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Sarah Nieves-Squires

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Cultural Identity and Bilingualism in the Puerto Rican Reality

Sarah Nieves-Squires

Mi yo, que me arrebatan mi yo! exclaimed Michelet ; a shout that is hurled - muted, albeit so loud it can be (and often is) perceived as strident- by those who claim "am e Rican" and who also are "American" citizens. Because Puerto Rico has been a colony of the United States since Spain, who originally colonized it in the 15th century, ceded it to the United States as bounty of war after losing the Spanish American War in 1898, it has long been condemned to suffer the throes of cultural identity. For the last decade, I have harbored the suspicion that Puerto Ricans have come gradually to suffer a concept of cultural identity that is deeply embedded in the continuity of postcolonial structures. This assumption is based on my observation of the ways in which validation structures superimposed by the metropolis assume power over definitions of cultural identity among Puerto Ricans. The most salient one, and the one I will concern myself with in this article is language usage.

Pursuing this quest has held my interest for quite a while: if language is the determining factor, who can claim ascription to the "true" Puerto Rican identity, when there are as many Puerto Ricans living in the United States unable to claim Spanish as their vernacular? What are the validating elements? Who decides?

The concept of cultural identity as it is usually played amongst Puerto Ricans is closely tied to one of three modes of linguistic performance: 1) those who speak only Spanish, most of whom are island bound, and who claim true "Borinqueñismo" 1 2) those who speak only English, continent bound, who are mostly called "Nuyoricans" 2, and 3) those who speak both languages, but who feel more comfortable in one or the other, depending on the ties that bind them to Borinquen, or to any of many locations in "el norte". This multifaceted identity crossroad is not new to Puerto Rican discourse. It arises from the fact that our language as we know it has always been tied to colonial structures. We are hard put to identify the totality of our native forbears' language, given the excellent job the Spaniards did on their numbers. We received Spanish from the Iberian invaders; English was imposed by the United States invaders, and thus, ironically, we now struggle with English through the Spanish we inherited from the colonizers who virtually eliminated our native forebears. Nonetheless, it is a Spanish sparkled by words emerging from the Taíno substratum - huracán, enagua, batey, to name but a few.

When German de la Granda published his book analyzing the healthy structure and continuous usage of Spanish in Puerto Rico, there was a collective sigh of relief about how we had managed to retain "nuestra lengua" vis-à-vis the frontal attack posed by the English language. During this whole process of acknowledging language as the collective instrument of homogenization, the datum of the assumption that those who spoke Spanish were the true Puerto Ricans, and those who were English-speaking tended to be looked at partly askance sort of escaped us. The metropolis exercised at that time (as it continues to do today) the role of validator. Stateside, the accented English of the islanders is not perceived as apt; yet neither is the Bronx accented Rican accepted as valid currency. Spanish banished as an alien presence; Puerto Rican stateside speakers subsumed in a sibilant and insulting term: SPIKS. Unfruitful as they were, the efforts of the U.S. of imposing the English language on the islanders via not only the language of instruction, but through the use of textbooks and other educational materials, have taken their toll on both sides of the ocean. But none suffer it more than those who reside stateside. Once again, following on the steps of the defunct Spanish Empire, the metropolis seeks to define our voice. And that voice is embedded in a language that we may choose to ascribe to or not, yet one that determines our personal circumstance. Spain stifled our forebears' voice through genocide. The U.S. stifles our inherited voice through the onslaught of our mores and folkways; through the negation of bilingualism as an achievement; through the continued isolation of "the language issue" from the colonization issue. There are many who would say that the sum of this is tantamount to genocide.

So if the language that we speak defines us, who are the true Puerto Ricans? Who validates us? Who are we associated with?

As it is wont to be the case in the U.S., ethnic definition rapidly becomes racial definition. In a survey made by the Latino National Political Survey in 1992, 47% of Puerto Ricans born in the island identify themselves as "Hispanic" or "Latino", so as to escape the dichotomy superimposed by the metropolis of having to choose between White or Black- there's no option for those who are a mixture of both. There is no place where one can claim to be Puerto Rican. Yet another way by which the metropolis imputes our cultural identity, retaining the right to validate our existence, albeit in paper. The answer lying in being subsumed in somebody else's panic.

Given the diasporic experience of Puerto Ricans, the role that language usage plays in the designation of cultural identity and the ways in which the answers are isolated from linguistic sources remains one of interest.

In de Saussure's distinction between *langue* (the language system in the abstract) and *parole* (which refers to the actual utterances of human speakers), *parole* remains variegated and personal, but *langue* provides the abstract framework, the structure that is not subject to individual whims and adaptations. It is constructed socially. In some Puerto Rican actualities the *langue* emphasizes adherence to a language rid of pesky referents to

the colonial structure, as embodied in the intrusive English language insertions and accommodations, while the parole rejoices in rapping its way into an irreverent convergence of the Bard meeting the Hidalgos. 4 Thus, I cannot but view the Puerto Rican language as a system of signs shuttling between double-sided linguistic signs where one side signifies and the other is signified. One side across the ocean, another side ghettoized; both socially constructed by the metropolis. How much power does the signifier have? We must deconstruct the 'sign' in order to assess its significance.

In Castile, during the seventeenth century, the Military Orders, who were the arbiters of nobility, required "proof of nobility and purity of Christian blood on both sides for three generations" 5. They would, in effect, validate the status system through three principles of social classification: function, lineage and wealth. Today, social scientists tell us that migrant populations require three generations before they can return a loving gaze towards their ethnic "roots". And we all know that beneath the cloak of equality in these United States, those same principles of function, lineage and wealth still lurk. Language, an integral part of the lineage is a required proof for the Puerto Rican who searches or claims validation of his/her cultural identity. Yet the function of the Puerto Ricans within the economic picture of the U.S. continues to place them within the lower echelon of the hierarchy. How, then, can third generation Ricans aspire to the wealth that would propel them out of their constricted real or perceived circumstance and towards a validation of their Puertoricanness? It is clearly not by speaking English, since already three generations have lost their Spanish and have yet to see the fruits of compensation for their loss. (Not to mention the fact that the Blacks have been speaking English for the last two hundred years and have yet to set themselves free of the economic shackles that bind them into the bundles of "the poor".) It is not by becoming monolinguals in English unable to claim their own rich cultural patrimony yet unable to partake of the Anglo investiture. And so far it certainly has not been through the continued defense of Spanish as a language of instruction and identification. Nevertheless, the language issue is used to pit state-side dwellers against islanders. Who can vote in the plebiscite? Who should? Is language the issue? Who decides? The status may not be at issue, but the language certainly is.6

What we have witnessed in the recent years is a transformation in the way Puerto Ricans acknowledge their solidarity - a transition from a vocabulary where the signifier held the key to acceptance based on linguistic uniformity to one wherein the signified claims allegiance not based on linguistic ascription, but on the love of the land and things Puerto Rican. There are proportionately more Independentistas 7 living in the U.S. than in Puerto Rico. This stands to reason, given the mistreatment and general defacement of bilinguality and otherness experienced by Puerto Ricans in this country. Yes, we see indices of discomfort when *el amor patrio* 8 forces islanders to stand cheek to jowl with Nuyoricans in order to affirm and defend the island's patrimony. After all, there are "orgullos que proteger" 9 on both sides of the Atlantic. But when all is said and done, the

issue of cultural identity shapes not only the way we speak about ourselves and about our world, but it also reflects how we perceive our situation in the political arena. The defense of the language we have come to claim as our voice, whether it is vis-à-vis the invader or in intra class or gender altercations is what solidifies our resolve to not be subsumed into that scary void of 'Porto Rico' 10, where we are perforce obliged to explain ourselves, and in a language that we do not claim as our own, at that.

Notes

1 Borinquen is the indigenous name for what is now known as Puerto Rico

Nuyorican is the name ascribed to Puerto Ricans born and residing in New York.

In Spanish, the name for the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States is translated literally as Free, Associated State.

Hidalgo is the embodiment of hidalguia, the traditional definition of which is 'the nobility which descends to men through their lineage'.

1 A Thompson, in *Language, History and Class*, Corfield, ed. Blackwell, 1991

A rallying point for the Popular Democratic Party in Puerto Rico was 'El status no está en issue' (The status is not at issue)

Followers of pro-independence movement

Love of the motherland

Pride to be salvaged

An acceptance that English speakers insisted in applying to the island's name in an effort to Anglicize it.