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## ▷ *Las paredes hablan en El Barrio:* **Mestizo Signs and Semiosis<sup>1</sup>**

**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, zapatas.

**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

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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 20<sup>th</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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 104<sup>th</sup> 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 117<sup>th</sup> Street, between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> 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 104<sup>th</sup> 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

in its portrayal there are ways of becoming *libre*, free of its subjugated poor status. The music group in the mural is called precisely "Conjunto Libre." By portraying a "*conjunto*" of the community, the muralist is offering them a way to become "*libre*." The Puerto Rican flag in the mural frames a real window with bars, bars that hold the island as an "Estado Libre Asociado," bars that are repeated in the sign for "*barras*," not only a place where one drinks, but turned now into a rigid piece of metal that holds the Puerto Rican people prisoner. Only the *conjunto* of people and voices can transform their situation. The white domino table at the foreground extends forward, turning into a road, a white path that ends when it reaches the word "Libre" and the eye is propelled outside of the mural and into the community.

The years in which the original mural was painted in the 1970s were years of ethnic revival and pride, with Puerto Ricans taking an active role in the liberation of their community, especially through education. Those were the years in which the Puerto Rican community took the New York City Board of Education to Court on the ground that an English-only education was leaving the community uneducated. The Aspira Consent Decree, passed in 1974, guaranteed that Puerto Rican children who did not speak English would be educated bilingually, releasing their bilingual tongues that had been silenced.

In 1998, Manny Vega, the Puerto Rican muralist who was Prussing's young apprentice in the 1970s, restored the mural. The Puerto Rican flag and the signs and advertisements at the bottom of the present mural, including a sign for "El Barrio Tours," were Vega's additions. Braun-Reinitz and Weissman (2009: 53) comment that the mermaid that emerges from the blue waters of El Barrio Tour "is as imaginary and seductive as the economic incentives promised but never delivered to the neighborhood." The improvements were a "Fantasía," as the sign of El Barrio Tour adds. The bars and the frames of the mural continue, as the community continues to be imprisoned in its poverty, without any possibility of leaving the mural itself and walking out.

The Spirit of Harlem brings together the past and the present. It is impossible for a reader of the mural to understand what is original and what is new, including what taggers in the community have added. In the same way, the language and cultural practices of East Harlem continue to be carried out in a dynamic relocation of time, as well as space. Not only are the language practices dynamically produced in multiple time eras which are inscribed in the mural simultaneously, but also in multiple spaces, as practices in East Harlem dynamically shift those brought from Puerto Rico in coming into contact with English, but also with the many Spanishes of other New York Latinos.

The other mural we describe gives us a sense of how another Latino group languages totally differently because of their arrival during a neo-liberal period of globalization. Ten blocks up from the "Spirit of East Harlem," the Mexican American community inscribes one of the buildings with the ideologies and language practices of *el Zapatismo*, now transplanted to a US context.

#### 4. The Zapatista

If the Spirit of Harlem mural is tall, The Zapatista is long, taking up most of the northeast corner of 117th Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenues. The Puerto Rican community of East Harlem became one with its vertical tenements, grounded in El Barrio. That is,



as US citizens since 1916, they saw themselves as here to stay, appropriating the *bloques*. The more recent Mexican American community of East Harlem is still looking across transnational contexts to that of Mexico, and in this instance, to Chiapas, for its liberation and for social justice. The mural is set on a blue color background.



Starting from the left, the mural has been divided into five different frames, each one of them separated from the other by a series of black footsteps walking upwards towards the top of the mural. These footsteps are representative of the ideology of Subcomandante Marcos, the leader of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, as he describes it in his 1992 essay, *Chiapas: The Southeast in two Winds* (2001):

This chapter tells how the dignity of the Indigenous people tried to make itself heard, but *its voice* only lasted a little while. It also tells how *voices that spoke before are speaking again today* and that the Indians are walking forward once again but this time with firm footsteps (n.p.).

Marcos explains that when voices are not heard, alternative modes of expression, *mestizo* languaging, has to be found. The visual voices of the mural are the footsteps, translanguaging in ways that have more visibility and traction than doing so in a timid Spanish voice, or in a weak English voice. Bolstered by the Mexican tradition of mural painting, the mural is a Mexican American expression of injustices in East Harlem, but expressed through those in Chiapas.

The five frames tell a story. We discuss each of the frames from left to right, as we would read a book. However, it is important to understand that the mural is experienced in its totality. That is, the reading by viewers/readers does not in any way proceed from

left to right, but rather can be selective of frames or features, or can be experienced in its totality simultaneously.

The first two frames introduce the two main characters — the Virgen de Guadalupe and Subcomandante Marcos himself. The Guadalupe has at her feet an angel, but this is a Zapatista angel, with wings that have green and red tips. The celestial image of the Guadalupe is not only disrupted by the political reality in Mexico, but also by the urban reality of New York. By the Guadalupe's shoulder there is a sign in English that reads "Sprinkler Siamese," accompanied by the actual sprinkler, which is at her feet. The Virgen de la Guadalupe is rendered more real, terrestrial and urban.

The second frame contains the first written words of the mural itself ("Zapatismo") accompanied by the strong image of Subcomandante Marcos's eyes and pipe seen through the characteristic black mask. "Zapatismo" is accompanied by words in strong white letters which read: "Todos somos Marcos," while on the left appears a piece of paper that reads:

*Detrás de nuestro rostro negro.  
Detrás de nuestra voz armada.  
Detrás de nuestro innombrable nombre.  
Detrás de los nosotros que ustedes ven.  
Detrás estamos ustedes.  
Detrás estamos los mismos hombres y mujeres  
simples y ordinarios que se repiten en todas las razas,  
se pintan en todos los colores, se hablan en todas las  
lenguas y se viven en todos los lugares.  
Detrás de nosotros estamos ustedes.  
Hermanos y hermanas de todo el mundo.  
Bienvenidos a este rincón del mundo en donde todos  
somos iguales porque somos diferentes.  
Bienvenidos a la búsqueda de la vida y la lucha  
contra la muerte.*

The word "detrás" (behind) is repeated seven times, and opens the first five verses. The poet wants us to look "detrás," not to the masks, but to the realities of the people behind them; not to the mural, but to the lives and inequities of those who live in those buildings. The Zapatista's voice is "armada" ("armed"), but their name is "innombrable" (not able to be said). No one listens despite the arms, and yet, the poet wants those of us who are looking/reading to understand that "they" are "us." The poet doesn't say "somos nosotros," or even "somos ustedes," but "estamos ustedes." It is a matter of positioning in ways that, like the picture and the words in the mural, blend the looker/reader and those who are portrayed. The mural allows us to enter a world as them, not as us; just like the Zapatistas portrayed enter our world as us. This message is repeated once again, "Detrás de nosotros estamos ustedes." The mural welcomes us into an integrated mestizo space, a space where we're all brothers and sisters, where we're the same precisely because we're different, because we're of different races and places. The mural languages in ways that go beyond Spanish and English, "them" and "us," beyond dichotomies of time and space, of people, and national languages.

The third frame is a double-frame. The left one depicts at the top a ship with Zapatistas, and at the center, Marcos. At the bottom there's a saying in Spanish, "*Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos.*" That is precisely what the mural does. It enables us to simultaneously consider many words and worlds in unison. The saying crosses across a globe of the earth, making room in this one earth for many. The ship navigates the sea of globalization, and so the Zapatistas aboard the ship are surrounded by "*caracoles*," snails, the sign of the autonomous rebel Zapatista municipalities. The waves growing from the globe keep the ship afloat, but the ship is also moved by the Mexican flag, which is its sails. Just as the Zapatistas are not only them, but also us, the world is not only global, but also local. The ship is carried both by the global sense of justice, and by the local sense of Mexican identity. The mermaids and the flying fish that surround the ship point to a better world. It is now, on the right hand of the frame that the translation into English of the Spanish language poem that was inscribed in the first frame is attested.

The translation raises a few questions. The poem in the Spanish version starts with "*Detrás de nuestro rostro negro*" ("Behind our black face"). In the English version, it starts with "Behind our black mask." In the Spanish version, the speakers are identified by their black face, while in the English account there is reference only to the black masks. The double meaning of the original Spanish version, in which "*rostro*" could refer to both dark skin and black masks, is lost in the English version.

The right side of the frame clearly starts out with "Chiapas," in big block red letters. Slightly to the right, with smaller red letters is written the Zapatista motto "*¡Democracia! ¡Libertad! ¡Justicia!*" ("Democracy! Freedom! Justice!"). From the rifle grows a flower. In between there is a Zapatista woman, armed with a rifle, but also with her two children, also masked. The eagle and the snake featured in the flag come out of it in this depiction, hovering over the flag. But the eagle is black, rather than golden as in the traditional Mexican flag. And whereas the eagle in the Mexican flag and emblem turns towards the right to devour the snake with the right talon, this eagle turns towards the left as it devours the snake with its left talon. The bottom right corner of this block also serves as an "acknowledgment corner," where several names are mentioned, thanking those people for making the mural possible, under the motto "*¡Viva Zapata, Cabrones!*" This is not translated, for the Spanish word "*cabrones*," (assholes) is not meant to be understood by anyone who does not speak Spanish, accused here as responsible for the oppression. At the same time, the use of the word "*cabrones*," serves as a ritual insult (Labov, 1972), addressed to the brave insiders, other fellow Zapatistas.

Below the word "Chiapas," there are two more images. There is an Aztec sun painted in red, but in Chiapas style, and to its left a small emblem. The emblem depicts Don Durito de la Selva Lacandona, a character created by Subcomandante Marcos (1992, 2008). Don Durito is a beetle, an *escarabajo*, who gives intellectual advice. In the mural Don Durito has a pipe, a pirate hat, but also a red scarf around his neck, and a paper clip as his lance. Around the emblem there is a motto that says: "*Don Durito de la Selva Lacandona: 'El problema con la realidad es que no sabe nada de teorías.'*" The important task, for Don Durito and for the muralist, is to confront established knowledge, and shake up intellectual theory and especially social science and sociopolitical theory, as it is expressed through language that normalizes the exploitation of poor people. It is reality that is depicted in the mural, plain and simple, without the words that shape theories that are responsible for the exploitation of the poor.



The fourth frame shows some more masked women and children. Some graffiti have been drawn over this block, making its reading somewhat more difficult. The bottom has the words of Subcomandante Marcos: "*La esperanza es como las galletas de animalitos... no sirve de nada si no se lleva dentro...*," for which the next frame provides the translation: "Hope is like animal crackers... it doesn't do any good if you don't carry it inside you..." With the word "*Esperanza*" clearly written above the translation, this frame depicts the *esperanza/hope* for Indigenous communities which are depicted resting on Aztec blocks in the middle of water.

The Zapatista mural offers a message of resistance, but also opens up a way of languaging that inserts hope in a better future. The Zapatista uprising in Chiapas on January 1, 1994 against neo-liberal policies and for right to "jobs, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, and justice and peace" (Russell, 1995: 36) resulted in the San Andrés Accords (February 16, 1996). This agreement gave the Indigenous communities autonomy over local governments and natural resources, and

included agrarian reform. However, the San Andrés Accords remained written words on a piece of paper without any relevance. Now the mural itself pushes the equity agenda and transgresses the meaningless written words of an accord that simply repeated the ways of languaging and being of the powerful. The community finds hope not in Mexico, and not through Spanish, but through its own form of representation and translanguaging in a more democratic United States. The next section expands on the meaning of murals for the East Harlem community.

## 5. Murals as translanguaging

The two murals that we have described are not only manifestations of the resistance of the community to their perceived powerlessness, but they also enact a *mestizo languaging*. This bilingual subaltern community needs to be addressed not just with conventional languages as constructed by nation-states. El Barrio is not simply made up of recent Spanish-speaking immigrants who can be addressed solely in Spanish, for many of the Mexicans speak Indigenous languages, especially Mixteco, and many have low literacy in Spanish. Although the urban presence of American languages has been studied in cases like Mexico City (Martín Butragueño, 2009; Sichra, 2009), it has received little attention in the United States. Furthermore, El Barrio is not simply made up of bilingual Puerto Ricans whose English literacy is more advanced. In a bilingual subjugated community that is not clearly structurally incorporated to any nation-state, national languages are not good vehicles of communication or of appropriation of messages. Both English and Spanish are evaluated as languages of Empire, communicating messages that are outside of the community itself.

Through murals, the community has found a way of expressing their own power and engaging in resistance to the racialization and linguification to which they have been subjected. In many ways, murals, in which both visual voices, as well as bilingual voices are inscribed, are manifestations of translanguaging, of using the entire language repertoire of the community to make sense of their lives. But this translanguaging makes full use of a visual multimodality that extends national constructions of language.

While English and Spanish appear in both murals, Spanish dominates. But because murals are not simply a linear representation as in a written text, Spanish is always represented in interdependence with English. Just as the muralist directs the viewers' gaze to a visual aspect or another, the muralist uses written language to address certain messages to the Spanish-speaking community only. In the Zapatista mural described, the texts in larger font and placed at the center of the mural are all in Spanish — "*Todos Somos Marcos*" ("We all are Marcos"), "*Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*" ("A world where many worlds fit"), "*Democracia! ¡Libertad! ¡Justicia!*" ("Democracy! Freedom! Justice!"). The choice of Spanish in a prominent position, or in larger typeface, is a conscious political choice as a declaration of political power over the symbolic space in the neighborhood. The urban space is a site for the negotiation and representation of the transnational politics of Latinos, colonized by the US in the case of Puerto Rico, conquered by Spaniards and subjugated by the US in the case of Mexico, but living now in a neighborhood space within a larger national US space which has to be bridged. The message, as stated in the Zapatista mural, is then for:

ordinary men and women  
 who are repeated in all races,  
 painted in all colors, speak in all languages,  
 and live in all places.

Through the translanguaging in the mural, the artists go beyond local space and local languages, constructing a way of languaging that speaks to all; that portrays, and yet dissolves gender, racial, language and social differences. The question, then, is why it is that the traditional definition of linguistic landscape as simply language in the traditional sense not work for East Harlem. Interestingly enough, it is the analysis of the traditional linguistic landscape that gives us the answer, the topic of our next section.

## 6. Traditional language signs in "El Barrio"

Anchored in the murals, we conducted a thorough analysis of the traditional signs of *la manzana* in which the murals were located.<sup>3</sup> What we found surprised us. In a neighborhood where Spanish is mainly spoken on the streets and in businesses, all the official signs, issued by the state or by central bureaucracies, as Ben-Rafael *et al.* (2004) have pointed out, were in English only. This includes mostly signs to orient or direct (for example, street names, traffic signs, "Playground," "Restroom") and signs to control actions (for example, "No Standing," "No Trespassing," "Litter Only," "Feed the Pigeon, Breed a Rat"). Most of the signs to sell goods and services ("Beer," "Ice Coors," "Lotto," "Finish Line Retailing") were also in English, although not equally in the two *bloques*. When signs were meant to either integrate the Latino community or sell to them, signs were either bilingual or in Spanish. But interestingly enough, Spanish was also used as counter-language to organize the community for resistance. These were our findings both around the Zapatista mural, as well as the Spirit of Harlem, although there were differences.

### 6.1. The Zapatista bloque

In the *manzana* of the Zapatista mural, one finds PS 155, an elementary government-funded public school<sup>4</sup> where 80% of the students are Latinos. Yet, there is only a small bilingual sign written by the Parent-Teacher Association and calling the parents to an election. In fact, the school also has a mural with nursery rhymes, but only of traditional English rhymes such as "Rock-a-Bye-Baby," "Humpty Dumpty," and "Twinkle-Twinkle Little Star." The sign "Once Upon a Time" reminds us that in this school, the educators would want it to be as they dream of it being once upon a time, without recognizing that "*había una vez*" there were always immigrant children. The businesses too seem to have their names and signs in English, whether they're auto repair shops, nail and hair salons, barbershops, tattoo salons, delis, *bodegas*, pizza shops, or convenience stores. There is a

3 We studied signs on 117th and 118th Streets between 2nd and 1st Avenues, and 2nd and 1st Avenues between 117th and 118th Streets. We also studied signs found on 104th and 103rd Streets between 3rd and 2nd Avenues, and 3rd and 2nd Avenues between 103 and 104 Streets.

4 Elementary schools in New York City typically include classes from kindergarten to 5th grade.

public garden, and the sign proudly calls it "Diamante Garden." The word "Diamante" is the only sign of the brilliance of Spanish in this community, where public Spanish is silenced, except for restricted spaces and uses.

We use the signage in La Cabaña, a Mexican restaurant, to capture the only uses for Spanish in conventional signs of this *manzana*. In La Cabaña, the menu in the window, the sign "Delicious dishes" and "No public restroom" are in English. There are, however, three signs in the window that speak to us in Spanish and that reveal the three functions for which Spanish seems to be used in signage in this community — 1) to impose English and an American identity, 2) to add new Latino customers, 3) to resist policies and practices that subjugate the community.

*To impose English and an American identity*

There is a printed sign for "*Clases de inglés gratis*" solely in Spanish. It is interesting, however, that in order to entice people to attend these free English classes, given at a local church, the sign adds that English is "*enseñado por americanos*." The fact that the sign in Spanish is about English classes and that the producers of the sign entice the community by advertising that classes will be taught by Americans, says much about the lack of valuing of the bilingual members of this community, and of the Otherness in which they're all held. Spanish is only used as a bridge to English, and English is only validated in the lips of Anglo American monolinguals.

*To add new Latino customers*

There is also a commercial bilingual sign of a website to order food and have it delivered. The message is clear: "*Nuevos clientes, más pedidos*." By signing bilingually, there will be more clients and more business, Spanish-speakers who will spend money to add to the business clientele.

*To resist and improve the community*

A bilingual sign calls the community to oppose a recent policy of New York City Mayor Bloomberg to ban super-size drinks. After appealing to the community to resist the policy, the sign ends in: "*Si esto es ahora, ¿qué sigue?*" The "What's next?" in the English text is rendered in Spanish through a literal translation from English that makes it meaningless except when looking at the English. Yet, Spanish-speakers are invited to enter a world "*qué sigue*" which would always give preference to messages in English, but that by raising it as a question is an invitation to other possibilities and to action.

Besides these three signs in one locale, the only signs that appear in Spanish in this *manzana* are a reminder of the powerlessness of the community, and a call to resist and act. One is in an empty storefront where there is a Spanish language sign for "*Alcohólicos Anónimos. Grupo Nueva (sic) Perspectivas*," a reminder of the high index of alcoholism in the community, spurred by the signs in English of "Beer." The other two are posters produced by an organization called "*Movimiento de Justicia para El Barrio*," which was founded "to fight against a voracious trend towards gentrification that is devouring affordable housing and displacing low-income families from their homes" and where community members "participate in skills-building workshops and deepen their political analysis through workshops on the root causes of injustice and other locally-based social justice movements around the world." <<http://www.idealists.org/view/nonprofit/H2dW3SPD9GBD/>>. In both posters, Spanish appears first, followed by English. One is a bilingual sign for the "*Campaña Contra Hogares Helados*," (Campaign against Frozen Homes) which gives the telephone number of the Emergency Hot Line to complain of

no heat. The other is a poster advocating for rights for tenants to repairs, and not to be evicted, calling to community members: "*Únete con tus vecinos para mejorar tus condiciones de vivienda!*" ["Unite with your neighbors to improve your housing conditions!"].

## 6.2. *The Spirit of East Harlem bloque*

In contrast to 117th Street, the *bloque* that contains The Spirit of Harlem displays more written Spanish. Although most of the residents here speak more English and are more bilingual since they have been in this community longer, Spanish here is more rooted in the community. This is interesting, for rather than a symbol of powerlessness, Spanish here has the power of long-standing and a history of civil rights and political resistance. There are more businesses here that engage the Latino community through Spanish. First of all, *El Especialito Semanario de la Gran Familia Hispana*, a free weekly published in Spanish is available here in vending machines. Signs of businesses are not solely in English as in the other *manzana*, but now there are more bilingual signs. There is sign for "Blake Pharmacy/Farmacia Blake" that welcomes customers with a sign that says: "*Productos hispanos y latinos. Bienvenidos.*" There is "El Barrio Hardware/Ferretería." There is "Mi Mexico Mini Market" with the sign "*Aceptamos cupones de alimentos. Productos Mexicanos.*" And the sign of "Shoe Repairs/Shoe Shine" is accompanied with "Compramos sneakers." The "Original House of Fragrances" has the saying in the window: "*Las luces que esta mirando son quemadores de aceite. Unas pocas gotas daran aroma a su ambeinte*" (sic). And there is the "*Taquería El Paso, Auténtica Cocina Mexicana.*" It is interesting that these signs combine both pride in Mexicanness, as well as the needs of the community, and the interpenetration of Latino cultures. One business not only sells Mexican products, but also displays that it accepts US government food stamps for needy families to do so. By announcing that sneakers are bought, the Shoe Repair store is also inviting residents to sell their sneakers, something that is rarely done in communities of more means. The signs in Spanish are a way of helping a poor community make ends meet without much public acknowledgment, a way of communicating counter-messages of resistance and hope.

Although in the other *manzana*, the signs to control behaviors were all solely in English, they are often bilingual here. For example, "No Parking," is accompanied with, "*No bloquee la entrada,*" and "No Trespassing" is accompanied by "*Prohibido el Paso.*" Because this area is being gentrified, there is new construction on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, and the sign in the construction site is in Chinese and English, pointing to the investment of other communities in this one.

The greatest number of Spanish-only signs are those in businesses that send money abroad, and mostly to Mexico. In one store there is a sign that reads: "*Envíe remesas a sus seres queridos aquí,*" significantly followed by "*Se venden tacos, quesadillas, tortas pica-ditas.*" By communicating that in a business that sends money abroad there is Mexican food for sale, Mexican clients are particularly welcomed. This is more explicitly done in another business of "*Envíos de dinero*" which then exclaims: "*¡Sí Paisano!*" thus appealing to the Mexican clientele.



### 6.3. *Reflecting on traditional signs in the community*

It is interesting to surmise why it is that Spanish in the traditional signs of 103<sup>rd</sup> Street is doing better than on 117<sup>th</sup> Street. We think that the gentrification of El Barrio, especially in its southern border, means that Spanish is gaining more prestige, as more white professionals move into the area and take up the music, the dance, and the language of the Latinos in the community. The linguistic landscape of El Barrio in the two areas targeted for analysis shows the relationship that power has to language and the changing role of Spanish in New York City.

The linguistic landscape of the *manzana* surrounding 117<sup>th</sup> Street, with few businesses, more poverty, and touching Black Harlem, is remarkable for the absence of written Spanish in the signs, even though the residents are more recent and more Spanish-speaking. Spanish there is used only to engage the community in resistance against social injustice. But on 103<sup>rd</sup> Street, Spanish is gaining ground, not just as the language of a poor minoritized Latino community, but as a New York language, used for business, and comfortable in its sounds that are being taken up by others who are not Latinos.

### 6.4. *Murals again and multimodal messages*

It is important to point out that in the eight blocks studied, there were an additional five murals, besides the two that framed our analysis. Around the Zapatista mural there was one mural on a fence titled "Immigration Game;" the other, is an impressive mural done in 2012 by incarcerated mothers to help them stay in touch with their children and titled "If walls could talk," as a message to their children. The main message by the incarcerated mothers to their children is clear: "When you feel lonely, place your hand here." The Spirit of Harlem *bloques* include three murals, the most impressive of which portrays Celia Cruz with a sign that reads: "La Reina Celia." The Queen of this *manzana* is not Subcomandante Marcos, but the music and salsa of Celia Cruz. This now more gentrified *manzana* is not commanded by Subcomandante Marcos, with a voice of resistance that has been successfully squashed by the national Mexican government, leaving the Indigenous population in silence. Here there is the music and salsa of Celia Cruz, with triumph and royalty, with businesses, and little by little with more Spanish voices, both oral and written.

The murals and the traditional signs blend in their messages. On 117<sup>th</sup> street, Spanish is still the language of a poor subjugated minority, still looking for liberation through Zapatista-inspired movements. On 103<sup>rd</sup>, despite the continued struggle of the poor Latino community, the role of Spanish is beginning to shift, as it acquires a more triumphant role as the language of a global Latinidad and pop-culture, and as it gains a role in the US economic market (Del Valle 2006, García 2011, Mar-Molinero 2008).

## 7. Conclusion

Bilingual signs are the mark of linguistic landscapes with vibrant bilingual communities. Yet, our analysis of the two *manzanas* in El Barrio, the historic Latino neighborhood in New York, shows that there could be vibrant bilingual communities without rich

traditional bilingual linguistic landscapes. Our exploration of the linguistic landscape of El Barrio has led us to understand that poor subjugated bilingual communities, with poor schooling and low literacy, find ways of languaging in public space that often go beyond the traditional linguistic landscape.

The two *manzanas* that we studied are dominated by murals—seven in the eight blocks that constitute them. The murals act as mestizo signs, blending traditional written and visual signs, and encompassing physical realities of buildings, walls, sprinklers, windows, doors. To reach the bilingual transnational community, colonized and conquered, but now living “*en las entrañas del monstruo*,” as José Martí, the Cuban patriot and author who lived in New York for many years would say in 1895, neither English nor Spanish are sufficient. To reflect a translanguaging that releases their voices in the public space, more is needed than simply one or the other language. Murals offer that alternative, allowing spaces in which words and images that emerge from different cultural, socio-historical and political practices blend. Murals serve to break the mirror/glass behind which these communities are held and which silences their different ways of languaging in public space, making them and their ways of languaging visible in its full complexity.

The larger narrative that the murals and the traditional signs weave is powerful. It offers a counter-narrative to the regimentation offered by traditional written signs in a bilingual minoritized community. Written language has been the purview of school, and the US Latino community, often poorly educated in Latin America, as well as in the US, has been robbed of its ability to fully express itself in writing in the ways in which they language at home. At home, even when Spanish is spoken, English is forever present, on the television, on the radio, brought into the home by young children, neighbors, outsiders. But in public signage, bilinguals are forced to make a choice, rendering them speechless, and seeking other means of communicating. Murals offer that alternative, creating counter-narratives of the realities experienced by the community and communicating to all who pass by, the vibrancy of the community, its life and ability to language. To the “Don’t!” of the many public signs of the community, and the “Do” of just consume and buy, the murals issue an invitation to act, to live, to sing, and to resist the portrayal of a community as absent of color and mired in problems.

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