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¡Qué, qué?! Transculturación and Tato Laviera’s Spanglish poetics
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In this article, I begin with a brief synopsis of Laviera’s four poetry collections, followed by a detailed analysis of selected poems from all four collections in order to demonstrate how Laviera displays a unique transcultural cosmology through language. First, I discuss poems that deal with the relationships between languages and how they affect one’s identity. Next, I explore Laviera’s emphasis on the non-European roots in the transcultural process and how this emphasis reveals transculturation as a resistance strategy. Similarly, an analysis of Laviera’s stress on popular culture, orality, and music further emphasizes Laviera’s transcultural philosophy as a means of survival and creativity. Lastly, I describe Laviera’s homage to certain poets and declamadores, as well as his insistence upon the Nuyorican’s contribution to the formation of Puerto Rican culture. Together, these various points demonstrate how through transculturation Nuyoricans and Latinos transform their language to reflect their biculturalism, and create an entirely new code. [Key words: Spanglish, Tato Laviera, Puerto Rican Literature, Latino Literature, Nuyorican Literature, Nuyorican Language, Transculturation]
Tato Laviera makes his role as poet clear in the first poem of his first collection of poetry. In “para ti, mundo bravo” of *La carreta made a U-turn* (1979), he states “I am nothing but a historian / who took your actions / and jotted them on paper” (13). For Laviera, *el pueblo y su gente* are the subjects of his poetry and from where the most authentic culture emerges. He feels that it is his duty, as a Nuyorican poet, to document that culture. As is the case for many poets, the word is at the center of his creation, his creativity. However, in the case of Laviera, a Puerto Rican born in Santurce and raised in New York City, language takes on an important and political role. Frances Aparicio has identified four major poetic moments in the metalinguistic discourse of Latino poetry: “bilingualism as conflict; the dismantling of institutionalized forms of discourse; the redefining of literacy; and Latino language(s) as a source of empowerment” (“Language” 58). What makes Laviera’s poetry so unique, powerful, and exceptional is that all four major poetic moments are present.

In an interview, Laviera tells how he became a poet:

So in May of 1960 I was Jesús Laviera Sánchez, and in September, three months afterward, when I started classes here [in New York], I was Abraham Laviera. That affected me a lot. That’s when I decided to be a writer, to go back to my name. When I became a writer, I said “I don’t want to go back to either Jesús or Abraham”; I used my nickname, Tato. (“Interview” 83)

Laviera’s choice not to use either Jesús or Abraham, but Tato, reflects his attitude toward his choice of language. Laviera does not choose between Spanish or English. His personal reality and the reality of his people, the Nuyoricans, is not one of either
an abiding reminiscence of abandoned national roots, must be restored to its natural place in a world uncontaminated by inhuman modernity and incompatible foreign values” (Divided 169).

Laviera’s oxcart, however, opts not for Puerto Rico, but instead makes a u-turn and stays in New York, just as so many Puerto Ricans did and still do. Laviera himself refers to this collection as the fourth act of the Marqués play (“Interview” 81). The first section of la carreta made a U-turn, titled “Metropolis Dreams,” directly references the last act or Marqués’ play, “La metrópoli.” Laviera’s metropolis, not unlike Marqués’, portrays a harsh New York reality, filled with scenes of hunger, cold, poverty, drugs, abandoned buildings, subways, and homelessness. One may read the second section of U-turn, “Loisaida Streets: Latinas Sing,” as what became of the displaced Doña Gabrielas in New York. These Latinas portray hope, sadness, love, freedom, rhythm, and, above all, survival. The third and last section of this collection, titled “El Arrabal: Nuevo Rumbón,” suggests a new path for the Nuyorican that returns to the cultural richness of Puerto Rican popular culture. This popular culture, the product of transculturation, according to Laviera is African at its root, and reflected best in the bomba, plena, and décima. Unlike Marqués, Laviera sees the possibility of such a return to Puerto Rican culture not in the physical return to the island, but instead the poet calls for a new transculturation between the popular culture of the Island and that of New York. Laviera’s “nuevo rumbón,” or new transculturation, allows Nuyoricans to challenge the acculturating forces of Anglo society.

Just as in la carreta made a U-turn, ENCLAVE begins in English and ends in Spanish while filling the pages in between with Spanglish, moving between languages and mixing them with great ease. The very title of this second collection indicates Laviera’s linguistic aptitude. It can be seen as a possible reference to the enclave of Puerto Ricans in New York, and one can also interpret enclave as en clave, in a code or to the beat of the clave. All of these definitions, however, apply and thereby demonstrate Laviera’s capacity to use language in order to portray a unique worldview. Again divided into three sections, “Feelings of One,” “Oro in Gold,” and “Prendas,” Laviera presents “a gallery of cultural heroes whose every essence is adaptation and survival within the enclave that allows for freedom of identity and expression” (Kanellos “Introduction” 3). Here the transculturation of Puerto Rican culture in New York called for in his first collection has taken effect and has given the enclave its unique place and flavor in the metropolis.

In Laviera’s third collection, AmeRican, Laviera proposes and defines a new, more humane America. Just as Laviera proposes in the two previous collections, the African and Indigenous are the humanizing factors and principal creators of a transcultural Puerto Rican culture. In AmeRican, Laviera suggests the need for a new humane
At first glance, it seems that the poetic voice is caught in a world of confusion, a world in which Spanish and English clash, leaving the poet and the community without any language. The placement of this poem within the collection is important. Located in the first section of *la carreta made a U-turn*, “Metropolis Dreams,” it is preceded and followed by depictions of a cruel New York. A New York of drugs, death, cold, and abandoned buildings—*el arrabal*. However, this poem apparently points to another brutal reality: loss of language and the failure of the education system. The reference to his name, Abraham, reflects that defining moment in Laviera’s life upon his arrival in the United States when a teacher changed his name: The very moment that made Laviera a poet out of his need to reclaim his name.

However, just as Laviera comes to realize that neither his Spanish given name—Jesús—nor his adopted English name—Abraham—will suffice, the same is true of his language choice. Neither English nor Spanish will do. Nevertheless, a solution exists: the acceptance of Spanglish as his language. The very title, “my graduation speech,” is indicative of this. His graduation may be read as the realization and acceptance of Spanglish as his language. “Matao” or not, Spanglish is his language and he will not make any excuses about it. The placement of the poem within the collection points to this conclusion. Not only is it the first statement on language, but while the four previous poems are mostly in English, with the exception of a sprinkling of a few Spanish words, “my graduation speech” is followed by a roller coaster ride of movements without warning between a range of English(es) and Spanish(es), which leads ultimately to the creation of a true Spanglish text. Placed in the center of the first section of his first collection, depictions of a brutal and ugly New York precede and follow the poem. The placement, then, would also seem to reveal the survival skills and creativity of the Nuyoricans who, surrounded by such despair and poverty, are able to not just survive, but also create, among other things, an entirely new language of their own. That language, Spanglish, the result of the Nuyoricans’ resistance to hegemonic acculturating forces, proves that transculturation can be a resistance strategy. As Aparicio observes “Language for Latinos in the U.S. is not merely a philosophical idea nor an intellectual luxury. It is a matter of survival, of life and death” (“Language” 59).

This linguistic condition leads the poet to comment on the relations between the languages within the Nuyorican community in all of his collections. The ties between the languages directly reflect the world of acceptance, negation, loss, uprooting, imposition, and transfer that the community has lived both on the Island and in the metropolis. Take for instance Laviera’s stance on the Spanish language. Although Laviera enthusiastically embraces Spanglish, the poet in no way abandons Spanish for Spanglish. Quite the opposite, Laviera sees in Spanish the strength to endure, and he is determined to preserve the language. Laviera observes in the poem “spanish”:

...
same hometown” (47). Such conflict is beautifully displayed in “brava,” one of Laviera’s best expressions of bilingualism and the tension that language(s) can cause. As Rauline notes, “The poem starts with a tight separation between the two codes to illustrate the lack of understanding, or rather the unwillingness to understand” (156). Brava reflects:

they kept on telling me
“tú eres disparatera”
they kept on telling me
“no se entiende”
they kept on telling me
“habla claro, speak spanish”
they kept on telling me
telling me, telling me
and so, the inevitable
my spanish arrived
“tú quieres que yo hable en español” y le dije
all the spanish words
in the vocabulary, you
know which ones, las que
cortan, and then i proceeded
to bilingualize it, i know
yo sé that que you know
tú sabes que yo soy that
i am puertorriqueña in
english and there’s nothing
you can do but to accept
it como yo soy sabrosa
proud ask any streetcorner
where pride is what you defend
go ahead, ask me, on any streetcorner that i am not puertorriqueña,
come dímelo aquí en mi cara
offend me, atrévete, a menos
of his son’s disparate sounding talk
melao remembered he was criticized
back in puerto rico for speaking
arrabal black spanish
in the required english class

melao knew that if anybody
called his son american
they would shout puertorro
in english and spanish

dual mixtures of melao and melaítos
spanglish speaking son
así es la cosa papá (Mainstream Ethics 27)

Here Laviera challenges the idea of the purity of any language, as both languages,
English and Spanish, are transformed by non-European elements. Melao’s Santurce
Spanish was too black for teachers in Puerto Rico, and his exposure to this prejudice
does not allow him to feel shameful of his own son’s language. However, the
description of Melaito’s speech as a “disparate sounding / talk” may cause some
confusion as to whether that which draws censure from the barrio is Melaito’s
Spanish or his English. Given the last line of the poem, “así es la cosa papá,” most
likely it is both. Clearly, Melaito’s English has been transformed just as Melao’s
Spanish was. The standard / formal English is transformed first by “black american
soul,” but Melaito adds his own flavor of “native plena sounds / and primitive urban
salsa beats” (“melao” Mainstream 27). The very language Laviera employs in “melao”
demonstrates this as Juan Flores aptly notes that “through the narrative voice is in
English, Spanish words, sounds and meanings burst through the monolingual seams;
every shift in geographic and biographical reference undermines the ‘official’ status
of either language standard. Close and repeated reading reveals a vernacular Spanish
subtext that explodes at the end” (“Broken” 347). Two key words underscore this
point: “disparate” and “son.” Hidden in the seeming English of the poem, these
words, when read in Spanish, add a new dimension to the poem. Is Melaito’s talk
disparate as in different or disparate as in atrocidad? Is it a different kind of Spanish or
a different kind of English? Or rather, an atrocious Spanish or an atrocious English?
Or both? Or all four? When Laviera writes “dual mixtures / of melao and melaito’s /
spanglish speaking son,” does he refer to “son” as in child or son as in music?
The “esquina dude” verbalizes with the need for change in the form of transcultural syncretism for survival. Furthermore, because this philosophy is expressed through the voice of a street hustler, it becomes evident that for the poet transculturation takes place at the level of popular culture, in the barrios, and this culture is first and foremost an oral culture. As Frances Aparicio reflects, “Más que una reacción en contra de los criterios europeizados de la literatura occidental, la lengua oral, que deviene en lenguaje poético, representa una aproximación al problema de la identidad personal y cultural del hispano en los Estados Unidos” (“Nombres” 47).

The poem “Doña Cisa y su anafre” reinforces this clearly. Laviera, in an interview remarks, “the poem ‘Doña Cisa y su anafre’ defines me as a Puerto Rican. That poem and that experience was my transition from the jíbaro to New York… It is there I express the combination between the jíbaro, the language, and New York. That is the total coloring, the rainbow of my identity. When I realized that, everything came together and I went on from there” (“Interview” 84). How does a poem about a woman selling bacalaítos define Laviera as a Puerto Rican? First, it demonstrates the power of orality on the popular level. Ana Celia Zentella, who has done extensive studies regarding the language(s) of New York barrios, asserts that for Nuyorican artists “the pervasive influence in their work is that of the oral tradition, which may have been received by direct means such as the telling of family stories and traditional lore or through the influence of the radio, which many refer to as crucial in their artistic development” (Growing Up 13). For this reason, not surprisingly, Laviera elevates a street vendor to the class of poet. In examining the title of the poem, it appears that Laviera does consider the street vendor a poet as seen in the use of the word “anafé.” Here, it seems that perhaps Laviera cleverly plays with the Spanish words anafe (a portable kitchen) and anafora (the poetic technique of repetition). Doña Cisa’s anafora is her constant repetition of the word “bacalaítos” to attract clientele.13 The very name of the vendor, Doña Cisa, also appears to be another clever play with words. Doña could be read as another reference to the Doña Gabriela of Marqués’ La carreta. This is true especially if one considers that the name Cisa itself may be read as the Spanish prefix “cis-” meaning over here or acá, and therefore Doña Cisa may mean “the lady over here,” or in this case the “Doña de acá.” Laviera writes of Doña Cisa:

... dándole sabor al aire reumático
creando sin vanidad al nuevo jíbaro
que ponía firmes pies en el seno de
américa quemando ritmos africanos y
mitos indígenas ... (la carreta 74)

Doña Cisa, then, like Laviera himself, recreates, or transculturates, the jíbaro in New York through her own poetry. A street vendor, she is elevated to the role of the...
the internal soul of salsa
is like don quijote de la mancha
classical because the roots are
from long ago, the symbol of cervantes writing in pain of a lost
right arm and in society today,
the cha-cha slow dance welfare
the internal soul of salsa
is an out bembé on sunday afternoons
while felipe flipped his sides
of the cuban based salsa
which is also part of africa
and a song of the caribbean
the internal dance of salsa
is of course plena . . . (la carreta 67)

Laviera here details the origin of salsa as the intricate transculturation of various musical genres from different locations and cultures. However, it is the coming together of these different components in New York that produces the new transcultural phenomenon salsa. First, the displacement of Africans in the Caribbean and their interaction with the Spanish and Indigenous cultures produces son, bomba y plena, and mambo, among other genres. Then, the displacement of Latinos from various countries who bring their transcultural traditions and cosmology to the United States create, or rather neoculturate, salsa. Thus, the worldview displayed by salsa, is one of continuous transculturations. Since salsa is a transcultural representation, in the same poem African Americans instantly embrace the musical genre because the African core, while modified, is pure:

. . . la bomba y plena puro són
de puerto rico que ismael es el
Nowhere, however, is the legitimization of Nuyoricans as creators of Puerto Rican culture more apparent than in ... but also Nuyoricans as legitimate creators of that culture.

In the poem "juan boria" Laviera describes the declamador: poetry of Luis Palés Matos, which proved to be a great influence in Laviera's work. Boria was particularly skillful at reciting the declamador poetry of Luis Palés Matos, which proved to be a great influence in Laviera's work. In the poem "juan boria" Laviera describes the declamador:

...director ejecutivo de la bembu burocracia
huracan en remolino, un nuevo diccionario
........................................
palesmatear y guillenear juan juan
........................................
el presidente-comandante-caballero,
recitando al todo negro
de la cuna con sus versos. (ENCLAVE 65)

The other great influence on the poetry of Laviera is undoubtedly Jorge Brandon, another Puerto Rican declamador who spent most of his life reciting both his own poetry and that of others, particularly Latin-American poetry, on Loisaida streets. Kanellos affirms that for Brandon "la única función del poeta es comunicar directamente con su auditorio. Brandon es uno de los pocos verdaderos declamadores que hayan sobrevivido en tiempos modernos" ("Canto" 103). Laviera's poem "declamación" reflects his feelings towards him: "...en tu poesía encomiendo mi madre / mis hijos, mi patria, mi abuela . . . / el pan nuestro de cada día dánselo hoy" (la carreta 73).

The importance of incorporating these two poets in his own work relates to Laviera's transculturation project in two ways. First, by including Boria in his work, Laviera situates himself into Puerto Rican literary history. Second, he brings Boria to the attention of his compatriots in the metropolis, thereby extending another Island tradition to the mainland. The same is true for Brandon. Since Brandon is not only a poet but also a declamador, Laviera accomplishes first, to continue, and second, to insert a Latin-American tradition of oral culture in the United States, not just by reciting poetry, but also by inspiring Nuyoricans to continue the tradition of Puerto Rican poetry and that of others, particularly Latin-American poetry, on Loisaida streets.
ideas claras caribeñas!

salió el sol, sus rayos atravesando
rayos, largas piernas afriquenas
rayos, trompetas charanga europea
rayos, tambores indígenas se encuentran
rayos, rompiendo todo esclavo
rayos, preservando colores de resguardo
rayos, con los viejos africanos
libremente exclamando:
isomos los mismos, los mismos éramos

somos humanos, respaldándonos, somos humanos

yo le canto a la lumbre del glorioso
despertar! (AmeRícan 21–2)

The homage to Guillén reveals Laviera’s admiration for the Cuban poet’s ability to awaken Cuban consciousness, an awakening that Laviera attributes to Guillén successfully capturing Afro-Cuban language, a “Base prieta jerigonza” that leads to “la lumbre del glorioso / despertar!”

In regards to Palés Matos, Laviera’s tribute reflects his admiration for Palés Matos’ language alone, rather than any sort of awakening of consciousness. Many have correctly criticized Palés Matos for a “form of poetry characterized by African sounding words, rhythms and language, yet, a shallow understanding of Black culture . . . [which] is partly responsible for the negative and, at best one dimensional images of Blacks” (Jackson 469). Laviera, nevertheless, defends his verse. As Martín-Rodríguez notes, “From Palés Matos, Laviera takes his ability to construct a poetic language inspired in the music, the vocabulary, and the rhythms of African tongues” (269). The scholar continues and accurately points out that “el moreno puertorriqueño” reflects this inspiration:

... ay baramba bamba
suma acaba
quimbombo de salsa
la rumba matamba
jíbaro. The refrain is often repeated in songs as a way of identifying it or the artist as Puerto Rican.

16 By articulating these transcultural manifestations as pure, Laviera challenges the linguistic prejudice which victimizes them and their community. . . . La Carreta ... became widely familiar to Puerto Rican and international audiences came to be extolled for over a generation as the classic literary rendition of recent Puerto Rican History” (Divided 160). René Marqués is also the author of the both popular and controversial El puertorriqueño dócil.

4 Jíbaro is a term used by Puerto Ricans to describe someone from the countryside. Sometimes used pejoratively to describe someone who is backwards in his or her ways, the term jíbaro is also upheld as the symbol of national culture. Cubans use the word guajiro similarly.

5 “Operation Bootstrap,” referred to in Spanish as “Operación manos a la obra,” was the policy of the industrialization of the Island undertaken by governor Luis Muñoz Marín in the 1940s and 1950s, which displaced millions of Puerto Ricans first from the countryside to San Juan, and then to New York due to the lack of employment in San Juan.

6 Loisaida is a term used by Nuyorican Poets to refer to the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

7 The clave is the percussion instrument—two cylindrical wood sticks tapped together—which keeps the 2/3 or 3/2 beat of salsa. The clave is considered by many to be the most important instrument in salsa.


9 Interestingly, Fernando Ortiz himself observes the same linguistic snobbery from Spain regarding the vocabulary of Latin America, and specifically Cuba. In his own cataloging of Cubanisms, he discusses the origin of the word guayabo and expresses his dismay over the fact that the Spanish Academy attributes its origin as French. Ortiz refers to the academy’s analysis as an “inexplicable etimología gabacha,” and replies “¡Que no nos venga la Academia con guayabal!” (Nuevo Catauro 280).

10 Aparicio observes that among bilingual poets there exists “a basic dissatisfaction . . . against the linguistic prejudice which victimizes them and their community . . . [but] Laviera’s attitude towards this prejudice is much more challenging and aggressive than that of other poets” (“La vida” 155, 156).

11 Laviera reveals in an interview that “Santurce was settled mostly by free slaves, run away from non-Hispanic islands of the Caribbean who found their freedom in Puerto Rico, and by poor people. It later became the prosperous, ‘new’ part of San Juan and is now in decay” (“Interview” 215).
REFERENCES


