

Katz, Marco. "What Happened: *los idiomas de salsa*." Modern Language Association (MLA). Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. January 2007. Conference presentation.

"Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present."

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

It all began with a funky solo bass line quickly converted by the clarinet, trumpet, trombone and drums into a traditional jazz version of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" that set up a salsa vocalist who surprised listeners throughout New York City by singing, "What happen'? I don't know. *Me dicen que por borracho, José a la acera cayó.*"

What happened? Why did radio listeners of the new Bobby Rodríguez y la Compañía album express surprise and, depending on their point of view, excitement or disdain? By 1976, audiences had already heard plenty of Nuyoricans (the children of Puerto Ricans living in New York) singing in English. During the 1960s, the language as well as the rhythms of Latin Boogaloo had united the offspring of Puerto Ricans with many of their African-American neighbors in Brooklyn, East Harlem and the South Bronx. In fact, many African-American musicians I know still believe that any R&B or funk worth hearing "has to have a little Latin in it." And for decades, Spanish words had appeared in popular songs destined for Hollywood movies and mainstream radio playlists.

What happened in the 1970s involved a body of music performed by and for a bilingual audience made up of young Nuyoricans moving away from Caribbean styles and towards an "American" dream at a time when dancehalls began inserting smooth disco recordings in between bristly sets by live salsa bands. As small as the audience for salsa was during those pre-crossover years, the audience for bilingual salsa lyrics remained even smaller. Nuyoricans

formed an isolated community within a community. Many had skin too dark to allow whiteness and too light to admit blackness. Their speech employed phrases as unintelligible to Spanish-speaking family members from Puerto Rico as it was to Anglophone New Yorkers.

Nuyoricans realized, then, that they formed a small group often despised on all sides, and appreciated lyrics created just for them, even those composed by a white—and later Harvard-educated—Panamanian with a decidedly English-sounding surname, Rubén Blades, the author of “What Happened.” These songs grafted new music and language onto existing Caribbean sounds that, as novelist Rosa Montero observed in her 1983 novel, *Te trataré como a una reina*, had already moved away from Iberian speech. “While performing, and only then,” wrote Montero of her singing protagonist, “Bella Isa constantly sprinkled her Castilian with esses, considering that this added a chic and tropical flavor to the matter.”¹ Nuyoricans took this a step further, transforming Caribbean Spanish into New York Spanish; Joe Cuba’s “*El Pito* (Never Go Back to Georgia),” for example, plainly confused Spanish-speaking listeners such as a Puerto Rican—adamantly not a Nuyorican—woman of my acquaintance, appalled because Georgia, the final word of Cuba’s refrain, sounded like *chocha* (pussy).

Like Joe Cuba, many salseros had more interest in rock ‘n roll than salsa. During the Latin Boogaloo era of the 1960s José Lebrón composed and arranged several works for The Lebrón Brothers that became popular among their African-American neighbors in Brooklyn. The release of *Salsa y control* in 1970 indicated the band’s intention of refocusing on salsa. Still, a 1976 recording, *Distinto y diferente*, reveals how José’s love of Stevie Wonder and other rock artists continued to find bilingual expression in original songs with lines like, “*Yo digo* because I know, *un mono no para un show*.”

¹ “Cuando actuaba, y sólo entonces, Bella Isa siempre salpicaba de esos su castellano, porque consideraba que eso le daba al asunto un toque chic y tropical.” (My translation.)

“The silenced or differentiated, manifesting itself through disconcertingly oblique processes,” writes anthropologist Néstor García Canclini in *Diferentes, desiguales y desconectados: Mapas de la interculturalidad*, “has less importance as a magical recourse for the modification of the reigning order than as an excluded voice that can reveal something about the excluding order.”² In a small part of Latin America known as *El Barrio* (East Harlem), *El Bronx*, y *Brooklyn*—surrounded by a city that perceived itself as the center of the world—Nuyoricans created a peripheral existence that provided a key to understanding the center, a fact seen not only in bilingual salsa’s part in Spanish language retention among the children of Spanish-speaking immigrants to New York, but also in the increasing acceptance of substantial Spanish content by English-speaking audiences. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, even as Orquesta de la Luz mixes the vocabulary of Cervantes with Japanese and Spanish pop stars like Julio Iglesias crossover to English, the worldwide audience for songs sung in Spanish continues to grow, due in part to the initial attraction of *las mezclas*, mixtures created by Bobby Rodríguez y la Compañía, Ruben Blades, Joe Cuba and The Lebrón Brothers.

So what can we understand about the excluding order after listening to these artists? Do the musicians merely offer another lesson on the ephemeral nature of the so-called American dream? Perhaps they also provide a more profound examination of the constantly changing nature of language and culture, an important idea to keep in mind as contemporary broadcast commentators call on citizens of the United States to protect their language and borders. After all, the ever-changing idiom we now call English resulted from a variegated stew of Germanic tribal languages, Norwegian, and French with bits of Latin thrown in for enhanced image.

² “Lo silenciado o lo diferente, que se manifiesta por vías oblicuas, desconcertantes, no importa tanto como recurso mágico para modificar el orden imperante sino como voz excluida que puede revelar algo sobre el orden excluyente.” (My translation.)

Finally, nothing more appropriately demonstrates the enduring power of salsa's multilingual lyrics than this article, written in English and Spanish for the purpose of publication in Dutch. This text—created in one former Spanish colony, California, for consumption in another, *Los Países Bajos* (Nederland)—will thus be rendered unintelligible to the author, assuming such an entity can be said to exist by the time the readers encounter what he once believed to have been his own text. *¡Vaya novedad!*

Works Cited

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