

TROPICALIZING THE OTHER'S CULTURE AND LANGUAGE IN LATINO/A LITERATURE

Antonia Domínguez Miguela
Universidad de Huelva

During the last two decades Latino/a literature has received great critical and publishing attention becoming a demanded literary product that is advertised as an exotic, spicy ingredient to the “multicultural” literary panorama. However, Latino/a writers have faced mainstream attempts of transforming them into commodities by creating works that go beyond the mere ethnographic account to explore the ethnic experience in all its complexities.

To achieve this, Latino/a writers are tropicalizing the dominant culture and language from within, impregnating them with a Latino cultural substratum that subtly challenges previous assumptions on the history and character of Latinos/as and that influences Anglo-American culture from the position of American subjects.

In the last decade, we have seen how Latino/a literature becomes part of the mainstream literary world. Latino/a authors began their publishing career in minor publishing houses like Arte Público Press, Third Woman Press, Kitchen Table Press, however, recent works and new editions have appeared in mainstream publishing houses. The immediate effect of this sudden boom of Latino/a literature is the threat of commodification as can be observed in many reviews and book covers that, trying to capture the reader's attention, allude to the exoticism and appeal of the works with adjectives such as ‘sizzling,’ ‘passionate,’ ‘magical,’ ‘dazzling,’ ‘spicy,’ etc.

However, in the last years, writers and critics have observed how, in many cases, a few ethnic writers were chosen as profitable products and examples of the “fresh air” coming into the publishing industry under the mask of a false interest in minority cultures as part of American multicultural society. Some Latino/a writers have been trying to overcome capitalistic attempts at transforming them in mere commodities, consumer goods, literary fashions while at the same time, they could not deny that it is good for them to get a wider readership and subsequently, more critical attention.

This dilemma and its consequences have provoked hot debates among critics, readers and writers. As it had previously happened with other minority literatures such as the Afro-American or Asian-American, nowadays there is an on-going discussion on this literature, its relation to contemporary critical trends on de-centering western ideologies and the extent to which it perpetuates a discourse on otherness and difference that focuses on the ethnic subject while it goes against the dissolution of the subject promulgated by postmodernist criticism. This paper tries to concentrate on some of the resources available to Latino/a writers to counter a dominant discourse that tries to manipulate difference for its own benefit, domesticating it, accepting their presence with restraint.

The Latino subject, in a similar way to that of the colonized subject approached by Homi Bhabha, becomes a stereotype that has its given function in the dominant discourse as Bhabha explains: “The fetish or stereotype give access to an “identity” which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence [...] the scene of fetishism is also the scene of the reactivation and repetition of primal fantasy — the subject’s desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division” (75). In any case, the ethnic subject is defined by the dominant discourse that manipulates the ethnic presence in many ways such as the dismissal of the native language and, among many others, the privation of a History, as Barthes comments in *Mythologies*: “these [are] new objects from which all soiling trace of origin and choice have been removed” (151). Latino/a writers are currently challenging these and other manipulations by not only presenting themselves as full subjects but providing a rich background from which their experience emerges. Their methods are subtle enough as in the case of “tropicalizations” that we will observe in several works where their transcultural identity is represented in a dynamic, creative space. By *transcultural* we refer to one of the first uses of the term by Fernando Ortiz who defines it as follows:

el vocablo *transculturación* expresa mejor las diferentes fases del proceso transitivo de una cultura a otra, porque éste no consiste solamente en adquirir una cultura, que es lo que en rigor indica la voz anglo-americana *aculturación*, sino que el proceso implica también necesariamente la pérdida o desarraigo de una cultura precedente, lo que pudiera decirse una parcial desculturación, y, además significa la consiguiente creación de nuevos fenómenos culturales que pudieran denominarse *neoculturación* (86).

The representation of this new identity that is neither American nor Latin American requires a new treatment of both cultures that takes into account how they influence each other. However, the influence of Latin American culture and history is, as we have pointed out, underestimated or misinterpreted by mainstream ideology and its assimilationist assumptions. It is at this point where tropicalization comes center stage since it functions as a strategy of resistance and affirmation at the same time. Frances Aparicio wisely distinguishes the different sides of tropicalization: when it is

carried out by Anglo-Americans as a way to “tropicalize”¹ the Latin other within fixed definitions and stereotypes — similar to Said’s theory of orientalism by which the dominant western gaze represents the Arab world — and when it implies a re-tropicalization or self-tropicalization that involves the conscious attempt to transform the dominant’s representation of the Latin other from within their own discourse and language. We will concentrate on this second tropicalization by Latino writers from within American literary panorama.

There exists a major way to tropicalize literary discourses in English similar to what Olalquiaga defines in general as the “latinization of the United States (76), by which the writer’s Latino cultural history permeates their work and is therefore, accessible to all readers. This is a recurrent element in many works by Latinos/as who embark in a search for their cultural roots as people of Latin American descent. Among the many works that recover their unknown or dismissed history we could mention outstanding works such as *Pocho* by José Antonio Villarreal, *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina García, *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez or *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago. In these works historical events such as the Mexican migration to the United States, the Cuban revolution, the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic or the colonial history of Puerto Rico are revised and rewritten from an insider’s point of view and taking into account that their works are going to be read by a wide readership, most of them Anglo-American and ignorant of Latin American history, so inextricably tied to that of the United States. For instance, in *Dreaming in Cuban* the orchestra of multiple narrative voices present in the novel challenges the univocal reading of the Cuban revolution, thus problematizing history and its different interpretations.

In addition, all of these works create a bridge between that history and cultural legacy and the contemporary lives of Latinos/as in the United States. In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, the García sisters learn to cope with their Dominican background, generational gaps and the new experience in the United States finding a common ground where their new identity emerges. In most of these works, the Anglo-American perspective is further problematized since the reader is obliged to transcend the mere ethnographic and exotic narration in order to understand political, cultural and historical implications in the development of the Latino/a identity. What these writers are trying to do is to claim their place in American society not stressing their difference but challenging obsolete representations of the ethnic subject and encouraging true intercultural dialogue as Americans.

The tropicalization of the English language in these literary works is especially interesting for its many creative possibilities and its subtle challenge to the dominant discourse. As it happens in other minority literatures, a recurrent and already traditional technique to defamiliarize the English language is the use of foreign words and phrases that appear scattered in the English text. Though it is still a usual technique it may

[1] We are following Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez Silverman’s definition: “To tropicalize [...] means to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images and values” (8). The use of this term is especially relevant for its spatial implications since it directly addresses the relation between the United States and most Latin American countries.

become a disturbing factor when its use renders the reading difficult or when the reader gets tired with immediate translations in the text. For these reasons, the appropriation of these texts and writers as exotic tokens and commodities by mainstream culture has encouraged Latino/a writers to adopt new and more subtle methods of subversion from within the English language. The most recent, creative and dynamic method is the tropicalization of the dominant literary language.

As we have mentioned this *tropicalization* consists of the manipulation of English so that it becomes impregnated by a cultural and linguistic Latino substratum: “a transformation and rewriting of Anglo signifiers from the latino cultural vantage point” (Aparicio 201). This latinization of English is parallel to what has taken place in other minor or postcolonial literatures as in the clear example of Indian or African-American literatures. This is a means by which a new discourse is created, and, as Homi Bhabha points out, it is “a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them” (89). Similarly, Gilles Deleuze, in his analysis of minor literatures in Europe, argues that the first feature of this type of literature is the deterritorialization of the dominant language by a minority group whose language has been dismissed².

This deterritorialization of English has been taking place in Latino/a literature in the United States for three decades by means of a conscious manipulation of English, of its signifiers, which are added new signifieds with a Latino substratum. These signifieds modify the text's reception to the extent that it may defamiliarize the anglo reader from his/her native language³. What at first sight may look like a lack of linguistic competence, is, in fact, creative and innovative experimentation with the language. As Frances Aparicio points out, tropicalizations provide “new possibilities for metaphors, imagery, syntax, and rhythms that the Spanish subtext provide U.S. literary English” (203). The effects on the reader vary depending on his/her characteristics. While an anglo reader may be at risk of not understanding a harsh critique on American society, for instance, a bilingual Latino reader is able to establish a sort of complicity with the writer, thereby making the message more powerful.

Tropicalization is especially noticeable in literal translations of Spanish idioms or phrases that try to compensate the overwhelming influence of English on Spanish, an influence that has provoked the so-called ‘degeneration of Spanish’ into Spanglish among Latino people in the United States. Therefore, an inverse process takes place, where the Spanish language predominates over the English language. We could mention

[2] Deleuze uses the example of Kafka, a jewish writer in Praga, and describes method for deterritorializing German: “One way is to artificially enrich this German, to swell it up through all the resources of symbolism, of onerism, of esoteric sense, of a hidden signifier ... Since the language is arid, make it vibrate with a new intensity. Oppose a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it” (19).

[3] Tropicalizations can be considered substitutes for other traditional methods that show the ethnic component of a literary work such as “code-switching,” combined use of English and Spanish that prevailed during the 60s and 70s but which was soon dismissed since it made these works hardly accessible to Anglo readers and rejected by mainstream publishing houses.

a great number of exemplary literary tropicalizations in prose and poetry. In Villarreal's *Pocho*, we find expressions such as "she has given light" and "I have an ache of head" that allude to the linguistic contact thereby presenting the English language as a site of cultural transformations and influence. In Victor Hernández Cruz's *By Lingual Wholes*, the poet manipulates the English signifiers to the extent that he translates the rhythms of Spanish into English as we can see in the poem "Anonymous" where the rhythm and rhyme changes with the content as it is related either to the English or the Spanish culture:

And if I lived in those olden times
 With a funny name like Choicer or
 Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, what chimes!
 I would spend my time in search of rhymes

 Alas! The projects hath not covered the river
 Thou see-est vision to make thee quiver
 Hath I been delivered to that "wildernesse"
 So past
 I would have been the last one in the
 Dance to go
 Talking note the minute so slow
 All admire my taste
 Within thou *mambo* of much more haste (*Tropicalizations 2*).

We can find many expressions where the poet plays with the reader as in "the world could blow up *but you tranquil!*" or the Poem "Puerto Rican Joke Riddle Told in English" whose only sentence reads "Can he take the *Can*," an elaboration of the phrase "dar la lata." Hernández Cruz's tropicalization extends to cultural items that literally invade the American world as in the poem "The Man Who Came to the Last Floor" where a Puerto Rican throws mango seeds from his window and they fall on a policeman's head. The mango tree grows and the man becomes a freak in the media, attracting everybody's interest. The image of spreading mango seeds is precisely what the poet is doing, planting new seeds in the reader's mind, introducing himself as a tropicalized Other that is now invading his Other's language and world. Sandra Cisneros's work *Woman Hollering Creek*, also stands out for its brilliant linguistic games such as her funny literal translations of Bolero lyrics in the story "Tin Tan Tan." In the title of the story "Salvador Late or Early," we can observe an inappropriate use of English since the correct sentence would be "sooner or later," however, the writer has opted for a literal translation of the phrase "tarde o temprano" whose meaning can be easily understood while at the same time it shows a strong influence of the underlying Spanish. This is also what we find in expressions like "I am without shame" (32), that defamiliarize English by making more reference to the particular Spanish expression "sinvergüenza" rather than the English one "shameless." Cisneros is especially creative and innovative when she makes up words that become literal winks at the bilingual reader. This is obvious when we notice, for instance, that a company is named "LA CUCARACHA APACHURRADA PEST CONTROL" (138).

Judith Ortiz Cofer is also a brilliant manipulator of language and literary discourses. She usually presents literal translations from Spanish that appear within English syntactic structures. One of the characters in *The Line of the Sun* calls the landlord a “son-of-a-great-white-whore”. Upon the English structure “son-of-a-bitch,” Ortiz Cofer superimposes features of the Spanish expression “hijo de la gran puta,” while adding the modifier “white” that further strengthens the critique to the landlord.

The latinization of literary style is also an outstanding and innovative feature of Latino/a literature. This process of defamiliarization of the dominant literary discourse has been related to the use of magic realism in these works, what shows a clear textual ambivalence. Among these works, *So Far from God* by Ana Castillo stands out as a parodic imitation of the magic realist style of Gabriel García Márquez while it is contextualized and impregnated by a social message that addresses the situation of the chicano community in the United States. *So Far from God* is a brilliant stylistic exercise that blends different literary traditions such as the Latin American and the Spanish Golden Age. This is what we often observe in the rocambolesque titles of the chapters, that clearly remind us of *El Quijote*: “Of the Hideous Crime of Francisco el Penitente, and His Pathetic Calls Heard Throughout the Countryside as His Body Dangled from a Piñon like a Crow-Picked Pear” (190). Castillo also defamiliarizes literary English through the use of Spanish syntactic structures such as the double negation and the calque of expressions and idioms from the chicano folklore in the third person narration. The use of very long sentences with many subordinate clauses that reminds us of the rhetoric of Spanish reappears in the narrative style of *So Far from God*. This and other stylistic features are recurrent in other works by Latino/a writers that are frequently accompanied by a style that imitates that of magic realist works.

This latinizing style is present in works such as *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago and *The Line of the Sun* by Judith Ortiz Cofer where it works as a complement of narrative spaces that serve as cultural genesis of their search for identity. Thus, the first part of *The Line of the Sun* that focuses on the story of the Marisol’s uncle in the island of Puerto Rico, stylistically differs from the second part of the novel settled in New York. The language of the first part is overelaborated and poetic in essence in an attempt to present an exaggerated view of the island reality, what comes to reinforce the similarities with the Latin American narratives.

As we have seen throughout the examples of contemporary Latino/a works, a new source of innovation and dynamic creativity is emerging in the literature of a growing minority that requires more critical attention, especially regarding their stylistic achievements and the message of cultural resistance and identity affirmation that underlies their literary discourse. Fortunately, research projects and critical studies on the experience of Latinos/as in the United States and their artistic production are increasingly reaching a wider audience while at the same time, Latino/a writers fight against commodification introducing subversive strategies such as re-tropicalizations that further challenge the dominant gaze.

Works cited

- Alvarez, Julia (1992) *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. New York: Plume-Penguin.
- (1994) *In the Time of the Butterflies*. New York: Penguin.
- Aparicio, Frances R. and Susana Chávez-Silverman eds. (1997) *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*. Hanover and London: U.P. of New England.
- Barthes, Roland (1976) *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bhabha, Homi (1994) *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Castillo, Ana (1993) *So Far from God*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Cisneros, Sandra (1991) *Woman Hollering Creek*. New York: Vintage.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1986) *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- García, Cristina (1992) *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Ballantine.
- Hernández Cruz, Victor (1982) *By Lingual Wholes*. San Francisco: Momo's Press.
- (1989) *Rhythm, Content and Flavour*. Houston: Arte Público Press.
- Ortiz, Fernando (1940) *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*. La Habana: Ed. Imagen.
- Ortiz Cofer, Judith (1989) *The Line of the Sun*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.
- Santiago, Esmeralda (1993) *When I Was Puerto Rican*. New York: Vintage.
- Villareal, Jose Antonio (1959) *Pocho*. New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books.