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la lengua es  
la ametralladora  
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TATO LAVIERA<sup>1</sup>

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 Nuyoricán 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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, *AmeRícan*, 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 *AmeRícan*, 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 street-  
corner 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.<sup>11</sup> However, the description of Melaíto's speech as a "disparate sounding / talk" may cause some confusion as to whether that which draws censure from the barrio is Melaíto's Spanish or his English. Given the last line of the poem, "así es la cosa papá," most likely it is both. Clearly, Melaíto's English has been transformed just as Melao's Spanish was. The standard / formal English is transformed first by "black american soul," but Melaíto 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 Melaíto'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 melaíto's / spanglish speaking son," does he refer to "son" as in child or *son* as in music?<sup>12</sup>

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 “anafre.” Here, it seems that perhaps Laviera cleverly plays with the Spanish words *anafe* (a portable kitchen) and *anáfora* (the poetic technique of repetition). Doña Cisa’s *anáfora* is her constant repetition of the word “bacalaítos” to attract clientele.<sup>13</sup> 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



escuchado toda su vida y ha llegado a formar parte de su manera de concebir el mundo y de proyectarse al mundo” (Kanellos “Canto” 105).

Fundamental to this worldview projected through song is the idea that cultural survival depends upon transculturation. Laviera recognizes that while the culture and its music are fundamentally African, it has been through transculturation that this root has survived as his poem “the salsa of bethesda fountain” reveals:

the internal soul of salsa  
is like don quijote de la mancha  
classical because the roots are  
from long ago, the symbol of cer-  
vantes 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<sup>16</sup>  
de puerto rico que ismael es el

its citizens . . . And he also confronts both by not settling for one language or the other language" (96). However, Laviera not only challenges Puerto Rico's failure to fully recognize the importance of its Black roots, but also the Island's failure to acknowledge the prominent role that the oral culture has played on the Island.

This challenge is evident not only in the poet's insistence on the incorporation of music as a legitimate form of oral culture and even poetry, but also in the poems where he pays his respects to the *declamadores* Juan Boria and Jorge Brandon. Laviera studied at the age of six under Juan Boria,<sup>17</sup> well known in Puerto Rico as a *declamador* of Afro-Caribbean poetry. Boria was particularly skillful at reciting the 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 bemba burocracia  
huracán en remolino, un nuevo diccionario  
.....  
palesmatear y guilleneear 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,<sup>18</sup> 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 dánoslo 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 declamación. In this way, Laviera's work functions as a bridge between the two

ideas claras caribeñas!

.....  
salió el sol, sus rayos atravesando  
rayos, largas piernas afriqueñas  
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" (265). 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

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “conciencia” from the collection *Mainstream Ethics (ética corriente)* (51).

<sup>2</sup> *la carreta made a U-turn* is now in its seventh edition and has sold more than 60,000 copies (Hernández 74).

<sup>3</sup> Juan Flores remarks, “Marqués’ death in 1979—the same year that Laviera’s book was published signaled the close of an era in Puerto Rican letters. . . . *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* 169). René Marqués is also the author of the both popular and controversial *El puertorriqueño dócil*.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> “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.

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

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> For a full discussion of transculturation, its many manifestations, and its application to the study of U.S. Latino literature, refer to: Alvarez, Stephanie. “Literary Trasculturation in Latino U.S.A.” Ph.D dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> 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 guayabas!” (*Nuevo Catauro* 280).

<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> 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” 217).

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