

## Invisible or Inaudible? The Representation of Working-Class Immigrants in the Short Fiction of Junot Díaz

### Introduction

She had discovered the secret to silence: pouring café without a splash, walking between rooms as if gliding on a cushion of felt, crying without a sound. You have travelled to the East and learned many secret things, I've told her. You're like a shadow warrior. (Díaz 1996: 74)

The epigraph is from the fifth story of Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996), a short story cycle in which Yunior speculates quite unempathetically about the reasons for his mother's silence. Yunior is the narrator in all of Díaz's short fiction, as well as his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), which first appeared as a short story in *The New Yorker* seven years before. Díaz's career, thus, has been tightly linked to short fiction. He started publishing some of the short stories that feature in his collections in magazines such as *Story* and *The New Yorker*, and his most recent work also belongs to this genre. 'Monstro' was published in June 2012 in *The New Yorker* and has been praised as a particularly acute commentary on our contemporary times of neo-liberalism and globalization (Quesada 2016: 291-2). For this article, I will focus on stories in *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), two books that are part of the same cycle: they deal with the same characters and their lives, parts of which are often retold throughout the different stories. Thus, readers can observe at one glance events occurring years apart and disagree with the interpretation which Yunior makes of them. In the parts set during his adulthood Yunior often seems to have forgotten his past or his childhood, which readers can easily access since there are big time gaps between each story. Readers can also learn about the reasons for Yunior's mother's silence – which he does not understand in the passage quoted in the epigraph but the origin of which is explored in a later story set when Yunior is a child – because each of the stories corresponds to a carefully chosen 'moment of truth,' using Mary Louise's Pratt's words to describe the genre (1981: 183). As a way to explore the struggles of this particular family of Dominican working-class immigrants, these moments of truth put great emphasis on the role of sound and silence – as the epigraph exemplifies – in the characters' adaptation in the new country.

The importance given to sound and silence in the articulation of the stories adds the concept of (in)audibility to what is often assessed as the (in)visibility of the migrant. There are different approaches through which to understand the notions of visibility/invisibility. In terms of colonialism, Otherness is created through extreme visibility so as to construct a discourse of difference and justify colonial domination (Bhabha 1994: 70). However, in the regimes of 'new racism' in the context of modern migration in a globalized world, migrant Otherness is constructed through audibility: the well-known 'transition from the "color line to the borderlands" [...] affect[ing] the body of knowledge subsumed under American Studies' (Šesnić 2007: 24). Furthermore, in the context of economically developed countries with important urban centres of migration, the ethnic Other is often rendered invisible – I would say, non-existent – in the host society's public domain, as Gloria Anzaldúa, too, believed (1987: 11). Paradoxically, the Other's voice, apart from being a mechanism for targeting him or her, is the tool which

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creates spaces of hospitality, following Paul Ricoeur's idea of linguistic hospitality which I will address later in this article. Therefore, languages and their sounds, and by extension the soundscapes associated with certain cultures, are described throughout the stories as playing an essential role in the regimes of both successful or unsuccessful hospitality. The first part of this article explores how languages in the stories are inextricably linked to, and part of, cultural soundscapes. I will continue by exposing how such cultural soundscapes are also crucial in understanding post-colonial modern racism, to conclude that the stories suggest – both in formal and ideological terms – that the migrant's hybrid voice can also subvert the nativist narrative according to which only those belonging to mainstream culture (and, therefore, language) are considered legitimate citizens.

### **The Dominican-American Soundscape**

*Drown* and *This is How you Lose Her* are two short story cycles that deal with the lives of the same family members, without chronological linearity and with a special focus on Yunior, the youngest son. The chronological discontinuity of these stories is crucial for the transmission of the cycle's message. As Jennifer J. Smith explains, the short story cycle as a genre 'creates meaning from disjunction' and is a particularly American genre in how it asserts that national identity is always necessarily fragmented (208). Non-linear short story cycles and the consequent epiphanic effect of the short story genre are thus crucial to represent the power dynamics that are always at stake in the lives of immigrants. In a naturalistic way, this collection shows the characters' – at times tragic – fates together with explanatory stories which appear later in the collections and deal with the family's past traumas.

In a chronological order, the nineteen short stories which form the two collections suggest the following fable<sup>1</sup>: Virta, Ramón and their children Yunior and Rafa used to live in the Dominican Republic when the father left the country in order to work in the United States, as stated in 'Aguantando', the fourth story in *Drown*, which narrates the period in which Yunior experienced the process of living 'without a father' (1996: 53). Ramón promised to return to take them with him once he had achieved economic stability, as explained in the last story of the first collection, 'Negocios'. This is the only story which offers Ramón's point of view even though Yunior is still the narrator, which might make us doubt the veracity of the narrated events – a feature characteristic of Díaz's incorporation of unreliable narrators. After that, they do not hear from him for a long time, and the family assumes that they have been abandoned when Ramón stops sending money to his family: 'Mami's letters [...] were corrosive slaps in the face. It was now a one-sided correspondence' (1996: 149). 'Negocios' also narrates the period in which Ramón lives for years with Nilda, a Dominican woman legally residing in the United States, whom he marries and with whom he has a child before eventually going back (1996: 164). At the end of 'Aguantando', Ramón takes his first family with him to the United States, including Yunior, who barely recognises him. It is not until the appearance of *This Is How You Lose Her*, sixteen years later, that Díaz provides readers with a glimpse of this adaptation period through the collection's seventh story 'Invierno'. While *Drown* deals both with the family's life in the Dominican Republic and with their experiences in the United States after the family's process of Americanization, this transitional period features only in 'Invierno.'

In all of the United States-set stories in both volumes, there is an emphasis on the psychological abuse that Ramón inflicts upon Yunior's mother. The description of her silencing stands in line with the stories' suggestion of the affective connotations of sounds, as will be discussed below. Furthermore, the stories suggest a link between

sounds and cultural identity and so negotiate the power struggles between host and guest cultures in terms of soundscapes. The stories 'Drown', 'Negocios' (both from *Drown*) and 'Invierno' (from *This Is How You Lose Her*) are especially illustrative of the problematics specified above because they are set in three clearly differentiated and important moments in this family's history. 'Drown' explores the aftermath of the adaptation process in the new country, after the mother became isolated and devoid of any contact with the outside world. 'Invierno' relates the liminal stage in which the family finds itself after arriving to the new country. Finally, 'Negocios' narrates Ramón's experience of this liminal stage, retrospectively and through Yúnior's voice since he had to undergo it years before his family. Hence, I will consider the whole narrative constructed throughout all of the stories to analyse the cultural situation of Dominican immigrants in the United States, but I will also consider each story in particular, taking into account their order of appearance in the collection, as the effects of both the short story as a genre and the fact that each story participates in a cycle are important elements in the transmission of the migrant's subjectivity.

In the fragmented narratives, the description of sounds is associated with identity at different levels, implying either positive or negative consequences. The idea of the 'soundscape' was introduced by Michael Southworth in his article 'The Sonic Environment of Cities' (1969) and extensively analysed by R. Murray Schafer in his book *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977). Southworth associates sounds with particular spaces (1969: 50), as is also suggested in these short stories. For example, for Yúnior, sounds evoke memories of his homeland and are signs of nostalgia. In 'Drown' Yúnior says, talking about his friend Beto, that his 'voice [...] crackled and made you think of uncles and grandfathers' (1996: 71). It is not only Beto's voice which evokes these memories, but also his language: Spanish. The sound of languages points back to the homeland and, as Ramón expresses, 'anyone wounded [...] thought home could save him' (1996: 158). Hans-Joachim Braun explains that sounds transmit feelings such as nostalgia, evidencing an obvious 'link between sound, memory, and changing living conditions over time' (2017: 82). Languages and the soundscapes they create do not only determine the ability to successfully transmit a message but, in the story, they suggest an emotional connection with the homeland which the characters seem to be afraid of losing. In this sense, language in the stories is not only presented as a communication tool. Spoken language is what the stories describe, as exemplified with the written representations of accents such as Ramón's pronunciation of the word 'yes' as 'jes' (1996: 136). Therefore, it is the sounds of a certain language and the cultural identity associated with it which create the soundscapes in which the characters can – or cannot – feel safe or that they belong.

In a more negative light, the sounds these characters can (or cannot) utter determine their social situation in the host country. Amanda Gerke situates the spoken language 'in a social place' and goes on to deduce that it is then 'logical that, as [society] involves power dynamics, [language] would need some sort of passage or access to this space' (89). Apart from the successful communication between interlocutors or lack thereof, both of which are determined by languages, how these languages sound when spoken – that is, the speaker's accent – also has a social effect which affects the dynamics of hospitality and opens (or closes) up the possibility for upward social mobility (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 2017: 130). As a housemate explains to Yúnior's father, in 'Negocios', 'you're going to have to practice if you expect to get anywhere' (1996: 132). In 'Drown' it is shown that the mother's only approximation to a friend is the Spanish on her TV (1996: 71): her inability to learn English, recounted in 'Invierno',

isolates her. In this context, language provides the link with reality which Southworth ascribes to sounds in general (52). ‘Drown’, although bearing a special focus on Yuniór’s homoerotic relationship with his friend Beto, ends with an image of Virta falling asleep watching a ‘movie dubbed in Spanish, a classic, one that everybody knows’ (1996: 84). The sounds that Virta connects with and understands (not only in semantic but in affective terms too) do not relate to her immediate sonic environment but to a geographically displaced one that only exists in her mind and which leads to her withdrawal from reality.

This potential link to reality relates not only to languages but also to sounds in a broader sense. Upon reaching the United States, Yuniór says that ‘[in their] old barrio [they] were accustomed to folks shocking the streets with merengue twenty-four hours a day’ (2012: 129). Many other claims relating to the soundscape are made in the narration of the liminal stage of ‘Invierno’. As Ana María Manzanás Calvo and Jesús Benito Sánchez explain, the father has already undergone ‘his own initiation rituals’ – portrayed in ‘Negocios’ – but for the family, everything is strange (2017: 130). This strangeness is in the first instance expressed through the unfamiliarity of sounds. In the transition from the Dominican *campo* where the children used to spend their holidays (1996: 1) to a New Jersey *barrio*, London Terrace, Yuniór defines the change in his acoustic environment: ‘even Papi’s early-morning noises were strange to me. I lay in bed, listening to him stumbling around in the bathroom, like he was drunk or something’ (2012: 125). Braun refers to experiences like this as ‘lacking soundscape competence regarding the new place’ (2017: 83). For Schafer, an acoustic environment relates to how ‘a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce [the acoustic environment] and may tell us much about the trending and evolution of that society’ (1977: 7). Although the acculturation, transculturation or biculturation of ‘one-and-a-halfers’ (Pérez-Firmat 1994: x) has been extensively explored in terms of cultural affiliations such as languages or popular culture referents, the shock that comes with the shift of acoustic environments has been little researched in this context. Interestingly, the father continually insists in ‘Invierno’ that the children should not be so loud. In an oft-quoted interview, Junot Díaz has claimed: ‘You come to the United States and the United States begins immediately, systematically, to erase you in every way, to suppress those things which it considers not digestible. You spend a lot of time being colonized’ (Céspedes et al. 2000: 896). There is a struggle, in Díaz’s view, between host and guest identities which responds not only to mere migration to a new and culturally different context but also to the new racism, associated with an alleged cultural difference perceived, as the stories suggest, in terms of sound rather than image.

### The Importance of Sound in ‘New Racist’ Discrimination

While visibility has been a crucial factor determining Otherness, these stories seem to focus more on the audibility of migrants. In the context of colonization, Otherness was created by making ‘skin [...] a signifier of discrimination [which] must be produced or processed as visible’: the colonized have to be seen (Bhabha 1994: 79). Homi Bhabha explains that visibility is crucial in the ideological construction of Otherness because it makes use of a discourse ‘which produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an “other” and yet entirely knowable and *visible*’ (1994: 70-71, emphasis added). In fact, Sylvia Mieszkowski et al. affirm that in the Western world visibility has long been regarded as the primary sense through which to theorize the world (2007: 11). Although the over-visibility of the racial Other is still a common practice, many scholars – among them Paul Gilroy, Sara Ahmed or Slavoj Žižek – have identified a trend within the decolonized and globalized world by which Otherness is articulated in the nativist

**Comentado [A2]:** Either here or earlier in the introduction, please define the concept of ‘new racism’, given that it is important for your argumentation

discourse ‘in cultural terms’ rather than racial ones (Gilroy 2000: 127). Therefore, the representation of cultural soundscapes which Díaz achieves through his indiscriminate use of Spanish – constant because of the always present personal voice of the intrusive narrator – as well as through written representations of accents and references to both Dominican and American music becomes crucial in this century’s representation of the immigrant experience.

Speaking good English is soon perceived as a necessity by the characters in the stories. In ‘Negocios’, one can observe how a relationship between legal citizenship and mastering not only the language but its sounds by speaking with a proper native accent is established. When Ramón meets Nilda, a Dominican woman, in New York, it is noted that she is a legal resident – ‘a citizen’ (1996: 141) – and that ‘[h]er English was *excellent*’ (1996: 141, emphasis added), as if implying a sort of cause-and-effect relationship. Visibility, therefore, does not seem the most compelling attribute which these migrants have to negotiate, since more often than not, it is their language that must be hidden. They are recognized as foreign when they are heard and so the narrative emphasizes their conscious silencing in the new society. When he embarks on the plane which would take him back to the Dominican Republic for the first time since he abandoned it, Ramón explains that ‘[f]or nearly four years he’d not spoken his Spanish loudly in front of the North Americans and now he was hearing it bellowed and flung from every mouth’ (1996: 155). Clearly, Ramón’s way to fit in entails the suppression of his sounds: the same colonization that Díaz talks about.

The stories’ focus on aural characteristics seems to respond to the changing dynamics of discrimination in the United States, where, because of the increased migration from countries such as Mexico and others from Central America in the last decades, a stigmatization of the Spanish language and its sounds has emerged (Laborde 2018: n.p.). Although discrimination in terms of skin colour is still a compelling problem in the American society, the nativist public discourse emphasises cultural difference in an attempt to appear more humanist (Balibar 1991: 21). In earlier migrant fictions like Piri Thomas’s *Down these Mean Streets* (1967), the Puerto Rican characters try to hide their visible skin colour rather than their Spanish accent (Thomas 1997: 153) recalling Bhabha’s idea of skin “as [the] signifier of discrimination” (1994: 79). But Latino immigrants at the end of the twentieth century and in the midst of the twenty-first have reportedly had to hide their accents and mother tongues (Laborde 2018: n.p.). The acoustic turn in cultural studies suggested by critics like Petra Maria Meyers (Braun 2017: 76) can therefore be connected to the changing rhetoric of nativist discourses in the United States. As an example, Manzanás Calvo and Benito Sánchez explain in their analysis of ‘Invierno’ that ‘whatever does not *sound* organically native and pertaining to the land is deemed illegal, marginal or backward’ (2017: 135, emphasis added). It is interesting for this analysis that Manzanás Calvo and Benito Sánchez talk about sounds rather than language since a non-intelligible – foreign – language is perceived as noise, defined by Schafer as ‘sounds we have learned to ignore’ (1977: 4), or rather to misinterpret as a potential danger to the nation’s cultural purity.

As a way of making the reader aware of the connection between language and power in a final moment of epiphany, ‘Negocios’ is placed at the end of *Drown* by way of conclusion. In this last story, readers are witnesses to the difficult times Ramón lived through when he first arrived in the United States without any knowledge of the language, which deprived him from ascending the social scale. At the time, Ramón used to practice English ‘whenever he felt weak’ (1996: 134) at his crowded apartment, which he shared with three other migrants, reading the city names on a road map, ‘enunciating the city

**Comentado [A3]:** Comment on ‘his Spanish’ being heard ‘from every mouth’?

names slowly, trying to copy the awful crunch of sounds that was English' (1996: 134). Again, Manzanos Calvo and Benito Sánchez analyse the phrase 'crunch of sounds' as a sign that English is not primarily a language for Ramón, but noise (2017: 138), therefore connecting with Philipp Schweighauser's understanding of the concept as 'most radically' diverging 'from what we already know' (2015: 476). In this way the story establishes that the migrants lack the knowledge that is intrinsically related to power in this new society, recalling Foucault's famous pairing of language and power. As a way to teach his children such knowledge, one of Ramón's biggest concerns in 'Invierno' is that they be quiet:

What did I tell you? How many times have I told you to keep it quiet?  
If we messed that up, joking around or cheating, he would force us to kneel down  
on the cutting side of a coconut grater, and only when we were bleeding and  
whimpering would he let us up.  
Now you'll be quiet, he'd say, satisfied. (2012: 130)

Ramón's demands towards his children respond to his will to adapt to his new acoustic environment, accepting the stereotypical notion, according to Schafer, that inhabitants from warmer areas of the globe are louder (1977: 64). Ramón, engaging in the tradition of double consciousness articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois, has internalized the stereotypes of which he only became aware once in the new country.

While the words of Americans are mere noise to these Dominican characters, in their period of adaptation to the new country they realize that their words may also be noise to others. In 'Invierno', Yuniór expresses a similar experience to the one previously lived by his father: 'On the TV the newscasters were making small, flat noises at each other. They were repeating one word over and over. Later when I went to school I would learn that the word they were saying was *Vietnam*' (2012: 123, original emphasis). Such sound unintelligibility is also portrayed when after arriving to the new apartment, Yuniór attempts to play with his neighbours, two white American siblings, and they cannot understand one another. Their interaction results in mutual noise: 'Wait up! I yelled. I want to play with you. The brother watched me with a half grin, not understanding a word I'd say, his arms scrunched nervously at his sides' (2012: 132-3). At the beginning, they manage to exchange names, but during their second encounter, with nothing else to say, one of the siblings ends up throwing Yuniór a snowball after yelling something which the latter, of course, does not understand. The failure of communication in these first encounters represents the failure of hospitality and the ensuing of a hostility based on mere linguistic difference. Similarly, the inability to communicate shapes the structure of the city: 'In less than a year they would be gone. All the white people would be. All that would be left would be us colored folks' (2012: 138). As such, the connection between soundscapes and spaces that Southworth makes is reinforced in terms of segregation: the soundscapes should not merge, they must remain clearly differentiated. Analysing the story, Gerke associates 'gated space[s]' (2015: 95) with the inability to 'access [...] the double-discourse community in which [the characters] live' (93) and with the consequent lack of power in the host society that comes associated with the transmission of knowledge through spoken interaction (92). Yuniór's attempted communication and relation with the American children fails, as does the creation of a truly hybrid neighbourhood where the two sonic communities can cohabitate. Due to this hostility, the necessity of being part of an already established acoustic environment and abandoning one's acoustic habits – such as the tone of one's voice or playing music on the streets –

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is suggested in the stories as a precondition in order to have access to social mobility. This story retrospectively echoes the fact that the success or failure in integrating the established acoustic environment has ultimately determined the fate of each family member, which explains the mother's eventual depersonalization and sole relationship with her TV in Spanish.

The formation of segregated communities is described in these stories as based on linguistic traditions and cultural habits which include aspects related to sounds, as specified above. In this sense, the aliens in American society discipline themselves in acoustic terms so as to fit in and have access to jobs and contacts. The host society recognizes those who do not belong through the sounds of their languages and their accents, so migrants consciously try to change them while at the same time creating safe spaces in these neighbourhoods where native sounds can be freely uttered. However, sounds and languages are also presented as a possible solution to the migrants' empirical non-existence in the public domain since voice and language are perceived as transformative elements in the poststructuralist tradition, unlike the image. Bhabha tackles this issue when he states that

the encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the [colonial] frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as site of identity and autonomy and [...] leaves a resistant trace, a stain of the subject. (1994: 49)

The postcolonial presence which can disrupt colonial discourse, according to Bhabha, is situated in the realm of spoken language and not visuals (1994: 72), just like Díaz decides to articulate his narratives by emphasizing the role of heard Spanish in the American society. Like Bhabha, Díaz suggests a model of hybridity to destabilise static conceptions of Otherness that result from uneven cultural contact.

### **Speaking back to the Nation**

In the previous section, I have addressed the role of sounds as related to the construction and identification of a particular cultural atmosphere. Junot Díaz believes, in this sense, that the sounds of Spanish speakers have been historically marginalized in the United States for ideological reasons. When asked about the presence of Spanish in his texts, he claimed:

[A]llowing the Spanish to exist in my text without the benefit of italics or quotation marks was a very important political move [...]. When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I've tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. (Céspedes et al. 2000: 904)

Díaz's description of sounds in his narratives, including written representations of Spanish, Spanglish and Dominican-American dialect, does not only portray linguistic difference but is reminiscent of the multiplicity of the world, refuting the Tower of Babel myth which yearns for a 'unitary language' and therefore worldview and epistemology (Kearney 2006: xvii). In psychoanalytical terms, Bhabha explains that the desire to see becomes problematized when it is met by a 'referent for the language of the Self' (1994: 47). The eye is deceived and the desirous observer is left, instead, with 'the sound of the signifier' (1994: 47). This stand rejects the stability of the visual image to advocate for

the iterability of language where meaning is always subject to transformations. The postcolonial idea of ‘writing back’, which is the voice of the postcolonial subjects ‘questioning and travestying colonial discourses’ (McLeod 2000: 25), is taken up in Díaz’s writing in the form of ‘speaking back’.

The aural quality of these texts, which emphasises that languages are much more than semantics since they are also determined by accent and intonation, highlights the acoustic level at which we perceive reality, which the traditional focus on the visual may have precluded but which is nonetheless an essential factor to take into account within representations of Otherness, strangeness, discrimination and the possibility for reversal. As already mentioned above, in ‘Invierno’ Yuniór analyses his new environment in terms of its sounds: how his father snores (2012: 136) and the noises he makes when he wakes up (2012: 125). He does not try to guess the words that his American neighbours utter, he just explains that they are ‘loud’ (2012: 137). Similarly, Yuniór’s mother’s inability to feel at home in the new country is associated to her inability to pronounce the ‘lazy soap bubbles of sound’ (124) which form the English language. However, when she realises that she is becoming increasingly alienated, she implores that her children talk to her: ‘You should talk to me, she said, but we told her to wait for Papi to get home. He’ll talk to you, I guaranteed’ (132). The act of speaking, not specified here as a communicative act but as a way to transmit sounds so that Virta can imitate them, is perceived by her as a possible solution to her undesirable situation.

Talking and exchanging words and sounds, even translating, within a space where none of the interlocutors holds any power above the other – the interaction that Virta does not have any access to – is analysed by Paul Ricoeur as ‘linguistic hospitality’ (2006: 28-9). According to Manzanás Calvo and Benito Sánchez, though much linguistic inhospitality appears in the stories, there are characters who are welcoming hosts for Ramón and who help him acquire the knowledge that becomes necessary for him to thrive in the United States (2017: 138-9). Nilda and his daughter, who speak to him ‘in politely spaced words’ (1996: 143), help him practice and therefore improve his pronunciation of the language. Linguistic hospitality, furthermore, supposes a possibility to access the worldview of the Other (Kearney xvii-xviii) and continuously negotiate their meanings, even when there is unintelligibility in the first attempt (Ricoeur 2006: 10), as in the encounter with the two siblings. This process of cultural translation through linguistic hospitality paves the way towards hybrid hospitable soundscapes, thereby rejecting the idea that the United States is monolithic in terms of the culture and language. In fact, Gerke contends that it is through the insertion of language(s) in certain hybrid spaces that the repression of ‘personal stories and national histories’ can be reversed and the creation of identities achieved, since speaking constitutes a practice of breaking the (literal and metaphorical) silence (2015: 84). In this way, Díaz explained in an interview that ‘Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world inside my head’ (Céspedes et al. 2000: 904). The importance that I am ascribing to languages in a person’s cultural identity is not relegated to their semantic aspect exclusively, since spoken languages, as are represented in the stories, are always an ‘inseparable combination of sense and sonority’ (Ricoeur 2006: 6). Linguistic hospitality must therefore take both aspects into account.

It is with his particular use of English containing not only Spanish words but also the written representation of how Dominican Spanish sounds – for example, in the pronunciation of Nueva York as ‘Nueva [...] Yo!’ (136) or the already mentioned ‘jes’ for ‘yes’ – that Díaz attempts to normalize Spanish and cultural plurality in the United States (Céspedes et al. 2000: 904). With his personal way of representing on the written

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**Comentado [A6]:** Year missing



page the sounds that are characteristic of the characters' cultural specificity in terms of accents and language throughout the process of migration and Americanization, Díaz inserts Dominican-Americans in the tradition of American literature. The narratives' depiction of the failures of hospitality in American society – as for example in the part when the American families abandon London Terrace – together with the presentation of the Other's worldview become a renewing presence, 'the sound of the signifier' that Bhabha theorized (1994: 47) and which might remind American readers of their country's liberal nativism, which deems the territory exclusively Anglophone.

### Conclusion

Junot Díaz's short stories draw attention to the fact that sound is a crucial factor within cultures: it makes the characters recognizable to Americans even when they do not understand them. His characters are targeted by Anglo-Americans in terms of their accents and sounds: the stories written by Díaz in this sense adjust to the idea that post-colonial new racism is based on cultural difference, and since, as discussed, cultures and sounds are inextricably linked, the characters discipline themselves in order to fit in the new society in terms of their accents or voice volume. However, because of this connection between sounds and culture, exchanging sounds in acts of linguistic hospitality becomes a tool for hope in the characters' alienated existences. In this line, the stories' particular aural quality serves to insert non-hegemonic cultures into the narrative of the United States, recalling the nation's cultural pluralism which is often dismissed in the name of one hegemonic mainstream culture.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using Mieke Bal's concept of 'fabula' as opposed to 'story'. The *fabula* refers to the chronological events that the characters experience while the story is the – maybe non-chronological – presentation of such events (Bal 1997: 5-6).