

Colloquy

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY ON CENTER STAGE: Rewriting Anthropology from the Margins of an MSI

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Standard American English (SAE) at U.S. colleges often creates a learning obstacle for students who speak different languages (Lawton 2013; Snell 2013). Additionally, standard language ideologies frequently act as gatekeeping devices that require students' linguistic obedience in exchange for opportunities to be represented in universities (Mena and Garcia 2021; Cushing 2020; Shohamy 2006). As Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores (2020, 103) argue, "Efforts to facilitate racialized populations' mastery of supposed 'codes of power' are not empowering . . . but rather a mechanism for producing governable subjects that support the raciolinguistic status quo."¹ In the present contribution we argue that strict adherence to SAE keeps people from learning new ways of being and innovating fresh practices and perspectives. In this essay, we—two white women professors and

two Latina students—discuss how our student-led theater project, *Seeing Rape*,² uses language to attempt to answer bell hooks's (1994) call for classroom “teaching to transgress.” We explore some of the challenges that arise in our project when we urge students to write in whatever language or dialect they like. We position *Seeing Rape* as an instance of *pracademics*, defined by Dána-Ain Davis (2003, 153) as linking “research practice to critical inquiry and ultimately to action that will dislodge power.”

We co-founded *Seeing Rape* in 2012 at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, both a Minority Serving Institution (MSI) and a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). The *New York Times* (Aisch et al. 2017) reports that the median family income of John Jay students hovers around the forty-fifth percentile and is \$41,900, among the lowest in both New York City and among students who attend other selective public colleges. Almost a quarter of John Jay College students come from the bottom 20 percent of income earners.

Over the past nine years, we have brought more than a hundred plays, written by more than a hundred undergraduates, to the stage in an annual production for audiences totaling more than 20,000. The plays originate in a class we co-teach that we call by the same name, *Seeing Rape*. We read about sexualized violence in genres ranging from social science to poetry. For their final projects, students write a short play about rape. At the end of the semester, we select nine to twelve plays for which we raise funds to pay professional actors to perform. Descriptions of the class and the performance are found in Shonna Trinch and Barbara Cassidy (2020).

STUDENTS BRING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY TO THE CENTER

In our first years teaching this course, a few students wrote their plays in a Spanish-English code-switching variety, varieties of African American English, and in a Jamaican patois-English variety. Their characters spoke in the languages germane to the contexts in which they appeared, and where necessary, they employed youthful slang and profanity.

Both actors and audience members say the work resonates with them because the language seems “real.” This oft-repeated response suggests that the plays are written in what the anthropologist John Jackson (2005) would call “sincere” ways.

Below is a sample of the positive things attendees have said:

It's so real Continue to make the scenes more gut-punching!

This type of performance helps us a lot to understand what goes on everyday around us.

Raw emotions. Each performance never failed to run tingles up my spine. Each story carefully thought and relevant. Brought awareness to so many rape scenarios.

Based on audience feedback and building on the work of Flores and Rosa (2015) to subvert the perspective of the white gaze/reception in language education, we argue for the value of the college's undergraduates' linguistic codes for education more broadly, outside of the language-teaching classroom. As we attempt to facilitate what hooks argues should be an exciting and open learning experience, students themselves can (re)write anthropology and reconfigure the university in their image.

Throughout higher education, stridently monolingual faculty members are often heard complaining that their students cannot write in English. Such statements reveal little understanding among faculty about bilingualism or bidialectalism. Rarely do faculty acknowledge the value of other linguistic codes for teaching and learning. With *Seeing Rape*, college students at an MSI claim authoritative positions about important topics as playwrights. Their work in different linguistic varieties then disrupts hegemonic language practices for their peers and faculty.

We believe *Seeing Rape* offers an instance of what our co-contributor and Colloquy editor, Kimberley D. McKinson, refers to as pedagogy that originates in "the life experiences of our students that allows us the opportunity for a fundamental re-engagement with the possibilities of anthropological theory and method."³ Now we regularly urge our classes to write in whatever languages they want. When students do so, several things happen. First, the students' plays communicate anti-rape messages to their peers in a way that no faculty expertise, college-mandated anti-violence training, or Title IX officer ever could. Second, as varieties other than standard English take center stage, the students themselves make an argument for the value of their linguistic codes to dismantle both patriarchy and white supremacy. Third, untranslated dialogue shifts the power perspective by "othering" the English-only audience (Jonsson 2014). Fourth, this student-led initiative lays bare the learning that gets sidelined by the professoriate's unquestioned devotion to standard language practices. Ultimately, professors must reckon with the fallacy of a pedagogy that insists that people will be confused by texts written in anything but SAE.

In the space that remains, co-authors Bianca Suazo and Jadeline Mallol Nunez provide their perspectives on language as *Seeing Rape* playwrights.

BIANCA SUAZO, MY JOURNEY THROUGH SPANISH

Environmental Factors

My first language was Spanish. Growing up in a predominantly Dominican neighborhood in the Bronx, Spanish was everywhere—from the bodegas to the radio stations, television channels and the household. Once I entered kindergarten, English slowly and steadily became my preferred and primary language. Eventually, English sitcoms replaced *Sábado Gigante*.

Family Expectations

Growing up, I had been called a *blanca* or *blanquita* (“white girl”) by relatives. While this description of me was used to express disapproval of my limited Spanish, it was also meant to compliment my English competency. I never felt judged by friends, however. None of us had any formal teaching of Spanish, and we shared the same slang.

Spanish in College

I did not expect to use Spanish in college, but was able to enroll in a 200-level Spanish course to strengthen my knowledge of it. My incredibly awesome professor, Maria Julia Rossi, provided the students with a judgment-free space and helped us form proper sentences in Spanish. The shared experience among my classmates helped me acknowledge that the Latinx community consists of diverse subgroups who experience being Latino/a differently and speak Spanish at various levels or not at all.

Language in Seeing Rape

In the *Seeing Rape* course, I was excited by my professors’ encouragement to employ different languages to interpret the world around us. My play, *La familia de papá*, is centered on the lives of three sisters who immigrated from the Dominican Republic to the Bronx. The sisters live together and work hard to make ends meet. Tensions rise among them as past traumatic experiences, present sexual harassment, and varying opinions on how to respond to past secrets cause them to clash. The play tackles familial dynamics, immigration fears, poverty, sexual harassment, and incest. The taboos surrounding sexualized assault within Dominican culture

were important topics for me to explore, especially the rhetoric, misinformation, and what goes unsaid within households.

I wanted the Spanish used in the play to be authentic, so I incorporated the colloquial Spanish used by people in my neighborhood. Formal Spanish would not have been a true reflection of myself or the people I know and our understanding, knowledge, and interpretation of sex, culture, and consent. Throughout the writing process, I found myself having to translate thoughts from Spanish to English, which was something I rarely do but found thrilling. It gave me the ability to tap into my experiences of everyday life from a different perspective.

Language as an Extension and Representation of Culture

While writing the play, I found myself thinking about language as a genuine extension of my culture and its customs. The amalgamation of New York urbanism and Dominican culture strengthens shared experiences among people of Dominican descent living in New York and elsewhere. The cheers and applause my play received confirmed that both Spanish- and English-speakers among the audience related to the story. I did hear from one professor in the audience that some of the plays made him uncomfortable. He asked if the curse words were “really” necessary and if we “really talk like that.” I was surprised by his questions. First, there were bigger issues we were representing in our work. He could have asked about our objectives and become part of the *Seeing Rape* conversation. Second, I had taken a course with him, and he had liberally dropped a few F-bombs in class—so, couldn’t we?

Future Writing for Future Students

For students, being able to write in languages other than SAE is great, because we can dive into their depths of meaning. There are worlds of untapped knowledge via other languages that we can make use of. As a writer, employing English and Spanish and their colloquial styles makes me feel like I am widening the scope and broadening the minds of my audience. I can also connect to and validate the experiences I share with other Latinx people. Writing in these languages and styles also represents an avenue for people from all walks of life to voice taboo topics like rape while engaging with their culture and breaking the cycle of silence.

JADELINE MALLOL NUNEZ, *SEEING CULTURE AND EDUCATION**Language and Academia*

I am Hispanic, and my family's background is Dominican. Just a few days ago, I caught myself editing my psych paper on multiculturalism to make sure I was critiquing white people in the "right way." I was taught to always be careful with what I am saying and how am I saying it, especially when applying to college: an "old white" person could be reading my essays. Through explicit statements, the books assigned, and the corrections on our papers, school teaches us that there is a right way to write.

Attending an HSI for college has revealed to me how much of my culture was lacking in my education. The importance of representation had not become clear until I reached John Jay College. However, even at an HSI, references to Hispanic culture often remain few. I have loved the once-a-month cultural events, but somehow they get separated from the "real" academics. One time, Elizabeth Acevedo, the author of the book *Poet X*, came to John Jay to give a talk. A Dominican author! For the first time in school, I got to read something I truly related to. From the tone to the words written, I thought, "I always hear that at home!" Should it have taken nineteen years for me to see Spanish in the literature I am being taught?

Seeing Rape Course

In the "Seeing Rape" course, my professors said we could write in whatever languages we wanted. I heard this and thought, "That's nice," and moved on. But now, I sit and reflect on that offer. While it may seem like students have options, a bilingual student like me still feels there is only one choice: English. I was trained to write in English, so the offer did not seem relevant to me. The thought of writing in Spanish actually felt a little intimidating.

I'm not sure what my professors could have done differently to convince me that I could write however I wanted. Their suggestion came after a twelve-year educational experience that taught me to write in English only.

My play *How Everybody Sees Me Now* was about a woman who takes the audience through her different relationships and experiences with people in her life after being raped. In my original draft, I did not incorporate Spanish. And even after my professor personally mentioned that I could, I added only one line in Spanish. I was hesitant. Did it fit with the play? I think it odd that I questioned whether my native language fit with my play. But including one line in Spanish seemed kind of random to me. The audience would not have thought the character to be Hispanic until this one Spanish line appeared. Then I wondered if that was

enough, but I could not think of anything else to add without changing the flow of the play. That one line took me a long time to write. I wondered if I used the right words. Should I be wording it differently? I worried how Google would translate it for English speakers.

I was nervous at the beginning of the *Seeing Rape* course, as I knew nothing about rape or about plays. I thought it was not going to go well, but it was a fascinating experience. I learned that with knowledge and in certain settings, I am able to talk about rape. This class has made me realize how the idea of the “right language” can be subjective. For example, some people may prefer to be called a “victim,” while others prefer “survivor,” and yet others neither. It is important to communicate with different people to learn these varied perspectives. I kept all this insight in mind while writing my play. I think people saw my point, because during the talk-back after the plays, someone mentioned a line from my play about being labeled a survivor. Having my writing and work displayed outside of the classroom was a significant experience. I took a step toward my future because this was my first time being recognized and paid for my thoughts and writing. I was motivated to write and think for reasons beyond a grade. I felt pride when watching the play and talking about the opportunity to friends and family. I will continue to feel pride and stand by my work as people watch *How Everybody Sees Me Now*.

CONCLUSION

African American Englishes, Spanish-English code-switching varieties, Jamaican patois, Arabic, and Urdu are not just objects of study that linguistic anthropologists teach as interesting examples of other people’s *norms and ways of speaking*. Rather, they are languages that college students speak. These languages represent group cohesion and historical experience, and they command authority and respect as communicative codes through which important messages are relayed. As the college community witnesses these facts through the *Seeing Rape* performances, these other languages disrupt the hegemony of SAE in a public forum. From the students’ work and by engaging with them about it, we learn of the power of their representational resources to reach their peers with anti-rape, anti-patriarchy, anti-racist, and anti-discriminatory messages. By listening to the silences, hearing the resistance, and noting how many students refrain from writing in anything but standard English, we stand to learn again how anthropology needs to be rewritten. Both Suazo and Mallol Nunez’s words remind us that there is a sociohistorical, political, and economic context in which our requests and urgings

to “write in any language you want” come to take on meaning. Following Davis (2003), we listen to the students where we work, and we try to reach a *pracademics* that puts theory into practice in a way that can bring about sociopolitical change. As linguistic anthropologists, we teach that no language or dialect is inherently better at communicating than any other, and we seek opportunities to value the students’ norms and ways of speaking on the college’s center stage. In so doing, faculty can learn what students have long known—sometimes it’s not what you say, but rather the way you say things that makes a difference.

ABSTRACT

We explore the use of linguistic varieties other than standard American (and academic) English in academia and in general, and particularly in a college theater program called Seeing Rape. Seeing Rape aspires to bring anthropology to a broader public to eradicate sexualized violence on campus. We discuss the possibilities and challenges encountered in trying to center different languages and dialects at the college through our program. [MSI; HSI; (non)standard English; rape; code-switching]

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1. The internal quote comes from Delpit 2006.
2. The plays can be viewed at seeingrape.com and on John Jay College’s YouTube Channel under the same name.
3. Personal communication, 2020.

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