

## **Bilingualism, Biculturalism and Pan-Hispanic Unity in the United States: Rosario Ferré's *Language Duel***

**By Patricia Montilla**

The literature of Rosario Ferré is well known for its tenacious criticism of Puerto Rican society. Her novels especially challenge conventional notions of gender, race, and class in Puerto Rico. In *Language Duel: Poems/ Duelo del lenguaje: poemas*, however, Ferré moves beyond the island to reflect upon the strong presence of Hispanic or Latina/o culture in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Published in 2002, this bilingual collection of poems focuses on the cultural and political aspects of English and Spanish, as well as on the importance that both of these languages have in forging a new U.S. Latina/o identity. Throughout the book, Ferré explores linguistic and cultural differences between English and Spanish and the emergence of a more inclusive Pan-Hispanic identity in which national boundaries and countries of origin are blurred to create a more encompassing Latina/o consciousness in the United States. *Language Duel* also reveals the complex nature of the bilingual, bicultural individual, highlighting the sometimes difficult but also humorous process that Latina/os in the United States experience while negotiating between the languages, norms, and traditions of two societies.

The poems that comprise *Language Duel* are conversational in tone and appear in English and Spanish, both versions juxtaposed side-by-side, with very little mixing of the two languages. Some code switches and word loans do appear occasionally to emphasize a point, provoke a particular response in the reader, or to create a comic effect.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between English and Spanish manifests itself in many of the poems as a struggle for power through references to numerous wars and conquests that have taken place for centuries and which are still occurring today. The language duel continues due to the thousands of immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America that arrive in the United States and because of the many generations of Latina/os in the country who refuse to assimilate into the now antiquated notion of the melting pot. These two factors cause some sectors of U.S. society to view Hispanics as a threat to mainstream, English-speaking American culture. Rather than be absorbed into North American culture, Latina/os in the United States prefer to acculturate, adapting to their new country without abandoning their native language and culture.<sup>3</sup> They have achieved acculturation in large part because of their vast numbers. Ferré published *Language Duel* two years after the 2000 census when Hispanics or Latina/os (of any race) represented 12.5% of the total population of the United States. According to the last census, the Hispanic population increased in ten years to constitute 16.3% of the country's total population in 2010. The U.S. Census Bureau's projections of the size and composition of the country's population from 2014 to 2060 indicate that, "by 2060, 29 percent of the United States is projected to be Hispanic- more than one-quarter of the total population" (9). Moreover, Spain's nonprofit *Instituto Cervantes* reported in 2015 that the United States had become the second largest Spanish-speaking country and estimated that by 2050 it would surpass Mexico in becoming the country with the largest Spanish speaking population in the world (35). This rapid growth is reflected throughout Ferré's book and is portrayed as the primary factor sustaining the feud between English and Spanish, as affirmed in the book's first composition.

The poem “Language Duel” or “Duelo del lenguaje” opens the book with the following interrogation: “Why is it that in the year of our Lord 2,001 Americans have such a difficult time learning Spanish?” (2). What makes this question humorous and jolting at the same time is the presumption that in the United States, people ought to speak Spanish. Rather than state that Hispanics are expected to speak English, the poem suggests that the rest of the population in America ought to learn Spanish. In the verses that follow, the poetic voice offers possible answers to the initial question:

Because of *E Pluribus Unum*.  
Because of the Civil War.  
Because of Catholicism and Protestantism  
Because of Papists and anti-Papists.  
Because [of] La Leyenda Negra,  
which left King Philip II of Spain,  
tarred and feathered in his underwear,  
sitting on the devil’s rump. (2)

The poem discusses various motives that associate English and Spanish with countries, mottos, religions, and wars, transforming the languages into tangible and violent entities, or historical events. English and Spanish represent the nations and societies in which they are spoken and are rendered as adversaries in a fight for power. The poetic voice states that they “have been at war/since Queen Elizabeth sank the Spanish Armada in 1588” and that they are “still feuding in Florida, Puerto Rico, and California,” alluding to political measures proposed in these states and commonwealth to establish one or the other as the official language. In identifying Florida, Puerto Rico and California as territories in which the feud is taking place, Ferré renders the struggle as a shared experience among all Hispanics, regardless of their country of origin, as these are parts of the United States where many people of Caribbean, Central American and Mexican descent live. The poem turns personal, however, when the speaker reflects upon how this duel that has existed for so many centuries affects her life:

In fact, I swear  
that as I talk to you  
in English  
about my right to speak  
in Spanish,  
I can hear the guns boom  
and see the cannon balls roar  
over my head. (2)

These verses bring to mind the controversy surrounding Ferré’s writings, particularly among fellow Puerto Rican writers, literary critics, and politicians, who have either commended or denounced her for writing novels in English and then translating them into Spanish. One can easily interpret this poem as a rebuttal to her contemporaries, like Ana Lydia Vega in her famous essay “Carta abierta a la Pandora,” who accuse her of assimilating and reprove Ferré for identifying herself as a Latina/o writer.<sup>4</sup> However, as

Irma López contends in her essay titled, “*The House on the Lagoon*, Tensiones de un discurso de (re)composición de la identidad puertorriqueña a través de la historia y la lengua,” the decision to write a novel in English allowed Ferré to creatively celebrate her bilingualism and biculturalism, attract a much larger public and introduce Puerto Rican history to English, monolingual readers (135). “Language Duel” can be read as a defense of bilingualism in which the poetic voice justifies her right to speak and write in both languages, as can be seen upon reading the text in the two languages. In the Spanish version, the speaker defends her right to speak English:

De hecho, yo les juro que mientras discuto en español  
sobre mi derecho de hablar inglés,  
escucho rugir los cañones  
y veo las bombas  
salir volando sobre mi cabeza. (3)

When placed side-by-side, both renderings of the text place the two languages on equal ground in claiming the right to speak in Spanish or English, respectively. The violence surrounding both languages is not regarded as an affliction or a source of personal angst or anguish, but rather as something that benefits the individual and especially, the writer, as expressed in the poem’s final assertion, which states:

Not to take advantage  
of the double perspective  
and run full speed ahead  
down parallel rails  
seems a pity. (4)

Regardless of the internal or external conflicts that speaking or writing both English and Spanish may produce, the two languages provide the speaker access to two worlds and thus, two ways to see, experience, and interpret life. In *Biculturalism, Self Identity and Societal Transformation*, Rutledge M. Dennis analyzes the complexities of biculturalism by examining different social types and affirms that “there are individuals who live in two cultural worlds and believe themselves to be culturally and socially enriched by the differing institutions, customs, and social networks made available by this opportunity” (16). The poetic voice in “Language Duel” embodies this type of biculturalism. For the speaker, English and Spanish are not merely combative; they are positive forces that illuminate the bilingual and bicultural individual, opening the mind to multiple views and creative possibilities. Bridget Kevane explores how Latina Caribbean writers such as Julia Álvarez, Cristina García, and Rosario Ferré recognize the importance of their North American heritage in their works in her study on ethnic identity and Latina Caribbean novels. According to Kevane, these novels “reflect a new and compelling form of postcolonial literature that explores the complexity of identities intimately shaped by their colonizer” (269). Kevane acknowledges both the positive and the negative reactions generated by the use of English and the representation of the United States in these authors’ novels in the following manner:

Today these writers support the role their experiences and life in the United States has granted them. As professional writers and voices of their communities, they promote the importance of the U.S. whether it is the North American literary canon or the power of Latinos as a voting block in U.S. politics. Although they have been criticized for their acknowledgement of their *americana* side, deemed cultural traitors and worse, they continue to advocate the symbiotic relationship that has shaped their own lives and, as will be seen, their literature. (273)

This interdependent relationship that Kevane describes as characterizing Latina Caribbean writers and their fiction, and the multiperspectivism and creativity it offers, is visible throughout *Language Duel*.

The linguistic characteristics of English and Spanish, as well as the expressive capacity that each language offers the bilingual individual are outlined in “Language Current” or “Corriente alterna.” The English language is compared to a plane in which thoughts travel 380,000 miles per hour. It is also depicted as a nuclear reactor where “whole sentences gush forth/and slam themselves against the page/condensing rapid sprays of pellets/into separate words” (6). Because of its directness and velocity, one has to know one’s destination prior to traveling in the English language, for, as the poetic voice affirms, “no excess baggage is allowed” (6). Stripped of the “playful, baroque tendrils” of Spanish, English permits one to communicate ideas much more concisely. While admiring these qualities, however, the speaker nonetheless expresses a predilection for Spanish in the second stanza of the poem. Here, it’s important to note the use of the first person plural in the Spanish version of the poem. The poetic voice states that “Nuestra lengua es muy distinta,” whereas in the English version the possessive adjective is omitted:

Spanish is a very different tongue.  
It’s deeper and darker, with so many twists  
and turns it makes you feel you’re navigating  
the uterus. Shards of gleaming stone,  
emerald, amethyst, opal,  
gleam in the dark as you swim  
down its moist shaft.  
It goes deeper than the English Channel,  
All the way down the birth canal and beyond. (6)

The possessive adjective “nuestra” in the Spanish text identifies Spanish as the native tongue or the language of origin of the poetic voice, the implied reader and Latina/os in general. The use of the first person plural is significant because it unites all Hispanics in the United States by claiming the Spanish language as their own without making any reference to a specific nationality and therefore contributing to the concept of a Pan-Hispanic identity. The word “nuestra” also allows the reader to participate in the text and to share the experience of being a bilingual Latina/o. Spanish is portrayed as the primary or first language; English, on the other hand, is the language that is assumed as a vehicle for travel and exploration. Moreover, Spanish possesses the properties of a kaleidoscope or prism that offers multiple perspectives because it is much more flexible and profound.

Associated with the uterus and with the birth canal, Spanish is rendered as the language of creation.

It is through Spanish that the conquistadors as well as those conquered during numerous wars are reborn in the United States today. The poems “Coming Up the Archipelago,” “The Bones of Conquerors,” “Juan de Oñate, and “Saguaro Countdown” depict the numerous cycles of conquest and colonization in the Americas, from the time that the Caribs defeated the Arawaks to the twenty-first century, as Latina/os are conquering the United States. “Coming Up the Archipelago” is a long poem that relates the history of Puerto Rico, since the island was known as Borinquen to when the boricuas began migrating to the United States, followed by many other immigrants from the Caribbean. The poem is delivered by a unified, collective voice of the Antilles:

The words Carib and canibal have the same root:  
anyone from the archipelago knows that.  
Speaking in tongues is one of our skills.  
We love to suck the bone to get the marrow  
and imbibe the strength. (12)

Ferré ironically appropriates the well-known image of the man-eating savage that was commonly used in justifying the conquest and colonization of the Americas and the Caribbean. In *Cannibal Writes: Eating Others in Caribbean and Indian Ocean Women's Writings*, Njeri Githire observes how, “as the fundamental threat to self-identity, cannibalism provided the ultimate justification for domination, consumption, and exploitation of these societies as a preemptive measure that would ensure the security of the imperial/colonizing self” (5). In Ferré’s poem, however, the metaphor of cannibalism is subverted and appears as a means of linguistic and cultural resistance and survival. The first person plural subject pronoun “we” is utilized throughout the poem to represent the many societies of the Antilles, who have the exceptional capability of ingesting and absorbing peoples and cultures. According the collective, poetic voice, the Caribs ate the Arawaks,

who were peaceful and planted manioc root.  
Then the Spaniards arrived and ate the Caribs  
who had swallowed the Arawaks whole.  
Then the Americans came  
and ordered everyone to speak English.  
But Spanish (which had eaten Carib and had eaten Arawak before them)  
bred strong on their tongue. (12)

Spanish, along with the anthropophagous nature it inherited from the Caribs, persists in the people of the Antilles, even when prohibited. As previously stated in the poem “Language Current,” Spanish is such a flexible and deep language that it can devour, assimilate, and survive everything, including North American imperialism and, subsequently, immigration to the United States. In *Cannibalism in Literature and Film*, Jennifer Brown contends that “the cannibal figure reflects and embodies fears of specific times and spaces. That is, his function and, more importantly, his location change throughout the twentieth century as popular fears change” (7). Ferré’s representation of

Caribbean immigrants as cannibals can be interpreted as the reflection of the fears that some sectors of American society express toward the increasing presence of Latina/os and the fast growing use of the Spanish language in the United States.

“Coming Up the Archipelago” also recalls the large waves of Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican migration to the United States in the twentieth century as the “ola tremenda” or the “wave of Caribs” that “rose from the archipelago and rolled into the mainland” (12). The poem asserts that upon arrival, the migrants, out of mere necessity, first tried to assimilate by learning English:

They took Spanish  
and stowed it between their frail bodies  
and the worn-out wool  
of their Salvation Army overcoats.  
They didn't want anyone to see it.  
Spanish was a dangerous umbilical cord  
that kept them connected to the islands,  
to hunger and death, to tattered humiliation.  
In English, they could find work,  
build a roof over their heads.” (12-14)

These verses reveal the internalization of the poverty, discrimination and racism that many Caribbean immigrants have experienced in coming to the mainland. The poem also captures the old formula of assimilation that prescribed total absorption into mainstream, dominant American culture, for which many Puerto Ricans rejected or repressed Spanish in order to be accepted as good, patriotic, and hardworking citizens of the United States. As the poetic voice states, “Next to an American passport/perfect English was the second most convincing proof/of American citizenship” (14). But times have changed, and new waves of immigrants from the Antilles are transforming the rules of the American Dream. As the last stanza of the poem affirms:

Puerto Ricans were followed by Cubans,  
Cubans were trailed by Haitians,  
Haitians by Dominicans,  
who had eaten French and had eaten Spanish  
that had eaten Arawak before them,  
and were ravenously hungry in turn. (16)

These new immigrants arrived “right onto the pink sands of Coral Gables!/They were famished and paper thin” (16). So hungry were they that when ordered to forget whatever language they had previously spoken, they simply “took a stone ax by the handle, chopped the English word “tongue” in two and swallowed it whole” (16). The new immigrants of the Caribbean are conquering English and American culture. They are acquiring a new language without abandoning their native tongues, and thus in turn are questioning which are the dominant language and culture of the United States.

Hispanic or Latina/o resistance to assimilation is also seen in “The Bones of Conquerors,” a poem contesting that in Miami one perpetually stumbles upon the

skeletons of the *conquistadores*; they survive in the names of the city streets and live on through the many individuals that continue to sail the Atlantic in order to arrive on the shores of Florida: “Yesterday is all around us like a breeze/swaying in the palm trees/ Today, the conquerors are here again: Cubans, Haitians, Puerto Ricans./The ocean is paved with their bones” (30). The new conquerors leave the Antilles to follow the same path as their ancestors, thus keeping their memory and legacy alive.

The cultural rebirth, or re-conquest portrayed in *Language Duel* is not a unique phenomenon of the Caribbean; the poems depict the same process as taking place in the Southwest. Ferré unites the people of the Antilles and those of Mexican origin in portraying their shared desire to preserve the Spanish language and Hispanic culture. “Juan de Oñate” opens with the following question: “Why/ if New Mexico was settled/ by Juan de Oñate/ten years before/the Pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts, do you insist that Plymouth/ Rock/was the first colony?” (32). The poem directly addresses mainstream American culture while disclosing the often forgotten fact that the Spanish conquered and colonized territories that now form part of the United States long before the English arrived and settled in North America. Juan de Oñate is the infamous conquistador of New Mexico that the poetic voice describes as a beast of the same rank as Hernán Cortés. Oñate is known for severing the legs of the Acomas, who “were peaceful,/but eventually rebelled when he savagely/exploited them” (32). Like the Caribs and the Arawaks of the Antilles, the Acomas also resisted; they too swallowed Spanish and made it their own. They survive today in the Southwest, where the vast majority of Hispanics, most of whom are of Mexican origin, reside. The poem ends by affirming that “Today the Pueblo are back/marching without a limp,/both feet planted firmly on *Madre Patria* ground” (34). The descendants of the Acomas are reclaiming their voice and rightful place in their ancestral homeland, which happens to be the United States of America.

The re-conquest of the Southwest is also depicted in “Saguaro Countdown.” The saguaro cacti of Arizona, which in their appearance physically resemble humans, are personified in this poem as former conquistadors and witnesses to the arrival of English speaking newcomers claiming the territory as their own discovery. The poetic voice, a saguaro cactus, discloses their ignorance:

I’ve been speaking Spanish to the O’odhams,  
and Hopi to the Pueblos for centuries  
and hardly had time to grow  
a stump or two on each arm  
before the new Conquistadors arrived,  
the English speaking Conquistadors.  
They are an eccentric lot.  
They have been here for three centuries  
and have already forgotten  
what came before them. (38)

As in “Juan de Oñate,” the speaker makes known his longstanding presence in the Southwest, as well as his multilingualism and multiculturalism, while revealing the strange inability of the English expansionists and settlers to acknowledge the individuals

living in the Southwest, as well as their audacity to declare themselves discoverers of new territories. The poetic voice ridicules their ignorance and arrogance upon stating, “I would never have claimed that I was the first *saguaro* to march in the Sonoran desert” (38). The poem then concludes by presenting the migration of indigenous and Spanish speaking peoples as a steady and unstoppable reality:

A hundred thousand *saguaros* speaking Hopi to the Pueblos  
speaking Navajo to the O’odhams,  
speaking Spanish to the Navajos  
make me suspect  
there are a hundred thousand *saguaros*  
marching right behind us. (38)

As in “The Bones of Conquerors,” the poem alludes to the numerous immigrants that continue to come to the United States from Spanish-speaking America, and more specifically from Mexico. The fact that the saguaros are associated with conquistadors and are marching, along with the word ‘countdown’ that appears in the title of the poem, are highly significant because they reflect deliberate, assertive and organized acts that will inevitably alter the culture and society of the United States.

The ancestral spirit of the Caribs, Arawaks, and Acomas remains even in the most assimilated Latina/os, as demonstrated in “The Spanish of the Ritz.” The Spanish language and Hispanic culture are forces so powerful that they surpass all socio-economic levels. Regardless of a person’s education or social class, one’s ethnic roots can surface and become public when least expected. The poem asks the reader to imagine him or herself at the Ritz Carlton Hotel:

Picture yourself in Gucci shoes,  
Well heeled, well schooled and entering a crowded  
elevator, doing your best to speak a perfect English.  
Unfortunately for you someone steps on your foot.  
A ¡*Coño!* bursts forth, an expletive so  
gross  
it’s like a bullet in the head. (48)

The physical pain of having one’s foot stepped on is so unbearable that the reaction emanates from deep within the self. The response is dictated only by feeling and immediate thought, without any control exercised by reason, and thus it is expressed in the most intimate language of the self: Spanish. It remains unclear if the vulgarity associated with the utterance is due to the fact that the word is an expletive or because the word is said so emphatically in Spanish. Both interpretations are conveyed in the verses that follow. First, “the elevator boy draws/a conspiratory smile/wanting to make clear/that Spanish has its classy people too” (48). Ferré comically renders the exchange between the passenger whose foot is stepped on and the elevator boy as a common occurrence among all Latino/as in the United States by using the Spanish language, as opposed to the name of a particular country of origin or ethnicity, to indicate that both individuals are Hispanic and therefore identify with one another. The remaining



passengers in the elevator, however, “stare and discreetly hold their breath,” so as not to be contaminated by the foreigner, as they ponder over what has happened to the Ritz, a highly exclusive hotel that is welcoming Latina/os to the dismay of the guests on the elevator.

The poem “Tongue less” or “Deslenguado” serves as a warning to those who, like the assimilated individual riding the elevator at the Ritz, try to conceal their native language and cultural origin. The poem advises that “Spanish / might flare up at you one day/ and put your life in danger” (54). The text humorously criticizes proponents of English-only legislation who argue that Spanish is infiltrating and defiling what ought to be the official language of the United States. Ferré also ridicules their conservatism upon comparing the growing use of Spanish to sexual activity, as a sinful behavior that “same as sex/heightens desire” (54). On the other hand, the poetic voice cautions readers that “the more you *habla español*, the more Spanish wants to be the official language of this country” (54). The warning holds even more weight in the Spanish version of the poem, which states, “mientras más se prohíbe, más se empeña este país en hablarlo,” suggesting that prohibiting the use of Spanish will only encourage those who can speak it to do so more frequently. The poetic voice then parodies “English-only” proponents upon stating that it is still possible to eradicate Spanish. The use of *Brillo pads* is recommended over *limpiador Ajax* as a means of erasing the stain or accent of Spanish (55). These verses play with the popular belief that Hispanics in the United States purchase certain brands because they remind them of their countries of origin. The suggestion that they change to a brand with an English name is part of the proposed homogenization. The use of cleaning products is closely tied to the cleansing of one’s ethnicity and to the process of assimilation, as revealed in the poem’s final verses:

Soon you’ll be an exemplary,  
monolingual, monotone  
sparkling clean citizen,  
and all your troubles will be over.  
Spanish will get rusty, shrivel,  
and fall off  
when you don’t use it. (54)

The homogenized, assimilated American is comically rendered as an insipid conformist. The end of the poem brings to mind its title, “Tongue less,” in suggesting that the absorption into Anglo-American culture has as its price the loss of one’s own tongue. Neglecting and ultimately losing one’s Spanish is perceived as a mental and a physical loss of the self.

*Language Duel* or *Duelo del lenguaje* reflects the bilingualism and biculturalism of Latinos in the United States. Ferré demonstrates how the use of both English and Spanish can foster new ideas and creative possibilities. At the same time, her poetry reveals the growing influence and power that Hispanics have in this country. Ferré’s poems capture the struggle that Latina/os face in preserving Spanish while acquiring and embracing English as their own language, and how this process unites Latina/os and contributes to the creation of a new Pan-Hispanic identity that welcomes all Caribbean and Latin American immigrants, as well as their future generations. The histories and

cultures of U.S. Latina/os may differ, but their presence in the United States and the close ties that they maintain to their linguistic heritage and cultural backgrounds unite them, regardless of their country of origin.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, I will use the terms “Hispanic” and “Latina/o” interchangeably to denote a person of Spanish American origin, of any race, who lives in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> In their book on the use of Spanish in the United States, Ana María Escobar and Kim Potowski state that code switching “es muy común en las situaciones del contacto de lenguas en el mundo donde hay un bilingüismo extendido” and that code switches can occur within a sentence, between sentences or as “marcadores discursivos” or “tags” that guide conversation (115). Word loans, on the other hand, consist of words that are appropriated and adapted from one language to another (124). For a detailed discussion on code switching between English and Spanish and word borrowing as reflections of bilingualism and biculturalism among Latina/os in the United States, see *El español de los Estados Unidos*.

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Ramos examines the various ways in which Hispanics in the United States resist assimilation in “Why Latinos are Different: The Melting Pot Myth.” See *The Latino Wave: How Hispanics Will Elect The Next American President*, p. 69-107.

<sup>4</sup> Ana Lydia Vega’s “Carta abierta a Pandora” is a response to an essay written by Rosario Ferré and published by the *New York Times* titled, “Puerto Rico, U.S.A.” In this essay, Ferré advocates for Puerto Rican statehood, defines Puerto Ricans as cultural hybrids, and defends Puerto Ricans’ biculturalism: “Our two halves are inseparable; we cannot give up either without feeling maimed. For many years, my concern was to keep my Hispanic self from being stifled. Now I discover it’s my American self that’s being threatened” (A21).

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