

With One Foot Here and the Other One There: Blurring the Boundaries of Home and Exile

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Similar to many U.S. immigrant minorities, Dominicans experience individual and collective struggles to effectively negotiate mainstream societal norms while at the same time attempting to retain key aspects from their culture of origin. Memory and its ensuing nostalgia for the tropical island culture and those left behind in the Dominican Republic combine with hope, resiliency and visions of a future on U.S. soil. For Dominicans, already heterogeneous ethnic and racial roots must sprout further to dig and find a space in a new land; a land that often views them as the “other,” ethnically, racially and linguistically. From this cultural crossroads, Dominican-American authors give voice to their people’s diaspora, and in the process redefine American literature and culture by intermingling their current realities with the vibrant cadences, flavors and colors of the Spanish Caribbean.

The Dominican-American poet Rhina P. Espailat is part of this enriching literary flux. She has mastered English and Spanish prosody, publishing in both languages, and is frequently deemed to be of the best New Formalist poets writing in the United States today. Thematically, her work covers a wide range of the human experience spectrum, from love to loss, to discovery, to language, and much more. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, portions of her work portray many of the realities of exile and migration, revealing a straddling of two borders (both fluid and concrete) that records a bicultural existence which encompasses ancestral heritage and acquired U.S. customs. Her works articulate the negotiation of a hyphenated ethnic identity while affirming cultural hybridity as a natural and enriching human process.

Espailat was born in the Dominican Republic in 1932, but came to reside permanently in the United States with her politically exiled parents in 1939. Her body of works comprises four full-length collections of poetry, *Lapsing to Grace* (1992), *Where Horizons Go* (1998), *Rehearsing Absence* (2001), and *The Shadow I Dress in* (2004); an upcoming poetry collection entitled *Playing at Stillness*; and three chapbooks, *Mundo y Palabra/The World and the Word* (2001), *Rhina P. Espailat*,

Greatest Hits: 1942-2001 (2003), and *The Story Teller’s Hour* (2004). She is the recipient of multiple prestigious literary awards such as the 2003 *Stanzas Prize*, the 2002 *National Poetry Book Award*, 2001 *Richard Wilbur Award*, the 1998 *T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry*, the *Oberon Prize*, the *Howard Nemerov Award*, the *Sparrow Sonnet Prize*, and several prizes from the *Poetry Society of America* and the *New England Poetry Club*.

Those who examine Espailat’s work find that in addition to her excellence of poetic craftsmanship, her words can help provide an understanding of the bicultural and bilingual experience, as well as of the human will and resiliency to transcend physical and emotional ruptures caused by migration and exile. It is generally understood that cultural/ethnic identity is a social construct that involves an ongoing process between the individual and the larger society. Multicultural approaches suggest that “a person can appreciate, practice, or identify with two different cultures independently of one another” (Rudmin 4). A person who demonstrates an amalgamation of traits from two distinctive ethnic groups is said to be bicultural. LeMay defines *biculturalism* as “a variant of both acculturation and pluralism based on the observation that exposure to several cultures can be additive. A person can be comfortable with both the dominant culture and his or her own ethnic heritage” (23). Espailat maintains distinctive attributes from two cultures and two physical spaces, in addition to having full command of two languages, which results in a self-identity that includes multiple additive traits. Poetry has served her as a suitable vehicle for the articulation of her dual ethnicity, through which she reflects a turning of her exilic experience into an affirmation of a compounded cultural identity that blurs the boundaries between her ancestral home and her permanent exile home.

Espailat uses memory, metaphor, imagery, meter and rhyme -- the poetic tools at her disposal -- to construct a symbolic bridge between two cultures and two languages. However, embracing a hyphenated ethnic identity entails adaptability and creativity, and successful biculturalism requires acceptance of the

new while retaining aspects of the old in order to maintain cultural survival. Espailat's poetry embodies compounded ethnic allegiances -- rich with images, metaphors, and language -- to illustrate the ongoing process of defining, redefining, and embracing a personally and professionally enriching bicultural and bilingual identity.

The rate at which a person will acculturate to his or her new host country depends in part on individual adaptability. "Learning Bones," published in *Mundo y Palabra* (2001), highlights individual differences in the process of acculturation as the speaker contrasts herself with her father in order to illustrate this point. This poem offers insightful reflections on the transition from an ancestral vehicle of communication (the Spanish language) and a worldview based on tradition—as exemplified by the father—to the speaker's acquisition of a new language (English) and a modern worldview based on utility and function. It begins with the statement, "I'm learning bones to please my father's ghost" (line 1). This line suggests the speaker's desire for some form of reconciliation with her father and with what he represents—in this case, the fierce adherence to ancestral culture and customs. The speaker is looking to the past with a different perspective (gained through age and experience) regarding the way her father viewed the world while she was growing up. Differences in age and maturity are likely to play a role in acculturation: the young are generally more flexible, adapting more rapidly to new environments, whereas adults are more cemented in their own identity because they have already defined personalities and belief systems. The narrator is learning the human skeleton by its Latin nomenclature in the same way that her father knew and recited its parts—a symbolic way in which he held on to his ethnic roots. The father is portrayed as being very proud of his Hispanic heritage. Unwilling to forego his cultural identity, he was rigid like "stone" and would not call the "Sternum" a "breastbone" (10,12). He held on to propriety and tradition and could not adapt to a new environment and time: "He didn't like my century" (19). In contrast, the speaker, "gospelled by [her] own time...[she] worshipped use," the utility and "function" of things (i.e., "glands"), and embraced modernity rather than tradition (13,16).

In addition to adaptability, individual personality may also play an important role in the process of acculturation. "Learning Bones" implies that the contrasting differences between the speaker and her father, concerning adaptation to a new environment, are partially based on their respective personalities. According to acculturation psychology, the speaker's father, who "wanted things to be, and to be there / forever in their place" (21-22) may exhibit traits of a philistine personality defined as "high in fear and low in curiosity... holding fast to social traditions and rejecting modernity... [being] non-adaptive in new social contexts" (Rudmin 11). The speaker, on the other hand, has a creative personality: evident in the fact that she is a poet in the first place, and illustrated in the poem by her desire to know "the mind's evasions, or the work of dreams" (18). A creative personality has a "balance of fear and curiosity.... [It] seeks controlled and coherent change ... maintaining but modifying schemas of the minority culture to adapt to the dominating pressures of modernity.... [It] widens the control of ... environment and adapts to a continually increasing sphere of social reality" (Rudmin 11). In the poem, the speaker is portrayed as looking towards the future and adapting appropriately, while the father looks towards the past and is unable to effectively negotiate the changes that occur around him. The final lines address the father's decline in health and his eventual death, years after the initial setting of the poem. It concludes with the speaker's resolution to learn the human bones by their Latin lexicon in an attempt to celebrate her late father's unyielding grasp for his cultural identity because "we make amends in any way we can" (39).

In a recent interview, Espailat states that the poem "Translation," published in *Callaloo* (2000), "is a much more mature poem, and reflects a deeper understanding of the subtle process of acculturation" (Interview with Cruz-Hacker July 9 2004). Throughout six stanzas, the speaker makes comparisons between languages and cultures—between Spanish and English and between Dominican and American cultural norms—through the use of imagery and cultural symbolism. At the heart of the poem is the issue of *transculturation*: a term coined circa 1940 by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y

el azúcar, and which addresses the two-way process of acculturation that involves and affects both the minority and the majority cultures (Trigo 99).

The poem begins by stating that visiting “cousins from home” (the Dominican Republic) are attempting to learn English but find it difficult since English and Spanish differ considerably in their linguistic roots (Spanish belongs to the Romance Languages family and English to the Indo-European family). English’s “slippery vowels” and “stiff consonants” like “Saxon spears” are contrasted with the Spanish “leisurely tongues of my home town” (lines 2-5). In the second strophe, the cousins’ numerous and “laborious” attempts to speak English “fail,” yet they “try again” but eventually “give up” (6-7). They wonder if the speaker, being bilingual and bicultural, “think[s] in this difficult noise [English],” and wonder “how love can work / in a language without diminutives” (19-20). For Dominicans, Spanish diminutives are terms of endearment integral to familial, romantic, and friendship relationships, and their absence seems to rob English speakers from being able to relate appropriately to each other (as the Dominican cousins would suppose). English does not provide such ways of addressing others, yet the speaker points out that American people love and care, despite the absence of diminutives in their mutual communications. She compares social relations between the two cultures: the extrovert and physically tangible way in which Dominicans relate with each other (e.g., demonstrative “hugs,” animated “gestures,” and openness to “strangers”) against the “goodness of people / who seldom touch” (Anglo-Americans) but still help others in times of need with “embarrassed silence” (26-28). In spite of the obvious differences in languages and social relations, the speaker has learned to love and appreciate the United States and its mainstream culture, and implies that in turn her neighbors have learned to love and appreciate her as well (the process of transculturation). She embraces her Dominican-American cultural identity, and in the process, effectively creates a merging of the ethnic selves.

The poem thematically central to Espailat’s work is aptly titled “Bilingual/Bilingüe” and published in both *Where Horizons Go* (1998) and *Mundo y Palabra*. It is written in both English and Spanish—a literary device used to recreate the linguistic

experience of bilinguality, and by extension, of biculturalism. Throughout nine couplets, the speaker contrasts her approach to learning a new language, English, and acquiring a new cultural identity (American) with her father’s insistence on retaining the Spanish tongue and the Dominican culture. In the essay by the same title, “Bilingual/Bilingüe,” published as the “Afterword” of *Where Horizons Go*, Espailat expands on her father’s mindset. The family were political exiles and her father “lived in the hope of return,” believing that the “new home, the new speech, were temporary” (67). On the first line of the poem, the narrator states her father’s theory on bilingualism: “My father liked them separate, one there / one here (allá y aquí).” He believed that “if it could be said at all, it could be said best in the language of those authors whose words were the core of his education” (Espailat “Bilingual/Bilingüe” *WHG* 67). The father’s attitude about language echoes research findings stating, “while there exists a number of markers of identity, such as social group, geography, cultural traditions, and race, for many Dominicans, language is the most significant criterion of self-identification” (Toribio 1135).

The poem “Bilingual/Bilingüe” suggests that the father needed a separation between English and Spanish out of the fear that dual linguistic and cultural allegiances “might cut in two his daughter’s heart / (el corazón),” forcing her to chose English, and by implication U.S. culture, over her original Spanish language and Dominican cultural identity (line 3). It is only natural for humans to desire a continuation of their own ethnic line—not only bloodlines—and to want to maintain their respective linguistic identity. Linguists report that Dominicans “remain fiercely loyal to their native dialect, which serves as an immutable marker of Dominican identity” (Toribio 1135). The speaker’s father does not want English, “the alien part to what he was—his memory, his name (su nombre)” —to “lock” his daughter in a place, both culturally and linguistically, that “he could not claim” (5-6). It is aptly ironic that the father considers English and U.S. customs the “alien part” though legally he and his family were designated as “alien” political exiles by the United States government, and by mainstream society.

This theme of alienation is commonplace to the immigrant reality. For the father, his Spanish “name”

represents more than a given name at birth or the surname of his father: it is the collection of cultural traits, customs, beliefs, memories and history that make him who he is—both his personal and ethnic identities—and which he wants his own offspring to retain and pass on to future generations. The father experiences cognitive dissonance around a perceived betrayal, exemplified by his daughter's process of learning another language and acculturating to a new set of cultural norms. Espaillat elaborates on the internal tensions many exiles and immigrants must live through in the essay "Bilingual/ Bilingüe:"

Nostalgia, a confusion of identity, the fear that if the native language is lost the self will somehow be altered forever: all are part of the subtle flavor of immigrant life, as well as the awareness that one owes gratitude to strangers for acts of communication that used to be simple and once imposed no such debt (68).

In an effort to hold on to his own cultural and linguistic identity, the father commands, "English outside this door, Spanish inside" (line 7). This paternally imposed linguistic split causes the narrator to experience emotional discomfort, and most likely, a certain amount of guilt due to her betrayal (as perceived by the father) of adapting to a new land and language. These conflicting emotions are illustrated by the poignant question: "But who can / divide the world, the word (*mundo y palabra*) from / any child?" (8-10). Espaillat recollects the difficulties of his time with a father who demanded the exclusive use of Spanish in the home: "His insistence on pure Spanish made it difficult, sometimes impossible, to bring home and share the jokes of friends, puns, pop lyrics, and other staples of seven-year-old conversation. Table talk sometimes ended with tears or sullen silence" ("Bilingual/Bilingüe" *WHG* 67). Regardless of the frictions at home, the poem declares the speaker's resolve to learn English; the determination to acculturate and survive in her exilic home prevails. She is "stubborn (*testaruda*)" and deliberately crosses the patriarchal boundaries to embrace American culture and its language: "I hoarded secret syllables I read / until my tongue (*mi lengua*) learned to run / where his stumbled..." (12-14). Yet, this crossing of boundaries does not come without emotional and psychological penalties:

Memory, folklore, and food all become part of the receding landscape that language sets out to preserve. Guilt, too, adds to the mix, the suspicion that to love the second language too much is to betray those ancestors who spoke the first and could not communicate with us in the vocabulary of our education, our new thoughts...a sense of grievance and loss may spur hostility toward the new language and those who speak it, as if the common speech of the perceived majority could weld together a disparate population into a huge, monolithic, and threatening Other. That Other is then assigned traits and habits that preclude sympathy and mold "Us" into a unity whose cohesiveness gives comfort ("Bilingual/Bilingüe" *WHG* 68).

However, this alienation does not have to be the final reality for the bilingual/bicultural individual. The heart of the poem and of Espaillat's articulations on bilingualism and biculturalism is found after the self-actualizing statement on the twelfth line, "I hoarded secret syllables," and by which the poem's narrator makes a stand against the monolingual (and the implied unicultural) paternal dictums. She decides to embrace two languages and two cultures and finds that "still the heart was one" (14). Here we see Espaillat's central belief concerning the human capacity to exhibit multiple linguistic abilities, and the potential of maintaining multiple cultural allegiances, and still remain a whole, unified individual with broader perspectives and understandings of the human condition. She briefly explains how this is possible in "Bilingual/Bilingüe:" "Luckily, there is another side to bilingualism: curiosity about the Other may be as natural and pervasive as group loyalty. If it weren't, travel, foreign residence, and intermarriage would be less common than they are" (68). The poem concludes with the speaker's hopes that her father understood, and secretly appreciated her deviations from his protective wishes—not only of his daughter, but also, and more importantly, protective of his ancestral language and culture:

I like to think he knew that, even when,
proud (*orgullosa*) of his daughter's pen,
he stood outside *mis versos*, half in fear
of words he loved but wanted not to hear. (15-18)

Espaillet emphasizes the positive aspects of possessing a bicultural and bilingual identity, although she does not neglect to point out some of the difficulties of negotiating a self that may have dual national and linguistic allegiances. This optimistic view of bi- and multiculturalism is a thematic concern addressed throughout her poetry, her essays, and personal expressions, through which she underscores the importance of ethnic inclusion and the avoidance of ethnocentric tendencies. This humanistic approach to migration and acculturation can be a source of positive affirmation to countless U.S. immigrants who live and love in this North American country while maintaining emotional, familial, political, and cultural ties to another land. In an interview, Espaillet stresses the positive aspects of possessing dual ethnicities:

I think where ethnicity is concerned, more is better, because the more people you can identify with and think of as "one of ours," the fewer people there are left to be classified as "not one of ours," and that's the classification that permits us to generalize, engage in stereotypes, think less of others, and otherwise treat them unjustly. Ideally, we would think of every human being as "one of ours," and that would be scientifically accurate, too: mankind really is, genetically, one huge family... Yes, I love having two cultures, two languages, two sets of associations, because it gives me so much more to remember, to write

about and with and from! But I think that overemphasis on physical ethnicity, and exclusive loyalty to those with whom we have traceable blood ties, can be a dangerous thing as well as a source of comfort. It comforts by giving us a group that's "ours" and always "on our side," but it's dangerous when it suggests that all those others, the "not ours," are therefore not our responsibility, and perhaps even the enemy somehow. What I aim for is communication with everyone, people from every background, and what I believe is that we're all responsible for each other (Interview Cruz-Hacker 9 July 2004).

It is evident that Espaillet has created an effective transnational identity by maintaining "*un pie aquí y el otro allá* 'one foot here and the other there'...settling into this Dominican/ American identity" (Toribio 1146). She consciously stands on the in-betweens while negotiating two places, two temporal spaces, two languages, and two ethnic identities. Moreover, whereas research and writings on the diaspora of many U.S. immigrant minorities may tend to emphasize the negative aspects of the acculturation process such as marginalization, voluntary or imposed separation, or prejudice and discrimination, throughout her writings, Espaillet transforms her exilic experiences into a successful process of new-identity-acquisition that has aided her to transcend to a place of self-affirmation that includes both worlds, the island and the mainland.

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