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Raquel Cepeda's Digital and Literary Publics: Twitter and Bird of Paradise

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Keywords

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Raquel Cepeda's Digital and Literary Publics

Twitter and *Bird of Paradise*

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Abstract: This study charts language use in two public spheres: literary and digital. Cepeda's 2015 memoir *Bird of Paradise*, much like fellow Dominican American author Junot Díaz's works, utilizes untranslated code switching and requires both linguistic and cultural translations on the part of the reader. Cepeda's digital public, analyzed via her active Twitter account with over 11,000 followers, employs language in different ways to reach a wider, transnational audience. This essay considers how both Cepeda's literary and digital spheres connect her to a diverse readership and can be considered examples of (digital) activism.

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In just the first two pages of Raquel Cepeda's memoir *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina* (2015), untranslated words in Spanish, from *papi chulo* to *arroz* and *mangú*, challenge the monolingual English reader. Besides the uncontested Spanish-English language duality of the text, the organization is also two-part. The autobiographical work begins by detailing Cepeda's childhood in New York City with her father during the hip-hop generation and in Paraíso, Dominican Republic, with her grandparents. The second part discloses the author's DNA test results and attempts to uncover Cepeda's ancestral roots prior to the emergence of the umbrella identifier "Latina/o." The fracturing of the memoir itself exposes other dualities of the work by highlighting the Dominican American journalist and documentary filmmaker's hyphenated identity and also stresses a linguistic divide. While the Spanish-English binary of *Bird of Paradise* constitutes one possible language-based analysis of the work, another is its streetwise, colloquial jargon. This essay relates the language patterns in *Bird of Paradise* to Cepeda's "unconventional activism" both on- and off-page and an expansion or widening of an increasingly prolific and transnational Latina/o "public sphere," explored through a joint analysis of the author's public Twitter account (@RaquelCepeda) and 2015 memoir. The

following pages analyze both the similarities and divergences between Cepeda's digital and literary public spheres, deciphering how language use can provide both access to and blockades from a given target audience.



The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature (2011), the most complete anthology of Latina/o literature to date, utilizes a chronological framework to highlight the more than 200 Latina/o authors in its 2,000-plus pages. This parsing or segmentation of Latina/o literature into specific time periods provides an ideal means of organization for an expansive corpus of texts, but such fragmentation also serves to decentralize the connections *between* phases. The period from 1946 to 1979, for example, titled “Upheaval,” in part represents a period of growing activism in the Latina/o community. The civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s may not have resulted in concrete changes for Latina/os on a national scale, but Latina/os geographically positioned in the Southwest and West, for example, protested against racial discrimination. Mexican Americans in particular, unified by the self-proclaimed “Chicano” identifier, “defined their collective identity as a nation within a nation” (Stavans and Acosta-Belén 589). Moreover, Latina/o novels that depict the 1950s and 1960s, written during or following the “Upheaval” phrase, often reflect this activist pulse. Two prime examples include Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), which explores the racial awakening of the author and narrator as he confronted racial prejudice and discrimination in New York City in the 1950s, and Julia Alvarez’s autobiographical novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), in which the author paints herself and her three sisters as ingrained in the youth decade of the 1960s, the novel’s protagonist labeled an “American hippie” by her Dominican family. On the heels of civil rights movements and initial pushes for racial integration and equality, the final phase indicated in the anthology is “Into the Mainstream: 1980–Present.” The most concrete trace of Latina/o literature entering the digital age in the introduction to this current, untermiated phase is the following:

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Latino literary renaissance, along with television, radio, the Internet, music, and politics, promoted “a fusion,” a mix of diverse, heterogeneous voices, a call for unity under the rubric of *Latinidad*, an invitation to be part of an imagined community of Latinos. (1469)

To what extent, then, has the Internet 2.0—a term focused on the Internet as a space for collaborating and sharing information via social media—for example, promoted this “fusion” of diverse Latina/o voices and how does it relate to the

activism reminiscent of the previous “Upheaval” phase? How has this cultural mixing enabled Latina/os to connect virtually with their homelands, thus impacting their experience in the US diaspora? More specifically, for Latina/o writers, how does an individual’s linguistic identity change on and off the page and how is it manipulated for an increasingly digital readership? While the *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* recognizes, albeit fleetingly, the upswing of digital text and growing presence of Latina/o authors’ self- and literary expression via digital mediums, the connection between the social activism of the “Upheaval” phase and the technological pulse of the current phase remains disjointed. This study attempts not only to fuse activism and social media use together, but also to gauge the growing online presence of Latina/o writers, with a primary focus on Twitter, as a possible signpost for social and digital activism on a transnational scale.

The concept of “unconventional politics,” defined as the juxtaposition to “conventional politics,” which refer to voting and other forms of electoral politics, allows for an understanding of transnational and digital activism. In many cases, individuals on the outskirts, many of whom belong to minority ethnic groups in the United States, “adopt *unconventional* political strategies and participate in protest politics” (Martinez 137–38; my emphasis). Studies on the political engagement of Latina/os and their predisposition to protest confirm that the diverse political orientation of Latina/os—namely, differences in citizenship status, education, income, and dominant language—lead to a diverse affinity toward unconventional politics (Uhlener, Cain, and Kiewiet). Protest and social activism disseminated through social media outlets such as Twitter, then, are representative of the unconventionality of “unconventional politics.” While not centered specifically on the Latina/o community, but certainly extending to the Afro-Latina/o community, a specific example of a contemporary social movement and platform disseminated through the microblogging service Twitter is #BlkTwitterstorians. This digital humanities project uses digital tools to share and disseminate knowledge and connects at a fundamental level with the Movement for Black Lives as “#BlkTwitterstorians was created in the context of a new social movement concerned with the liberation of Black people” (Brown and Crutchfield 49). The fact that #BlkTwitterstorians is a digitally born movement is key because the open-access, hashtag-searchable platform allows for the hypervisible project to be read as a “mode of resistance.” Aleia M. Brown and Joshua Crutchfield confirm: “It resists the pedagogy that white scholars are the sole purveyors of knowledge. It resists the idea that Black people, particularly young adults, are not politically engaged” (53). As #BlkTwitterstorians exemplifies, digital venues offer individuals an alternative mode, often in real time, to engage with a diverse public. Protest and political activism through multimedia sharing platforms such as Twitter confirm the multiple forms protest can take on a national or global scale. Thus, given the demonstrated turn of Latina/os toward nonelectoral politics, how might Latina/o authors use digital platforms as an

activist outlet, and how does this connect (or disconnect) them to their country of origin? The following pages attempt to answer this question by analyzing Cepeda's memoir as well as her Twitter account, with a focus on the conflation of target audience and language use.

With respect to interconnected publics and social networking, the concept of the public sphere proves helpful when approaching the target readership for a memoir like *Bird of Paradise*, deemed the first nonacademic memoir by a Dominican American in the popular market. While the term has been reassessed and applied to different, international spheres in millennial scholarship, the initial emergence of the public sphere credits German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). The theory was originally designed to describe eighteenth-century publicity and public space in Britain. Despite the elitist initial understanding of the public sphere, the Habermasian theory can be approached as an "ideal projection" (228) to exploring the category, as Eduardo Mendieta asserts. The goal of this study is to move beyond Habermas's delineation of the public sphere, using his work as a starting point, to consider how Latina/os such as Cepeda—via a textual and digital presence—redefine the contested concept of what can be considered a "public sphere" and, relatedly, who can be considered a "postcolonial intellectual." According to Mendieta, what is missing from narratives defining the public sphere and public intellectuals—who are best described as "eighteenth-century cosmopolitan intellectual[s]" (215)—is the notion of a "postcolonial intellectual." Cepeda, with a digital and literary corpus, then, can stand for a postcolonial (digital) intellectual who exists in and contributes to communities with multisensory, interactive platforms. Mendieta does not represent the only scholar to challenge Habermas's narrow vision of the public sphere; James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) constitutes another prime example.¹

The modern relevance of the public sphere, in reference to Habermas's delineation of the network of individuals together forming a public, doubles as an ideal theoretical thrust that enables social media outlets like Twitter to function as signposts for unconventional politics.² Habermas's public sphere as first sketched in the 1960s delineated an inclusive public arena, but full entry into the all-embracing space was dependent upon a given individual's level of education and property

1. Scott's work posits that the public transcript signals an imbalance of power between dominant and subordinate groups. Scott offers the term "hidden transcripts" to refer to discourse created outside of the public transcript, "beyond direct observation by powerholders" (10). While the Internet and digital mediums can give some a false sense of power, they can also attribute agency to individuals positioned at the periphery or outskirts of a dominant, intellectual public sphere. Twitter, for example, allows for "hidden transcripts" to find (easily accessible) public expression.

2. Habermas more specifically referred to this concept as the "bourgeois public sphere," defined as "the sphere of private people come together as a public" (17).

ownership. Habermas's introduction to *Structural Transformation* discerns: "We call events and occasions 'public' when they are open to all" (1). While mass media traditionally represented a domain of those with economic and social capital, Internet use is rising on a global level, especially in emerging and developing countries. On a broad level, the Internet also traditionally defines as open-access (a global system of computer networks), and public social media accounts can be considered platforms of public access. Although Habermas does not address the Internet and *social* mass media, he does address what he refers to as "the realm of mass media," noting that "publicity has changed its meaning" (2). Habermas's direct reference to mass media signals the juxtaposition of private and public as the increasing stronghold of mass media served to further publicize or broadcast a group's opinion and interests. Twitter, in particular, is inherently "public" given that most Twitter users elect to not "protect" their tweets, granting followers and nonfollowers unlimited access to their profile. Twitter's simplistic mission is "To give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" ("About Twitter"). Twitter's mission, on the surface, aligns directly with Habermas's distinction of "public" as "open to all."

While Habermas's understanding of nonprivatized space centers on the area in which individuals come together to engage in conversation about societal issues (often giving way to political action), contemporary literary critics have interpreted the notion of a public sphere as a means to better understand "the emergence of the literary public sphere and its functioning within the broader society" (McCarthy xiii). In particular, Raphael Dalleo offers a poignant reading of Caribbean access to and blockades from the public sphere in his book *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere: From the Plantation to the Postcolonial* (2011). Dalleo problematizes the understanding of "public" in a Caribbean context. He suggests that conceptions of "public" in the global Caribbean have over time become both raced and gendered and further confirms that "the process of imagining an embodied public has proven both enabling and restricting" (2). The following pages build on the idea of a Caribbean public sphere, signaling more concretely a Latina/o or diasporic Caribbean public sphere, by deciphering how writers interact (or refrain from interaction) with social media platforms. Similar to Dalleo, I am interested in the ways in which this sphere, owing to its digital repercussions, transforms into a transnational space of influence. I also consider Cepeda's digital-political platform as a model case to better understand the presence of Latina/o authors within an increasingly technologically based "public sphere." A focus on language and a consideration of how language choice and language use relate directly to the transnational public that Latina/os such as Cepeda address in both digital and print form stresses the intersections between the literary public sphere and the digital/social media sphere, an inherently public domain.

Besides the aforementioned unconventional politics in which Latina/os traditionally engage, scholars have also addressed unconventional *publics*, designated by Michael Warner as “counterpublics,” or publics that are aware of their “subordinate status” (56). Dalleo suggests the Caribbean public sphere is an exemplary counterpublic in regards to its inconsequential status when compared to European literature (4). Latina/o literature, too, often finds itself relegated to the margins, but a bilingual or multilingual digital presence has, in some cases, resituated Latina/o literature in the mainstream. The public sphere, as expressed by Habermas, originally manifested in common social spaces such as coffee houses. However, as interactions become increasingly digital and Latina/os can more readily connect with a public in both the United States and their country of origin, the need for a physical space is no longer essential. In this way, the Latina/o public sphere, as a response to the often ambiguous status between country of origin and the adopted homeland, has no physical grounding. Likewise, the Internet 2.0—directly referencing social networking—performs as a transnational space or a counterpublic that distorts a traditional understanding of a given public. While social media may not exist face to face, it does hold both discursive and representational power. As exemplified by the map of Cepeda's Twitter followers below, Latina/o authors succeed in connecting with individuals on an international scale. Cepeda's realm of influence, as confirmed by Twitter, stretches far beyond the United States and Dominican Republic.

Twitter represents an ideal example of the border-crossing capability of social media. The microblogging service started in 2006 with the first official tweet from the company's founder, Jack Dorsey. The seemingly simple first tweet—“just setting up my twttr”—utilized a mere 20 of the 140 allotted characters and responded to Twitter's original slogan or prompt, “What are you doing?” Fast forward just over a decade and users of the microblogging service no longer simply describe what they are doing; instead, Twitter has developed into a social media platform that also shares, often in real time, what *others* are doing. In this sense, many tweets double as reactions to specific events or responses and critiques of local, national, and global issues. Twitter, then, is a contemporary example of Habermas's public and has developed into a virtual space in which “people engage in rational-critical debate,” a space that contests and critiques public opinion and its fleetingly uniform existence (Habermas 69). The following paragraphs analyze Cepeda's public Twitter account; the “handle” or username of the account is @raquelcepeda.³

3. It is important to briefly explain how I access and analyze the information from the author's account. The Twitter Search API allows queries against the indices of popular tweets from the past seven days for any given account. I connect to the Search API by using the free coding software R. Although one can build a query using this platform in many different ways, in this case I am interested in searching tweets by language and place. In the first instance, I generate a cloud of most common words used in Cepeda's tweets over a period of seven days. The second instance geocodes the location of a subset of Cepeda's more than 11,000 followers.



Figure 2. @raquelcepeda: Geography of Followers, 2017. Courtesy: Megan Jeanette Myers.

are instantly shared with her thousands of followers. Unsurprisingly, many of the words identified as keywords in the text cloud above are abbreviations or combinations of words: “debatenight,” “demdebate,” “amp,” “ur,” “RT” (Retweet). While the shortening of words and phrases is a key characteristic of Twitter language given the limit of characters per tweet, the use of abbreviated words and slang in online written expressions carries over into literary expressions, and similar word uses can be identified in *Bird of Paradise*.

Figure 2 turns to a visualization of the geographical location of the @raquelcepeda Twitter account followers. Each of the account’s 11,000-plus followers embed a geotag on their Twitter profile and, provided the authenticity of the location noted by the Twitter user, this location can be mapped alongside that of other followers of a specific account.⁴

Mapping Cepeda’s Twitter followers confirms the global reach of her Twitter account. While the word cloud confirms the author’s digital response to politics and her exercise of unconventional politics—in that Cepeda uses an online platform to protest or espouse her own political views—the follower map signals a type of transnational activism. Moreover, Cepeda’s followers are not just inactive receivers of Twitter content; instead, they are able to interact with the material and elect to retweet or reply to a tweet. This asynchronous, yet direct online model for conversation signals an incessant exchange of ideas and a constant, unmediated dialogue. In addition to the multifaceted dialogue(s) Twitter encourages, knowledge of the diverse geographic locations of Cepeda’s digital public as referenced by Twitter allows for a tracing of Cepeda’s digital footprint and shows how Latina/os can use

4. It should be noted that the coding software R needs to “clean” location data retrieved from Twitter prior to running additional code to plot and graph the results. Depending on the extent of the cleaning, this lowers the number of Twitter followers with locations that can be plotted on a map.

digital platforms as an activist outlet connecting them to their country of origin. The geographical range of Cepeda's followers, however, extends far beyond the United States and Hispaniola, confirming a wider following and international influence.

After considering language patterns referenced on Cepeda's personal Twitter account and visualizing the global makeup of her followers, I now turn to *Bird of Paradise*, to analyze the use of language in the autobiographical text and the ways in which language caters to a specific audience. First, I will consider the constant use of code switching in the text. From the opening pages of the memoir, code switching emerges as a constant. There are over eighty Spanish-language words in the first chapter alone; such insertions appear interspersed as a single word or short phrase, and always in italics. It is important to distinguish between Spanglish and code switching. Spanglish, in linguistic terms, is a form of code switching representative of an Anglicized dialect of Spanish spoken in the United States. Cultural critic and linguist Ilan Stavans purports Spanglish to be a linguistic phenomenon, stating in *Spanglish: The New American Language* (2004) that instead of describing Spanglish as a "clash," his "own political approach is made clear by the alternative: *encounter*. English and Spanish have found each other, they have become partners in this ever-expanding mode of communication" (18).⁵ Regarded by some scholars as constituting a "broken" language (17), Spanglish, as Stavans defines it, is "the verbal encounter between Anglo and Hispano civilizations" (5). My primary focus in analyzing *Bird of Paradise* is code switching, which is generally regarded as the alternation—rather than the "encounter" or "intermixing"—of two separate languages in a given conversation or text. The examples of code switching in *Bird of Paradise* are plentiful and to some extent the motivation or use of the language alternation can be codified. The paragraphs below chart code switching in the memoir as an attempt to mask a derogatory term in English, to provide culturally specific alternatives to racially charged terms, and to represent regionalisms or *dominicanismos*.

The alternation of languages in *Bird of Paradise* is not solely between Spanish and English. Rather, the text is multidialectal. While code switching between Spanish and English dominates the memoir, Dominican Spanish, Ebonics, Haitian Creole, and other languages also find representation in the two-part text. There is also an alternation between standard English and colloquial English. On Twitter, a more informal platform in which typos and abbreviations are considered the norm, colloquial English *is* the standard. Moreover, while many Latina/o authors who publish primarily in English, including Cepeda, occasionally tweet in Spanish or code switch within a single tweet, the juxtaposition between the two alternating

5. Examples of Spanglish in the text are minimal. One example is the use of the term "dominiyorkian" (9). This fusion of "Dominican" or "dominicano" and "York" (from New York) is reflective of Josefina Báez's use of the term and its variants in her performance text *Dominicanish* (2000).

languages is less explicit on Twitter, in part because Twitter does not allow for words to be italicized. Furthermore, it can be difficult or impossible to reproduce accents and special characters in the Spanish language on formats such as Twitter. Ñ (or enye), for example, cannot be included as part of a handle or username.

Numerous linguists have codified the range of code switching strategies utilized by Latina/o authors. Lourdes Torres's 2007 study considers Latina/o texts written between 1990 and 2004 and assesses a range of different literary works for their levels of accessibility for the monolingual reader. Torres identifies the following three categories: (1) "Easily Accessed, Transparent, or Cushioned Spanish"; (2) "Gratifying the Bilingual Reader"; and (3) "Radical Bilingualism." Easily accessed code switching is the alternation between languages when the second language, in this case Spanish, is familiar for the monolingual reader. Examples include proper names like "mamá," or common Hispanic foods. In this first category of code switching as detailed by Torres, if the translation is not obvious it is provided and the Spanish words are marked in italics. Writers who use this technique, to an extent, "may desire to mark the text as Latino/a at the linguistic level but may not wish to alienate monolingual English readers" (79). The second category provides no translation or distinguishing of text written in the foreign language (no italics or quotation marks). Writers employing the "Gratifying the Bilingual Reader" strategy prioritize the bilingual and bicultural reader. The final category denotes a "Radical Bilingualism" in the sense that code switching pervades the entire text, a uniquely bilingual work. These texts model sustained code switching and are accessible only to bilingual readers. Unsurprisingly, such experimental texts—Torres identifies Giannina Braschi's *Yo-Yo Boing!* and Susana Chávez-Silverman's *Killer Crónicas* as two examples—are published primarily by academic presses as opposed to mainstream or trade presses.

While other studies besides Torres's three-tiered approach also identify types of code switching in Latina/o literature, the majority of these center on linguistic classifications and constraints on code switching, applying "linguistic criteria to literary code-switching" (Lipski 194).⁶ John Lipski's "Spanish-English Language Switching in Speech and Literature: Theories and Models," for example, is an earlier model similar to Torres's in that it denotes three "types" of code switching, of varying accessibility for nonbilingual readers. Lipski's Types II and III, similar to Torres's distinction between the "Bilingual Reader" strategy and "Radical Bilingualism," are differentiated by "intersentential" (Type II) and "intrasentential" (Type III) code switching. Here, intersentential refers to the alternation of

6. A sampling of such studies includes Gary D. Keller's "The Literary Stratagems Available to the Bilingual Chicano Writer" (1979), Laura Callahan's *Spanish/English Code-Switching in a Written Corpus* (2004), and Carol Myers-Scotton's *Duelling Languages: Grammatical Structure in Code-Switching* (1993).

Spanish and English sentences; intrasentential, to the replacement of one language by another midway through any given sentence. Following this model, in which Lipski focuses on Latina/o literature, one can categorize most of the code switching in *Bird of Paradise* as intrasentential. Although intersentential switching does exist in the text, it occurs primarily within dialogue between the author and a Spanish speaker.

In his 1978 study, linguist Rodolfo Jacobson attempts to delineate linguistic criteria that allow code switching to occur. In doing so, Jacobson identifies the all-encompassing category of “preference,” a category that can explain code switching in a literary text when no specific reason is clear. The constant use of code switching in the case of derogatory or vulgar words can be classified as one of “preference”: an author’s decision to reproduce words often deemed unprofessional or inappropriate in Spanish reflects personal preference and is often a reflection of his or her own societal use of language. An example in *Bird of Paradise* is a conversation between Cepeda’s stepmother, Rocío, and a friend. The friend “calls Rocío *una santa* for sacrificing so much for the boys while their father, a good-for-nothing *comemierda*, parties with other women” (75). *Comemierda* represents a Spanish compound (*come* meaning “eat” and *mierda* meaning “shit”) that functions as a synonym for “jackass” or “imbecile” in English. Additionally, the word “bitch” appears only once in English (on p. 240) in the memoir. The multiple other allusions are to the Spanish equivalent, *puta* (10, 16, 25, 26, 92, 95). Other Spanish-language insertions for what many consider to be profanities in English include *culo* (“ass,” 5, 15), *coño* (“shit/fuck,” 7), and *jodedores* (“fuckers,” 4), among others. Such examples are often syntactic reversals, Spanish nouns inserted for their English counterparts. As Casielles-Suárez notes in a study about Junot Díaz’s use of what she refers to as “radical code-switching,” in instances with strong language “rather than switching codes, Díaz is massively borrowing Spanish lexical items and treating them as if they were English terms” (480). In most cases, the insertion of strong language in Spanish does not conform to Spanish grammatical structures. Cepeda’s “tons of *putas* of all ages” (16), for example, defies traditional Spanish grammatical syntax, which instead would begin the sentence with the noun: “... *putas* de varias edades.”

The second pattern evident in the author’s use of code switching in *Bird of Paradise* centers on the appearance of racial terms. Reflective of Cepeda’s marked interest in race on her Twitter account as well as her role as one of the codiscussants of the recently cancelled Panoply podcast “About Race” (Full title: “Our National Conversation About Conversations About Race”), the memoir at large is rooted in racial exploration. Cepeda explores race on an individual and familial basis, but also comments on the racial consciousness of Dominicans, both on the island and in the diaspora. Just before she narrates her candid discussion with Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons, Cepeda summarizes anti-Black sentiment

in the Dominican Republic for her readers, noting, "Dominicans have, perhaps intrinsically, managed to resist disremembering their African ancestry rather than forgetting it" (251). Dominicanist Silvio Torres-Saillant in *Introduction to Dominican Blackness* (2010) shares Cepeda's reference to a "black behind the ear" mentality.⁷ Torres-Saillant confirms: "Blacks and mulattoes make up nearly 90% of the contemporary Dominican population. Yet no other country in the hemisphere exhibits greater indeterminacy regarding the population's sense of racial identity" (4). Examples of code switching in *Bird of Paradise* in which Cepeda elects to write racial terms as untranslated Spanish are numerous and include *morena* (15, 112), *caramelito* (42), *trigueña* (47), *prieta* (63), *indio/a* (31, 57, 107), and *africana* (13, 97). These examples range from formal terms used in the Dominican Republic to codify race on national identity cards (or *cédulas*) to terms of endearment with racial undertones.⁸

Indio/a, when referring concretely to its historical use in the Dominican Republic, can denote a racial category imposed by the infamous twentieth-century Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo in the 1950s. Kimberly Eison Simmons clarifies: "The construction of *indio* as a non-black, mixed, race/color category is in relation to Haitians, who were defined on the census as black." She continues, "Over time, the usage of *indio* color descriptors and categories had the effect of distancing Dominicans from their African heritage and ideas of blackness in an attempt to create an affinity toward Spanish ideals against an indigenous (Taíno) landscape" (29). The irony, perhaps, in the use of the term "indio"⁹ in the Dominican context has to do with the fact that the term historically implies a negation of Blackness and African heritage. The repeated appearance of "indio/a" in the memoir is capable of reinforcing racial hierarchies, despite the work's overall rhetoric of racial democracy. Throughout the second part of the memoir, however,

7. This term, "El negro tras de la oreja," references an 1883 poem by Dominican Juan Antonio Alix in which the poetic voice criticizes Dominicans attempting to pass as white and deny their Black ancestry. Critic Ginetta Candelario popularized the phrase with the publication of her book *Black behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (2007).

8. Cepeda addresses in the preface to *Bird of Paradise* the "Dominican Republic Electoral Law Reform," the bill passed in 2011 that eradicated the category "indio/a" on the *cédula*. Post-2011, the Dominican *cédula* offers only three options, all related to an established ethnic group: mulatto, black, and white. Cepeda writes, "I find it troubling that if I wish to officially recognize the Indigenous fragment of myself, it won't be legal" (xvii).

9. There are various uses of "indio/a" in the memoir, many with different contextual significance. The "india" on page 31, for example, references the Dominican Virgin, La Virgen de Altigracia. Page 57, on the other hand, refers to a racial, phenotypic understanding of the term: "His long black DA and those high cheekbones made him look like an indio." The eighth chapter, titled "God Bodies and indios" (107), instead points to an Indigenous understanding of the term as Taíno or Carib; Cepeda writes in the chapter: "Look, even in the D.R., the Taíno and Carib Indians and the Original Asiatic Black had to contend with those white devil Spaniards" (111).

Cepeda *celebrates* her DNA results with clear roots in Africa. The maternal ancestry on both her mother's and father's sides, for example, hails from West and Central Africa (242, 264). Cepeda remarks: "the history of Africa in the Americas is a fascinating one, and somewhere along the line, the narrative runs through my veins" (246). The inclusion of various racially charged Spanish terms in the memoir in many ways speaks to the complexity of race in the Dominican Republic and the Dominican diaspora and confirms contemporary usage of Dominican racial terms in the United States regardless of connotation or etymology.¹⁰ The aforementioned podcast "About Race" furthers Cepeda's racial dialogue as related specifically to Dominican politics; an entire episode titled "Cancel Your Punta Cana Wedding" focuses on the 2013 Dominican Tribunal Court ruling that stripped the citizenship of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent.

In the preface to her memoir, Cepeda offers her commentary on Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s series *Black in Latin America*. The episode focused on the Dominican Republic includes a conversation between Gates and a Ministry of Culture employee in which said employee states "there were no more Indigenous people left on the island like there were in South America, so Dominicans used the term [indio/a] to negate their blackness" (xvi-xvii). Cepeda identifies the surface-level racial dialogue between the two men as "archaic," faulting the discussion for not addressing the reasons behind a denial of Blackness for Dominicans and other Latina/os. What can make conversations surrounding the complexities of race and identity less "archaic" includes the motion to integrate new generations of Dominicans and transnational Dominican Americans into the conversation. A widening of the public sphere for Caribbean Latina/os, as well as the expansion of the public sphere into a *digital* public sphere as exemplified by Cepeda's wide Twitter following, more profoundly examines and probes existing and "archaic" or traditional racial dialogues. In this sense, the code switching in *Bird of Paradise* in specific reference to racial terms succeeds in meeting and encouraging a bilingual readership. A literary confrontation of the complexities and tensions surrounding racial identity in the Dominican Republic *and* the Dominican diaspora becomes enhanced and increasingly authentic via dual language behavior.

Finally, the third pattern in Cepeda's use of code switching in *Bird of Paradise* relates to the myriad dominicanisms or regionalisms in the text. Many of these instances favoring colloquial language speak to the pattern of nonliterary language or streetwise jargon in both the memoir and Cepeda's presence on Twitter. The abbreviations used on Twitter and visible in the word cloud of Cepeda's Twitter

10. One example is the use of racial terms as nicknames, often used in loving, familial terms in Dominican culture: "I've heard Mama and Papa say that people in Santo Domingo referred to Ercilia's mother as *la prieta* Francisca because she was darker than the night sky" (63).

account are, similar to the dominicanisms, not comprehensible for all users.¹¹ While abbreviated words and nongrammatical syntax are hallmarks of Twitter, fellow Dominican American author Junot Díaz often faces criticism for the fact that his writing requires readers not only to translate unitalicized or unmarked Spanish words and phrases but also to perform a cultural translation, in an attempt to make sense of history, popular culture, and racial politics.¹² In an article titled "Revenge of the Nerd: Junot Díaz and the Networks of American Literary Imagination," critic Ed Finn considers Díaz's general online readership. Finn puts into focus the "digital traces of book culture" (1) to decipher the ways that readers and machines work in tandem to undertake a novel like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. While Finn primarily analyzes consumer reviews and automated recommendations from websites like Amazon and LibraryThing, Díaz's 2007 novel has also been annotated by a public readership online. The public glossary www.annotated-oscar-wao.com, for example, contains notes and translations for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* created by a monolingual reader who found herself unable to page through the novel without constantly referencing Wikipedia and free online translation programs like Google Translate. The connections between readers and machines relates directly to an understanding of vernacular culture. If the digital or the machine can stand for the informal, nonelite, or subordinate sphere, this notion allows one to consider how digital dialogues encourage individuals to question and reshape understandings of difficult concepts relating to identity and geopolitical borders, for example. Approaching the digital sphere as borderless helps to approach a translational Latina/o public sphere that also inherently crosses boundaries. The hybrid nature of web-based communication, then, allows for users to prioritize the vernacular over institutional, elitist discourse.

Cepeda's memoir, in a similar fashion, forces the monolingual reader to keep his or her laptop or Spanish-English dictionary accessible. While Cepeda elects to mark non-English words in italics, there is no glossary and the constant use of regionalisms or dominicanisms makes the text, at times, difficult to understand even for bilingual readers. A sample of such "dominicanismos" includes "cibaeña" (12), referring to an individual from the Cibao region in northern Dominican Republic; "tigere" (12), a dominicanism for "hustler"; "di'que" (4), meaning "he said/she said"; and "fukú" (78), referring to the curse Dominicans believe Christopher Columbus brought to Hispaniola in 1492. To understand these terms,

11. A reason behind the abbreviations on Twitter is the 140-character maximum. Many tweets challenge grammatical syntax and shorten words as much as possible.

12. Díaz represents just one example of a larger phenomenon within Latina/o literature; within Dominican American letters alone, other notable authors to perform linguistic and cultural code switching include Julia Alvarez, Loida Maritza Pérez, and Josefina Báez.

a reader would need to be familiar with a specific (Dominican) Spanish dialect in addition to a particular cultural and historical context. Moreover, much like the evasion of grammatical norms on Twitter, oftentimes dominicanisms and other Spanish words do not follow Spanish syntactical norms. While Cepeda reproduces the Dominican phrase for “hustler” (or a deceitful, manipulative individual) as “tigere,” the phrase—in order to preserve the correct Spanish pronunciation—should be spelled “tiguere.” Relatedly, although some Spanish words in the memoir are accented correctly, many are not: “a quien estás mirando?,” “que paso” (111), and “sientate” (113) are just a few examples. Although a missing accent may be relatively insignificant, and does not change the message or value of the literary text, the miswritten Spanish words serve to conflate the intended audience of the memoir. These examples of missing accents mirror the often nongrammatical Spanish of bilinguals on Twitter. Moreover, the grammatical lapse suggests that the accentuation of Spanish words is irrelevant because most readers do not need the written accentuation to correctly pronounce the words; this argument assumes the pronunciation of these Spanish words would likely already be compromised by the monolingual English-speaking reader.

In Cepeda’s attempt to recreate her own search for an identity “before we became Latino” (xiv) within the text, the regionalisms and dominicanisms prove representative of her individual journey and the diverse communities she inhabits. These colloquialisms reflect the author’s voice and experiences. What makes the memoir increasingly complex is the fact that Cepeda’s inclusion of “regionalisms”—words and phrases linked to a specific space or geography—hail from not one but two spaces: the Dominican Republic and New York. Born in Harlem but later connected to uptown Manhattan’s hip-hop culture, Cepeda at times prompts the reader to perform cultural translations, as opposed to simply linguistic translations. Thus, returning to Torres’s three categories of code switching strategies in Latina/o texts, none of the three adequately fits *Bird of Paradise*. Although Cepeda’s use of Spanish may appear to be “easily accessed,” in large part due to the fact that Spanish words are italicized and set apart from the English text, the lack of glossary or translations and the existence of multiple linguistic and cultural registers pushes the memoir’s code switching strategies even beyond that of “gratifying the bilingual reader.” It may be that no reader, monolingual or multilingual, approaches a text like *Bird of Paradise* without some difficulty. The epigraph at the beginning of chapter 7 (written first in Spanish and directly below in English) is from Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1986): “Simultaneously, I saw my face from different angles/And my face, like reality, had multiple characters” (87). While the quote speaks to individuals of multiethnic identities, it also relates to multilingual identities. Anzaldúa, in fact, writes about her experience with language as “linguistic terrorism,” framing language in Foucauldian terms based on its

ability to exclude.¹³ Anzaldúa's motives for code switching are political, intended to force others—namely, monolingual readers—to feel the same split or disconnect that she has. In this sense, the code switching in *Bird of Paradise* can be understood as the politically charged equivalent to Cepeda's public Twitter account, framed largely as a response to US politics. Cepeda's memoir, albeit more subtly, asserts Blackness and other aspects of the US Latina/o experience by asking readers to perform a translation of transnational terminology.

Discerning Cepeda's motive behind code switching in *Bird of Paradise* also relates to the intended audience of the memoir. While analyzing various uses of code switching in the work frames the text as multidialectal, *Bird of Paradise* is not fully accessible for a monolingual reader. The imagined "public sphere" with language skills and the historical and cultural context necessary to fully understand the memoir is a limited one. While code switching offers cultural and linguistic authenticity to a text and can best represent the dual language use of Latina/o authors like Cepeda, it can also limit the audience. A literary public sphere, however, is not the same as a digital public sphere. As referenced by Cepeda's Twitter account and its global follower profile, a digital message—in a condensed, colloquial format—is more readily accessible to the masses. Notably, no non-English words registered in the word cloud search of keywords over the seven-day span of @raquelcepeda, possibly confirming that intended readership may differ from online to the written page. At the same time, the political thrust of Cepeda's Twitter account, as well as her colloquial, relaxed language, concretizes parallels between the digital and the literary.

Cepeda explores both the digital and literary public spheres considered in the previous pages via her racial commentary. This dialogue, highlighted or emphasized in the memoir by the code switching and a clear thematic pattern in Cepeda's tweets, signals the most obvious example of unconventional politics in *Bird of Paradise* in the sense that the author espouses her own politically charged responses to racial realities and adds her voice to both national and international conversations about race. Although the mediums are different and autobiography and microblogging platforms like Twitter are not approached with the same writer's mindset or end goal, both *Bird of Paradise* and @raquelcepeda respond to political, social, and cultural realities—Twitter just does so in real time. Cepeda's recent memoir as well as her digital presence, as referenced by her Twitter account,

13. Anzaldúa's linguistic stance paints language as a violent clash, a sentiment shared by Díaz. Díaz notes in an interview with Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien: "When I learned English in the States this was a violent enterprise." Díaz then denotes his attempt to mirror this clash or violence on the written page as his "revenge on English" (209–10). Not translating, much as it is for Anzaldúa, is a political move for Díaz, to not position Spanish as a second-rate language.

are signposts for boundary-less communities in dialogue with diverse, multicultural public spheres. Both, in their own ways, mimic the sentiment shared by fellow Dominican American writer Julia Alvarez when describing her own artistic motivation: “I’m mapping a country that’s not on the map, and that’s why I’m trying to put it down on paper” (173). While Cepeda’s imaginary literary public sphere is accessed “on paper,” a possible digital Latina/o sphere widens her audience—in part because of a confirmed transnational following but also due to the condensation of the dialogue to respect the 140-character limit. The online presence, in many ways, is increasingly important for Latina/o authors as its orality and brevity render (digital) messages accessible for a wider audience. Cepeda’s exploration of identity both on- and off-page, professed to a digital and literary public, as “a transnational who isn’t all the way American or Dominican but travels between both worlds” (177), demonstrates how language choice and language use relate directly to the transnational public that Latina/os such as Cepeda address in both digital and print form.

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