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▷ *Las paredes hablan en El Barrio:* **Mestizo Signs and Semiosis¹**

Abstract: By focusing on two different squares of blocks in the traditional Latino NYC community of El Barrio/East Harlem in NYC, this article shows ways in which the community goes beyond the language of traditional public signs and resists the English-only of official signs. Because English and/or Spanish are insufficient to transmit messages in a community that is undergoing change and whose Latino population is made up of people of different national origins, race, class, and language, murals in this community serve as mestizo signs. The article shows how murals offer a multimodal alternative, building translanguaging spaces in which words and images that emerge from different cultural, socio-historical and political practices blend to release Latino voices. The article also discusses the intersection of the murals with other more traditional signs in the two *bloques*, pointing to the different role that Spanish and English takes on, as it adapts to the context and the message.

Key words: Harlem, linguistic landscape, mexicans, murals, New York, puertoricans, translanguaging, zapatistas.

Resumen: Centrándose en dos cuadradas de calles diferentes en la tradicional comunidad latina de “El Barrio/East Harlem”, en la ciudad de Nueva York, este artículo muestra la manera en que dicha comunidad va más allá del lenguaje de las señales públicas y se resiste al “solo en inglés” de las indicaciones oficiales. Puesto que el inglés y/o el español resultan insuficientes para transmitir mensajes en una comunidad que está atravesando

* Ofelia García is Professor in the Ph.D. programs of Urban Education and of Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures and Languages at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She has been Professor of Bilingual Education at Columbia University's Teachers College, Dean of the School of Education at the Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University, and Professor of Education at The City College of New York. Among her recent books are: *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A global perspective*; *Bilingual Community Education and Multilingualism* (with Z. Zakharia & B. Otcu); *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity, Vols. I & II* (with J. A. Fishman); *Educating Emergent Bilinguals* (with J. Kleifgen); *Additive Schooling in Subtractive Times* (with L. Bartlett); and *Negotiating Language Policies in Schools* (with K. Menken). She is the Associate General Editor of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* <www.ofeliagarcia.org>. E-mail: ogarcia@gc.cuny.edu.

** Ivana Espinet is pursuing her Ph.D. in Urban Education at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York. She has an M.A. in Instructional Technology and Education from Teachers College, Columbia University. She is currently the facilitator for the National Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship in New York, where after school practitioners engage in a year-long intensive inquiry-based reflective learning process. She is presently working on a collaborative visual ethnography that explores how young people in a school with a large population of emergent bilinguals navigate their relationship to their multiple communities. E-mail: ivanaespinet@yahoo.com.

*** Lorena Hernández is a PhD student from Spain in the Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures and Languages program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She obtained an MA degree in SLA and Spanish Applied Linguistics from Arizona State University in 2008. Her research interests focus mainly on sociolinguistics, and more specifically, on language ideologies, and the sociology of Spanish in the US. She teaches Spanish at Lehman College, in the Bronx. E-mail: lorenaherram@gmail.com.

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cambios, y cuya población latina está compuesta por personas de diferentes nacionalidades, razas, clases y lenguas, los murales de dicha comunidad sirven como símbolos mestizos. El artículo demuestra cómo estos murales ofrecen una alternativa multimodal, construyendo espacios de *translanguaging* en los cuales las palabras y las imágenes que surgen de distintas prácticas culturales, sociohistóricas y políticas se fusionan para dar paso a voces latinas. El artículo también analiza la intersección de los murales con otras señales más tradicionales en las dos cuerdas, apuntando a los diferentes roles que asumen el español y el inglés conforme se adaptan al contexto y al mensaje.

Palabras clave: Harlem, mexicanos, murales, Nueva York, paisajes lingüísticos, puertorriqueños, translenguar, zapatistas.

1. Introduction

Perhaps no other neighborhood in New York has had a longer history of sociolinguistic study than East Harlem, known as El Barrio. In the late 20th century the Language Policy Task Force of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, under the leadership of Pedro Pedraza, published many studies of the language use of East Harlem (see, for example, Language Policy Task Force, 1988; Poplack, 1978). And in 1997 Ana Celia Zentella immortalized a “bloque” in the neighborhood in her book, *Growing Up Bilingual*.

El Barrio has been characterized as a community with a high level of poverty, few job opportunities, and inadequate municipal and state services (Sharman, 2006). Because of their citizen status, Puerto Ricans in El Barrio were able to attain some political power through the 1970s and mid-1980s with the elections of Senator Olga Méndez and Assemblyman Del Toro, as well as other politicians at local and state levels. But in the last two decades, El Barrio has been transformed by changes in New York City.

While Puerto Ricans still compose the largest Latino group in the neighborhood (26.8% of the total population), their numbers have decreased over the last decade. Since the 1980's, there has been an increase in the number of Mexican immigrants who have populated the area. In 1980, the Mexican population accounted for 0.7% of the total Hispanic population of the neighborhood and by 2010 it comprised 9.5%. El Barrio has shifted from being a Puerto Rican neighborhood to one populated by many Mexicans and other Latinos, some of whom are undocumented, but others who are merchants, artists, students and union leaders. The Latino community of El Barrio is mostly working class, with an annual per capita income of less than \$6,000 (Cardalda Sánchez/Tirado Avilés, 2001). Dávila (2004a: 155) describes Mexican and Puerto Ricans as “jointly investing in El Barrio as ‘Latino Space’.”

At the same time, as real estate prices in Manhattan have reached peak levels, the neighborhood has started undergoing gentrification, with young white professionals joining the Latino ranks. Property values in East Harlem have climbed. There has been a severe decline of affordable housing in the community and an increase of new condominiums and co-op buildings. This wave of gentrification has displaced many of the current low income and long time residents and has created tension in the community (Dávila, 2004b).

This paper looks at the changes taking place in East Harlem through its linguistic landscape. Rather than focusing on what people in East Harlem do with language, as had been done in the past, the paper focuses on how signs are inscribed in the East Harlem landscape, how *las paredes hablan*. The paper attempts to answer the question, *What is the role of signs in the East Harlem landscape and what do they tell us about the language practices and language ideologies in the community?* Rather than an individual perspective, the paper takes a community perspective, as it attempts to make the community itself both the subject and object of study. That is, we want to know more about how signs are inscribed in the community's public spaces and what messages they convey about the community and to the community, and in which ways those messages are delivered. We tell the community's story through its signs. For this reason, we do not start with a history of the community in which the signs are inscribed, but rather we start with a semiotic analysis of the signs in the linguistic landscape.

Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25) provide the early and traditional definition of a linguistic landscape: "The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration." Ben-Rafael (2009: 40) defines linguistic landscape as "linguistic objects that mark the public space." Work on linguistic landscape has become an established sub-field within sociolinguistics since the early work of Spolsky and Cooper (1991) on Jerusalem's street names. The volumes by Backhaus (2000), Gorter (2006), Gorter, Marten and Van Mensel (2012), Jaworski and Thurlow (2012), Shohamy and Gorter (2009), and Shohamy, Ben-Rafael and Barni (2010) have given legitimacy to the field.

Communities have different ways of languaging,² and in the East Harlem community, for reasons that we explain below, the early definition of linguistic landscape has to be extended. Given the complexity of this bilingual community, as well as the poverty and lack of services, including good schools, to which the East Harlem residents have been subjected, languaging in this linguistic landscape goes beyond oral or written English or Spanish to include the visual signs of murals. We argue that murals, blending visuals and written words, and producing oral reactions from those who pass by (and sometimes written ones in the form of graffiti), offer a *mestizo* approach to languaging, releasing signs from having to be either oral or written, and offering a community-appropriate way of messaging.

We divide our analysis in this paper into two parts. The first part consists of an analysis of two murals that significantly dominate and define the community landscape — "The Spirit of Harlem" and "The Zapatista Mural." We chose those two murals to anchor our analysis because beyond their vibrancy and importance, they also represent two faces of the community. The Spirit of Harlem is located on 104th St. and Lexington Avenue, the center of the Puerto Rican community and a crossroad of cultures as gentrification moves uptown, and was originally completed in the 1970s. The Zapatista Mural is on 117th Street, between 2nd and 1st Avenues, in what has become the center of the growing Mexican population, and was originally done in the 1990s.

2 For us, "languaging" refers to the discursive practices of people that are product of social action (Becker, 1995 and Maturana/Varela, 1973).

In the second part of the paper, we look at the more traditional written signs in the *manzanas* of these two murals. That is, we analyze all signs, iconic or written, that are in the square of blocks in which the murals are located, and study how it is that these signs interact. Together, the two murals and the traditional signs in the *manzanas* tell us the story of the language, cultural, social and political practices of the East Harlem community. They also tell the story of languaging in a subjugated Latino community and the tools that are used to communicate messages and stories in ways that go beyond traditional definitions of language. We explore these issues in our discussion, but we start first by discussing what we mean by “mestizo signs.”

2. Languaging and mestizo signs

Backhaus (2007) has said that the language of signs can express a desire to assert power. If the language of signs in East Harlem is an expression of power, then, as we will see, despite the long Latino history in that neighborhood, English continues to exert its power, as written Spanish is almost silenced. The message is clear — it is fine to have oral interactions in Spanish, both in Latino homes and communities. But the public language of signs has to be in written English, as the Latino community is robbed of opportunities to read Spanish publicly.

However, there is another way of languaging that resists the power of written English, perhaps more effective than written Spanish because the messages they communicate are different from those of the conventional standard language of signs. In a bilingual community where Spanish literacy is not taught and, hence, low, another way of resisting the power of written English (and of consumer values) lies in murals. More than any other community in New York City, East Harlem is known for its murals — 228 of them in 2001, according to Cardalda Sánchez/Tirado Avilés (2001). Murals are, as these scholars have said, “visual voices.” They:

[S]ustain a dialogue with the community and this communication constitutes a form of knowledge-production. They are designed to create a reflection and evoke visual/verbal responses in an urban setting where cultural amnesia has been induced by the dominant commercial culture. (Cardalda Sánchez/Tirado Avilés 2001: 265)

Murals disrupt not only the plethora of signs in English, but also provide the community with alternative representations and messages than those they’re getting through schools, television, and formal settings. At the same time, murals engage the community in responding to the oppression of poverty and English-only discourses to which they have been relegated. Murals, unlike written signs, also disrupt the commercial culture and the image of Latinos as simple consumers. Murals then are *mestizo signs* — situated between the oral and written word and encompassing both, and evoking a type of communication that is neither written literacy in the sense evoked in schools, nor pure art. Instead, it is a dynamic performance, engaging those who see it in praxis, in an active response.

In many ways, murals provide a way of languaging that disrupts the written standard language of public spaces. Although translanguaging, that is, using the community’s full language repertoire to communicate effectively without regard to national constructions

of language (García, 2009), is frequently performed orally in the community, the community is shy about displaying their translanguaging performances in writing in public signs. This has to do with their fear that they will be judged negatively for either their written English or their written Spanish, and their languaging stigmatized. Instead, the community has found another way to translanguaje, using now their full semiotic capacity to go beyond language as simply English or Spanish, and thus extending the notion of linguistic landscape itself.

For Latinos, murals have a long history as expression of political resistance and class struggle. Murals have served as ways to communicate complex social messages to a population with low literacy. In Mexico, the mural tradition culminated between 1920 and the 1970s with the work of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, who used murals to communicate the ideas of the Mexican Revolution and to construct pride in a Mexican *mestizo* identity.

As “visual markers of Latinidad” (Dávila, 2004a), murals may be the only public medium available to the bilingual Latino community of East Harlem to protest social injustice, at the same time that murals embody the community itself. Murals are “social chronicles of the community” (Cardalda Sánchez/Tirado Avilés, 2001: 264) and construct a *mestizo* Latino identity that combines elements of its origins in Latin America with those of the United States. In so doing, murals build a pan-Latino subjectivity that is different from being Latin American or North American. This “third space” subjectivity cannot simply be expressed in public signs through either English or Spanish or both. Thus, murals, which in themselves contain written Spanish and English, are *mestizo* signs, enactments of translanguaging in the public space.

Cardalda Sánchez and Tirado Avilés summarize the power of murals in El Barrio by saying:

As visual voices, they speak loudly about the complex and contradictory processes through which Puerto Rican and other Latino/a identities are conceived and enacted. In this respect, murals act as public signatures to transgress the colonial violence that provokes invisibility. (Cardalda Sánchez/Tirado Avilés 2001: 283)

In the next two sections we analyze how two murals not only transgress colonial violence, but also conventional language and the signage of linguistic landscapes. In using visual voices to engage the community in resisting social injustice, murals make visible the limitations of conventional standard language, both majority and minority ones, in the telling of counter-stories and communicating alternative messages through public signs.

3. The Spirit of Harlem

On 104th Street and Lexington Avenue, the “Spirit of Harlem” comes alive. The mural is striking because of its size and its vivid colors. It takes up the whole side-wall of a building, is four stories high, and measures 42 feet by 75 feet (Braun-Reinitz/Weissman, 2009).



The mural communicates a “spirit,” with portraits of real community members, predominantly Puerto Rican, playing dominoes, playing a *cuatro*, singing, playing basketball, learning to ride a bike. The Puerto Rican flag and the *garita del Morro* are depicted at the bottom of the mural, and business signs displayed. The mural portrays the residents “hanging out” in front of the actual building. It populates the walls of a building with people in action, and with signs of Puerto Rican identity (the flag, the dominoes, the *cuatro*). Also evident is commercial activity — one a sign for the “Amsterdam Cheese Co.” — and then signs in Spanish — “Comidas,” “Barra,” “Farmacia,” “Conjunto Libre,” “con salsa, con ritmo.” Together these words in Spanish give the community its subsistence — food, drink, health and music/dance. What the mural does is bring the wall to life, project activity and motion, and bring out the overlapping languaging of the community, signs other than the written word (a flag, dominoes) pointing to the Puerto Rican life of the community, and others in English and Spanish. But in the use of English and Spanish words within the mural hangs a tale. The most prominent sign in English is that of the *Daily News*. The sign is written from right to left, a language transgression that offers a view of the sign as in a mirror. “Daily” is the word that is most prevalent, contrasting to the Puerto Rican *vida diaria* in Spanish in the mural itself. It is as if the mural tells the story that the *Daily News*, the most accessible English language newspaper to the community, does not tell, as it ignores events in the East Harlem community. The mural goes beyond the English of the world outside East Harlem, but also of the Spanish of the “Comidas,” and the “con salsa, con ritmo” that make up the daily life of the community. In its own way, the mural tells the story of a vibrant community whose life exists as separated by a mirror, unrecognized by the powers that be, by a city that leaves it to its own sounds — its salsa music, its Spanish, its translanguaging — that reflects and duplicates the mainstream reality, but that is never the same because it is inverted and different.

In this mural, artist Hank Prussing was also making a statement about the status of the community and of Puerto Rico. He depicts the Puerto Rican community of East Harlem as lively and in action, but behind a mirror that separates them from the mainstream. But