the word *wonder*, hence the magical. Moreover, the introduction of the notion of *fukú*, "generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (Díaz, 2007, p. 1) that affects the lives of Dominicans and Americans and is the source of all suffering and ills of magic provenance. The narrator claims:

Who killed JFK? Let me, your humble Watcher, reveal once and for all the God's Honest Truth: It wasn't the mob or LBJ or the ghost of Marilyn Fucking Monroe. It wasn't aliens or the KGB or a lone gunman. It wasn't the Hunt Brothers of Texas or Lee Harvey or the Trilateral Commission. It was Trujillo; it was the *fukú*. (p. 4)

Moreover, the characters believe in the connection with the dead, since as the narrator reveals, La Inca was encouraged to save Beli by the spirit of her late husband. Yuniór explains that "in that hour of tribulation... she remembered who she was. Myotís Altagracia Toribio Cabral. One of the Mighty of the Sur. *You must save her, her husband's spirit said, or no one else will*" (p. 144).

Interesting in this respect is also the figure of Mongoose, "one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers" (pp. 151 n 18) that accompanies and protects the Cabral family. It is the Mongoose that saves Beli when she is beaten in the sugarcane and foretells her future. The narrator reports the conversation between Beli and the magical creature (in italics) as follows:

*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.* (p. 149)

The same Mongoose, "Golden Mongoose, . . . very placid, very beautiful. Gold-limned eyes that reached through you, not so much in judgment or reproach but for something far scarier" (p. 190) is seen by Oscar on several

occasions, including when it prevents him from committing suicide. Oscar decides to jump off the bridge, but fortunately lands on the garden divider not the concrete, and survives. The Mongoose helps him out yet again in the sugarcane when he is beaten, just like his mother years before, by the Captain's thugs. Clearly, the Mongoose is a magical creature that is introduced to an otherwise real, sometimes all too real world.

Finally, the story "Monstro" contributes to the discussion on magical realism. The narrator is welcomed by his friend Alex in Santo Domingo in the following way: "Welcome to the country of las maravillas" (Díaz, 2012, p. 109) and it evokes the seminal idea of *lo real maravilloso* by Carpentier, and thus refers to the theoretical framework of magical realism as well as to the narrative tools. Also, some of the incidents that take place in the story may be considered supernatural.

Magical realism in the texts leads to the creation of the hybrid structures, to the suspension of the readers between the real and the magical, that contribute to the sense of in-betweenness. Moreover, as Monica Hanna (2010) observes, the diasporic condition "seems to lend itself to magical realist forms as it is by definition an encounter between two different worldviews" (p. 512).

The hybrid constructs discussed in the article are merely a selection from a whole array of others offered by the discussed texts. Further analysis could focus on science fiction, since Junot Díaz's texts are infused with science fiction strategies and tropes, as well as incorporating science fictional references; of interest could also be the analysis of the texts' meta level. However, I believe that the aspects and fragments selected for this study illustrate how the Dominican-American contemporary writers make use of hybridity to discuss the migrant condition of in-betweenness, of being suspended between two languages, cultures, countries and modes of representation as well as to express what is inexpressible in any other way.

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“Ani tu, ani tam”.  
Doświadczenie narodu bez granic  
we współczesnej literaturze dominikańsko-amerykańskiej

Analiza tożsamości imigrantów często skupia się na byciu pomiędzy, egzystowaniu między granicami, a także braku przynależności do żadnej z kultur. Grupa, która wydaje się uosabiać ten stan to migranci z Republiki Dominikany w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje temat doświadczenia bycia pomiędzy, zawieszenia pomiędzy granicami i między dwoma krajami w wybranych tekstach współczesnych pisarzy dominikańsko-amerykańskich: powieści *Krótki i niezwykle żywot* Oscara Wao i opowiadania „Monstro” Junota Díaza oraz powieści Soledad Angie Cruz. Celem artykułu jest analiza doświadczenia bycia pomiędzy wyrażanego poprzez hybrydę, czemu służą narzędzia oferowane przez estetykę neobarokową, a także poprzez intertekstualność i realizm magiczny.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Angie Cruz, bycie pomiędzy, hybrydyzacja, Junot Díaz, literatura dominikańsko-amerykańska, neobarok.

### Note

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