
Reflections on Language and Identity

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I am often asked the identity question, Do I consider myself Dominican or American? I find these binary categories, either/or questions reductive, not accurately capturing hybridity and the nuances of how our «origin» cultures, languages, identities evolve and operate in «real time» in a complex interconnected world.

I suppose I could say that I am all-American, meaning the term American in the hemispheric sense: my roots, my history, my native tongue, my rhythms, my soul comes from the Caribbean, the southern part of the Americas, but my education, training, craft have grown and flourished in American soil. Pan-American, maybe that is what I should call myself?

Hyphenation is another model for transcultural identity. Often in the USA, I'm described as Dominican-American. At least this allows me to claim two of my multiple identities. But again, these categories don't do justice to the diversity within these two categories, a diversity that keeps changing and evolving.

For instance, which of my two cultures is the dominant one? It depends. If I spend a few weeks in the DR visiting family and speaking and interacting in Spanish, my English/US American selves begin to shift to my Dominican ones. Upon returning to my home in Vermont, the balances rever-

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se as I become immersed in that culture and language. But the non-dominant side does not “disappear” totally. It’s still there, leaving its traces in everything I do and say. Like the shoreline, identities are constantly in flux: the tide sometimes is low and sometimes high, the shoreline is a ragged shifting line. Even when the sea withdraws, it leaves many treasures behind (as well as taking some with it) which reminds us that we belong not just to terra firma but also to the sea.

I prefer the model of hybridity, which suits a person whose roots originated on an island, that most permeable of geographical landscapes, absorbing the many nationalities, cultures, identities that have entered and settled there. Islands are all about access. They are sponges, soaking in the many influences that come in, and creating combinations and solvents that go out in Diasporas, changing where they go and being changed as well. No such thing as “purity” in this model. Diversity is much more interesting, vital, alive and sustainable.

When we get to language, it seems easier to separate and assign identity: I’m English dominant. Or, I’m bilingual. But even here, I go back to that shoreline. Ostensibly, as a writer, I feel most comfortable in English. It’s the language of my education and the one I’ve learned to craft as a writer and to think in as a scholar. But my books are filled with the histories, stories, characters, legends, of my Dominican roots: the García family, the Mirabal sisters, Salomé Ureña, Camila Henríquez Ureña, la Vieja Belén, la Virgen de la Altagracia, las ciguapa! I’ve Dominicanized American literature by introducing my American readers to my origin culture, cuisine, historical figures, families.

But beyond the content of my stories there are further, more subtle influences of my Dominicaness. I became aware of this during a book tour when an audience member challenged me, “When are you going to write shorter sentences?” What a question, right? I didn’t understand what he was referring to. But that night at my hotel, I opened a book I had brought along on my tour, a collection of short stories by Raymond Carver, a quintessential mainstream American writers.

I began counting the words in his sentences. Carver averaged about ten words per sentence, sometimes a little more, maybe twenty-one, sometimes less. When I made a similar word count for *In the Time of the Butterflies*, my sentences averaged over thirty or more words, sometimes as high as sixty, seventy! Sometimes the count was much shorter, but there was definitely a different rhythm to my syntax, a curvaceous swing to my prose. And that's when I realized that my sense of language, its lyricism, syntax, and rhythms were more Latin/Dominican than Anglo American. I was "writing my Spanish in English."

We don't leave our roots behind; they draw on the soil we were sown and feed us with their minerals and mythologies, rhythms and syntax, colors, smells, sounds, different lenses for seeing and understanding the world.

I think this is very hopeful! We who are transnationals (and who isn't these days?) are not "lost tribes" or even Diaspora Dominicans, we are the future. Hybridity is what our human family is becoming in our interconnected world. Being a hybrid means we help create bridges and connections between cultures, not just intellectually, but by who we are. We embody integrations and interactions that will become ever more critical if our species is to survive on this fragile planet of quickly diminishing resources.

Jean Rhys, a writer from Dominica, a tocaya island to the Dominican Republic, once compared writers to rivers that flow through a specific country and landscape, but ultimately, flows into the sea. She said that we must "feed the sea, feed the sea." I love that image: each of us as a river or stream or rivulet with a specific trajectory, history, origin landscape but ultimately flowing an enriching the ocean that includes us all.

That seems a vital and hopeful place to end these ramblings on who I am: a river mingling the many waters that have made me who I am, as I flow through Santo Domingo and Nueva York, Santiago and Illinois, Jarabacoa and Vermont, to finally contribute my waters to feeding the ocean where all my identities finally dissolve into a whole.