



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Translenguaje en la villa inmigrante: Creating our path to existence

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Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on how translanguaging in the immigrant community emerges as a form of social resistance that results in the creation of counter-spaces and counter-narratives. Likewise, I draw on the concepts of dialogical education of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the perspective of Critical Race Theory and on how the social and cultural capital of immigrant communities plays an important role in overcoming environments that are averse to their presence. I contend that it is from “not existing” in a social system that the immigrant community is capable of opening spaces to exist and to lead new generations to project new forms of social identity, which are reflected in new linguistic, poetic, artistic expressions and new ways of social organization. In developing this concept, I address the case of the people of the town of Marshall in the U.S. state of Pennsylvania and the RevArte collaborative of which I am founder and director.

Resumen

En este ensayo reflexiono sobre cómo la práctica de translenguaje en la comunidad inmigrante de origen latinoamericano surge como una forma de resistencia social, que resulta en la creación de contra-espacios y contra-narrativas. Asimismo, las reflexiones que presento se basan en los conceptos de educación dialógica del educador brasileño Paulo Freire, y la perspectiva de la Teoría Crítica de la Raza y en cómo el capital social y cultural de las comunidades inmigrantes juegan un papel importante en la superación de entornos adversos a su presencia. Sostengo que es desde el “no existir” en un sistema social que la comunidad inmigrante es capaz de abrir espacios para existir y llevar a las nuevas generaciones a proyectar nuevas formas de identidad social, que se reflejan en nuevas expresiones lingüísticas, poéticas, artísticas y nuevas formas de organización social. En el desarrollo de este concepto de translenguaje desde la villa inmigrante, abordo el caso del pueblo de Marshall en Pennsylvania en los Estados Unidos y la colaborativa de RevArte de la que soy fundador y director.

El Inicio

Cuando uno llega como un nuevo inmigrante, al inicio uno se encuentra en el limbo (When you arrive as a new immigrant, you are initially in limbo).

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El limbo es el espacio de nowhere, in which one cannot distinguish north from south, east from west. Everything is new and unreadable. Initially, new immigrants try to translate everything, even though it is impossible. Over time, however, they begin to learn to read the surrounding culture and society and their linguistic repertoire expands. They begin to reinterpret the world, not from two languages, but from a changing repertoire in which words and their meanings stretch and are used in innovative ways (Rymes, 2010). Similar to their expanding language repertoire, immigrants' practical and discursive consciousness necessary to navigate life also expands (Giddens, 1984). Their lives transpire through using and creating new expressions (Link, 2018). The sounds, words, phrases that they create, and their changing perceptions of how to live, can lead to acción liberadora for the immigrant y desaparece el limbo (liberating action for the immigrant and the limbo disappears). I call this process *translenguaje*. Translenguaje para el inmigrante becomes a new way to read and name the world and understand life y la existencia. This article will be written from my own position of experiencing translenguaje. Every day, as life passes for me, I sense that I live in a unique reality. This reality is not based on my land of origin (México), nor that of the United States, where I now live, but it is a new perspective of being with a new social identity. In communicating my understanding of translenguaje, I have used phrases and paragraphs in which Spanish and English appear together, alternating with rhythm, creativity, and poetry.

In this brief essay, I describe my own experiences as a new immigrant to the United States that led me to study what I call *La villa inmigrante*. The immigrant village is a conceptual and internal space but also a communal space based on our understanding of physical spaces. I describe it this way:

A village is bigger than a town, but smaller than a city, yet it lacks a voice and social representation. Therefore, it inhabits the space of non-existence. This village is established in a physical space and reproduces its *modus vivendi*. It opens markets, restaurants, beauty and dance salons; it expresses its beliefs and opens spaces for worship; and yet it still does not exist. (Arango, 2013, n.p.)

La villa inmigrante thus fights from a position of disadvantage, as it does not “exist,” at least not according to government institutions and policies. As a result, the journey, pain, struggles, injustices, talents, values, and social contributions of its members are often not recognized. When it is assigned an identity, it is typically criminalized by dominant political and social narratives. For example, in the American presidential elections that I have witnessed from 2008 to 2020, la comunidad inmigrante fue el chivo expiatorio (the immigrant community was the scapegoat) for political groups to promote nativism. This was especially prominent in President Trump's campaign in 2016, in which he criminalized the entire Mexican community. However, it is not necessary to be Donald Trump to instigate violence toward immigrants and the Latinx community in particular. It takes a complex and pervasive social system to repress an immigrant language, to narrate a negative story about immigrants, and to find it unproblematic for individuals in the United States to remind immigrants to “speak English because you are in America.” I have heard such expressions even from school liaisons who work with the Latinx immigrant community. Repressing an immigrant language can destroy immigrants' identification with their heritage, the sense of origin that gives them strength and direction for their existence. Matar nuestra lengua nos deja en el limbo (Killing our language leaves us in limbo).

How has the immigrant community resisted? And what has been the role of trans-language in contributing to this resistance? These are the central questions addressed in this essay that will reflect on the generations that have grown up in the town of Marshall, Pennsylvania (a pseudonym), the small town where I now live, and that have passed through RevArte (also a pseudonym), a nonprofit organization that was born as a counterspace to nurture social resistance.

Las Primeras Experiencias

Desde que llegué to the United States in 2000, I have woken up at dawn and dedicate the first hours of the day to reading and writing, meditating, and visualizing the day. In doing this cada día, I have reflected on the constant struggle of knowing how to navigate in an anti-immigrant space. Some of the worst times for trying to do so followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001, and the months and years after Trump's election in 2016. I had thought that, over the years, this struggle to navigate the world would disappear. It has not. Over the years, the struggle has only become more complex, especially in spaces where my social role now has greater consequence than when I first arrived as an international student in 2000. As I tried to suppress Spanish in my initial years of living in the United States, I found that I also suppressed my innermost emotions, and, over time, I realized that I was killing important aspects of my identity and personality. I realized that something muy profundo dentro de mi moria (deep inside of me was dying).

Although I had studied the Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire as a university student in Mexico, it was here in the United States and in the classes of the Peruvian sociologist Dr. Samuel Escobar (1993) at Eastern University that I learned about the global significance of Freire's work with greater precision, although there were few examples of practical application. In 2002, I moved near the small town of Marshall, and as a social anthropologist, I observed the migratory wave of the 2000s transpiring in my new hometown. The "United Nations International Migrations Highlights" (United Nations, 2020) establishes the 2000s as the decade of migration. Approximately 221 million people changed countries around the world. I was one of them, along with many other thousands from Mexico, as well as newcomers from Central American and South American countries who immigrated to the town of Marshall. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Latinx population of Marshall increased from 9.7 to 27.8 percent in that decade. In 2021, according to Public School Review 2021, more than forty percent of the students in Marshall's school district are of origen latinoamericano. Such data show the growth of the Latino community, pero no muestra la lucha que la comunidad inmigrante ha encarado (however, it does not show the multiple struggles that the immigrant community has faced) in the last twenty years, which include deportations, police harassment, and rejection of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy that would allow individuals, known as "Dreamers," who immigrated to the United States as children to be able to work legally and to "defer" deportation (Benuto et al., 2018). Perhaps most important, there has been una falta de reconocimiento de su presencia in social systems (a lack of recognition of their presence in the social systems).

Una Reflexión Crítica de Mi Posicionalidad

A framework that I draw on in this essay is Critical Race Theory (CRT) for three reasons: (1) This writing has an emancipatory intent; (2) it allows us to reflect on

what Tara Yosso (2005) defines as cultural wealth; (3) it allows us to recognize positionalities—here, my own—as well as that of the academic community and the Marshall community. Yosso (2005) describes cultural wealth as becoming clear when

CRT shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. Various forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. (p. 69)

These three aspects are central to CRT and are necessary to avoid covering up power relations but also to recognize the existence and power of the immigrant community. One of the central foci of CRT is an understanding of how our positionality allows us to reflect on privileges that we might not be conscious of. Therefore, I reflect daily on my own positionality as an immigrant with privileges and also reflect on the positionality of the members of *la villa inmigrante* and *RevArte*. I consider that *es una práctica esencial* of my internal dialogue, and a dialogue that I sustain with *la comunidad*. As a result, I reflect constantly on myself and my positionality. For me, it is important that I understand from where I observe and how I observe, from where I act and how I act. In drawing on the CRT framework, I am able to reflect *en mi jornada como inmigrante* (on my journey as an immigrant). In this way, I recognize how, on the one hand, I am an immigrant facing many challenges, but on the other, that I have privileges that most members of the immigrant community do not have. Over the years, I have been able to transition from being a university student to being a worker, and from being a worker to being a resident, and now to being a citizen of the United States (I now have dual citizenship).

I next reflect on how I came to be who I am, and its relation to the cultural wealth that I inherited from my family. Although I grew up in a working-class family in Mexico, my older brother and I were the first generation of our family to finish a university degree. We were encouraged to do so by our mother, who studied until middle school and who loves art, education, and reading, and by our father who lived in extreme poverty as a child in the northern state of Coahuila in Mexico and, who as a young person, dared to immigrate to Mexico City and later to go to engineering school. Such examples provided me with the tools and resilience to navigate in life and put me in a position of privilege. Most of my compatriots have crossed the border taking enormous risks in traveling across the desert to seek new opportunities. I arrived in the United States by plane with a visa and was received as a student by a university. Today, I teach in an Ivy League school. Although the story of my parents is very similar to many of the members who participate in *RevArte* and the majority of immigrants living in Marshall, as I review my story and positioning through CRT, I realize that it is important to be authentic in the roles that I play in those communities in order to recognize the cultural wealth of the community.

Even so, despite having documents which establish my “legal” identity while living in the United States and despite having a job at a university, I have been subjected to discrimination, racial prejudice, and even police harassment on several occasions because of my appearance and *mi acento en inglés* (my English accent). *Sin embargo las batallas que he peleado* (However, the battles that I have fought), do not compare to the struggles that most *RevArte* members and the people of Marshall face every

day. Many struggle under intimidation from employers and landlords, abuses from contractors, sexual harassment, provocations from the police, and threats of deportation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). They also contend with a lack of sensitivity and empathy from local government and social services institutions.

Sugerencia: RevArte Como Contra Espacio de Translenguaje y Práctica de Resistencia (Suggestion: RevArte as a Translanguaging Counterspace and Resistance Practice)

In 2006, for personal reasons, I decided not to return to Mexico after completing my university degree in social policy and theology, in which I focused on the civil rights movement of the 1960s and liberation theology in Latin America. At that time, a friendly family that owns a Mexican market in Marshall expressed to me the challenge that their daughters had with the high school tareas (assignments) and asked if I could help. This first experience of helping a group of teenagers led me to think that even though Latinx community members were opening businesses, organizing sports leagues, and building churches, we were missing a *counterspace*—a place where we could create counternarratives, a place dedicated to education, social reflection, and art exploration. The education system in Marshall typically regards the children who have immigrated to the town, and even those who are born in Marshall to immigrant parents, as a “burden.” This school environment combined with nativism in the political and social discourses puts tremendous pressure on these new generations. The pressure to speak English comes with the hidden message: “stop speaking your language” (*deja de hablar español*).

I began to think that we needed a counterspace of dialogue where we could identify and discuss the challenges that we faced as a community. I saw the need for a place where we could actively pursue social change and social transformation. I noticed that even the narratives produced by our closest allies reduced the value of our immigrant community to our economic contributions when they mention that immigrants take the jobs nobody wants, or that immigrants contribute to social security without taking back the benefit. These statements are true, but they do not recognize the value of our identities and our many other noneconomic contributions. These reductionisms, even in “supportive” narratives about immigrants, became another mechanism to dehumanize us, because we are seen only as a community that can be used. That is why we need, as immigrants, to create our own narratives to bring the whole picture of our identities *de quienes somos y quienes deseamos ser* (of who we are and who we want to be).

Even though the immigrants in Marshall were transforming the town and stimulating the economy, we lived under tremendous anti-immigrant pressure from the local government. Alberto (a pseudonym), a twelve-year-old boy, whose parents are from Puebla, Mexico, was one of the first students at RevArte. He showed me the American flag in his yard and said, “My parents put it there because they don’t want to be rejected in the neighborhood.” Alberto did not speak Spanish, and at RevArte he refused to speak in Spanish because he believed that, since he was in America, he should speak English. My encounters and dialogues with Alberto and others opened my eyes to the pressure immigrants in Marshall were facing to assimilate. One of the first parents who visited RevArte said to me: “Maestro, Usted es un buen ejemplo de asimilación, mire que bien habla el inglés” (Teacher, you are a good example of assimilation. Look at how well you speak English) when he heard me speaking English to a local city council member. It made me think about my positionality, and it bothered me deeply that I was seen as a model of assimilation. That comment made me conscious of my role in the

community and how I had to reject any kind of a protagonist role, *para que la comunidad sea la protagonista y no yo* (so that the community is the protagonist and not me).

However, and living in the contradiction between *la necesidad* (need) y el rechazo (rejection) to assimilate, the immigrant parents also wanted to preserve the “purity” of Spanish and the “original” accents that they had learned in their hometown, as each region in Latin America and Mexico have their own accents and many times mix with original indigenous languages. For many then, this is the second time that they experience translanguaging. They were concerned that their children were losing the Spanish of their heritage. However, these children were developing a rich repertoire of expressions and finding creative ways to navigate the complexity of the many social and linguistic challenges that they faced and that were also challenges to their own social agency and identity (Arango & Link, 2021). I began to pay attention to the creative ways that they brought English and Spanish together, composing *oraciones y frases* (sentences and phrases), alternating words and expressions. I often overheard expressions such as “Nos vemos este weekend,” “estuvo buena la party,” “who wants to go to *la playa*,” or “¿cuándo cortamos la yarda?” What is often identified as “Spanglish” corresponds to the fact that in social reality languages are not kept apart from one another. “Pure” Spanish or “pure” English is not spoken, and languages evolve through social interaction. In this manner, immigrants shape language, creating new grammatical constructions with a unique *poética* and *nuevas narrativas* in reading and naming the world. I consider these new narratives a praxis of resistance that can develop in a more intentional way if we create a counter translanguaging space that will allow the Latinx community in Marshall to explore and express the social reality in which they live.

Hence, I began to understand that we needed to create such a translanguaging countertspace because it would allow us to express our words freely, thus resisting the pressure of assimilation. It could serve as un *contraespacio para ser nosotros*, donde la comunidad debe ser la protagonista (a countertspace to be us, where the community must be the protagonist). I began to imagine a countertspace where translanguaging praxis could allow for the dialogues and reflections that we needed. Paulo Freire (1970) became central to our methodology as we developed RevArte. His concept of dialogical education became the center of our praxis, ideas, decisions, dreams, projects, and the opening of new workshops. Fundamental to the existence of RevArte is that everything happens in dialogue, not in the formality of assemblies, but in the *camadería de nuestras cenas diarias en el pequeño cuarto que rentabamos* (friendly conversations of our daily dinners that we share as a community).

Nine years after the creation of RevArte, we now see members of the community displaying their identities in full freedom, and we witness the talents of the community emerging with passion and creativity. RevArte today reaches out to more than 250 families. It runs more than forty-five workshops every year, each of which was organized in response to an initiative proposed by a member of RevArte. In most cases, they are instructors at the center. The work of the center has also been recognized as one of the most influential nonprofit organizations in the Philadelphia area by Generocity (n.d.), a nonprofit news organization (generocity.org). I consider the growth of RevArte, and the many classes that we offer, to be possible only because we found a way *para nombrar el mundo en el que exploramos nuestra identidad* (to name the world in which we explore our identities) (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Translanguaging praxis occurs every day and has catalyzed extended dialogue with public policy makers and social institutions that were not possible before. The immigrant community in Marshall has collectively created a countertranslanguaging space que resiste el sistema

and now looks to transform it. There is a need for such counterspaces in which the power of translanguaging can be experienced, because to name the world is to exist, as Paulo Freire argued in his work (1970, 1992).

In this essay, we have outlined some important ideas to continue reflecting on how translanguaging can create a Freirean space, un espacio dialógico. It is also a way (una vía) for the immigrant community to affirm their presence and to generate their own narratives. I argue that these narratives are best read and understood through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Using this lens, the Marshall Latinx community can better understand and value their own positionality, knowledge, experience, collectivity, resiliency, and cultural wealth. Furthermore, their experiences can teach many others working in a range of institutional sectors, such as in the academy and those creating social policies and legislation. Learning in this fashion can result in deeper reflections, more emancipatory research, positive legislative change, and, ultimately, a deeper understanding of these times and the importance of the villa inmigrante.

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