Ana Lydia Vega's "Pollito Chicken": Stripped to the Bone

Megan Myers, Vanderbilt University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/megan-myers/6/
Ana Lydia Vega’s “Pollito Chicken”: Stripped to the Bone

Megan Jeanette Myers
Vanderbilt University

“Pollito Chicken” (1981) by Ana Lydia Vega, included in the co-authored collection of short stories *Virgenes y mártires*, reflects the inconsistencies and complex binary identity of the Puerto Rican colonial subject. Due to its polemic subject matter, the story has been widely criticized and not always cast in a positive light; critics Aurea María Sotomayor and Margarita Fernández Olmos deem the story “superficial” and “uncontrolled” while Nicholas Mohr points to Vega’s neglect of her homeland community, emphasizing the importance of defending Puerto Rico against the “Island’s intellectuals” (90). The defining feature of the story is the incessant code switching between Spanish and English. Although the grammatical structure adheres to Spanish norms, the Spanglish that Vega utilizes distinguishes her as a writer capable of writing in two voices and two languages. However, Vega’s fragmented voice is not the only one heard in “Pollito Chicken.” The story’s female protagonist, Suzie Bermúdez, is an Americanized second-generation Puerto Rican, a proud resident of New York City. Suzie, unsure of, and often denying, whether she is at all *boricua*, is caught in a constant interior battle between the ideologies and cultures of two different countries, Puerto Rico and the United States. In the same sense that Vega’s use of Spanglish represents a satirical and political agenda, Suzie’s use of the same represents a colonial mask. So-called “good English” serves as the best strategy to hide any trace of, to employ her own vocabulary, “Spik.” Suzie’s voice, through Vega’s own—not necessarily conscious—
creation, juxtaposes the author’s apparent political and ideological project, and places Vega in an ambivalent and seemingly ambiguous role in regards to language.

In this essay, I will explore the meaning of Vega’s code switching as part of a two-pronged approach to decipher the significance behind the author’s use of Spanglish. I will first consider Vega’s code switching to be a conscious decision, driven by her political and ideological project aiming to generate a sense of national unity for Puerto Rican islanders—isolating English and its remnants in Spanish, in the form of Spanglish—through repeated use of sarcasm and parody in the text. The second reason for Vega’s code switching in “Pollito Chicken” will be considered an unconscious one and will compose the latter half of the study. This second, less transparent meaning of Spanglish in “Pollito Chicken,” stemming from an unconscious decision on Vega’s part, is centered on Vega’s inclusion of a female protagonist, which yields unforeseen tensions in the story, as well as on Vega’s own role as translator, highlighting her choice and ability to write in Spanglish in the first place. These joint approaches aim to determine the meaning of Vega’s code switching in “Pollito Chicken” and give way to a paradoxical valuation of Spanglish on the part of the author in so far as the first, conscious significance of Spanglish is cancelled out by the second, unconscious one. Put simply, Vega, in taking two antithetical stands, (though one may not have been intended), ultimately takes no stand. However, for me, this ambivalence disappears when the story is translated from its original Spanglish version into English. This translation proved a valuable exercise leading to a conclusion highlighting Vega’s support of Puerto Rican national unity, a unity encompassing those on and off the island, regardless of the language(s) they speak.

In order to better understand the story’s relationship with language, it is imperative to begin with a brief introduction to Spanglish, defining the linguistic style and recognizing other authors who have elected to express themselves not only in English or Spanish, but through a purposeful mixture of the two. Code switching, understood as the switching between two or more languages within a single conversation, is a universal response to multilanguage environments. Sociolinguist Ana Celia Zentella confirms code switching is not the creation of a new language, but rather an alternation between languages “in innovative ways
for varied discourse purposes" (88). Following the brief discussion of Spanglish on the following page, the focus will turn to the first of the two possible meanings, centered on Spanglish as a satirical cultural, political, and social response, in a desire to demystify the Spanish-English code switching of Ana Lydia Vega. This approach will be followed by an examination of Vega’s unconscious approval of Spanglish in “Pollito Chicken.” Within this latter approach, it is not only critical to examine the creator of the dual-language text and the reasons behind her audacious linguistic expression, but it is equally important to highlight the specific moments in the story when Vega’s protagonist, Suzie, elects to use Spanish over English, as well as Suzie’s underlying commentary on the role language plays in her New York life.

Alongside an analysis of the convoluted relationship with language evident in “Pollito Chicken,” Julia Kristeva’s idea that language marks the Other, or foreigner, is presented as a theoretical framework to better conceptualize Suzie as a colonial subject who, for personal reasons and for external ones, is forever linked to a language of which she will never have ownership. Kristeva’s ideas, included in “The Love of Another Language,” gain further meaning as to their relevance to translation and bilingualism in Jeraldine R. Kraver’s article, “Revolution Through Poetic Language: Bilingualism in Latina Poetry from la Frontera.” Kraver’s theories seeking to explain the phenomenon of code switching prove useful when considering Vega’s role as translator, and also help me to understand and dissect my own experience translating “Pollito Chicken” into English. Encompassing a final meditation upon code switching and what the translator gains in the process, my choice to translate the story into English stemmed from a desire to examine Vega’s linguistic and stylistic choices in a new light. I hoped to strip away the text’s sarcastic sheen in order to highlight the impetus behind specific instances of code switching, and also to erase the transitory, go-between aspect of the story produced by its English-Spanish representation. This exercise was beneficial not only as a means of enhancing the story’s analysis, but also as a reflection upon the act of translation itself and what can be gained by inhabiting the role of translator.

Spanglish, the mixture of Spanish and English that has a definition caught between language and dialect, is what Mexican-born scholar, Ilan Stavans, refers to as a “verbal phenomenon.” For Stavans, working at the forefront of an official categorization and standardization of words...
born from the crash between Spanish and English both in North America and elsewhere, Spanglish is an "underground vehicle of communication" that is not only a form of code switching, but a fresh tongue (Stavans "Spanglish" 2). Spanglish has proven itself as a vehicle of communication in popular culture with strong roots in the everyday vocabulary of bilingual individuals, but literature, too, has emerged as an ideal medium for experimentation with this bold linguistic expressionism. Other writers, like Vega, who have positioned themselves along the jagged, indefinable line of Spanish and English include Chicano Juan Felipe Herrera and Nuyorrican Tato Laviera. Illustrative of the efforts of such linguistic buccaneers is the work of essayist Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa writes about her own experiences speaking a border tongue, Chicano Spanish, while employing the same linguistic mestizaje she critiques. For her, "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity" (59), or rather, she is her border language. She furthermore recognizes the illegitimacy of her border tongue in the sense that she finds herself forced to choose between either English or Spanish when she would rather speak Spanglish—she is stuck in the role of linguistic accommodator instead of the accommodated.

Vega’s conscious choice to write “Pollito Chicken” entirely in Spanglish, does not originate from a position of accommodation, a fact that points to Vega’s purposeful use of code switching in the story. In other words, her end-goal was not to cater to a specific bilingual crowd, nor to include English in the story to present a possible point of entry to the text for those not fluent in Spanish. Instead, Vega desired to do the exact opposite of accommodating her readers, instead forcing them to acknowledge the satire in her dual-language story. The Spanglish in “Pollito Chicken” may very well be “a celebration of the creativity of popular language” and a prime example of “dialectal diversity” (Wallace 79), but it is also saturated with linguistic irony and satire, and the omniscient, fictitious narrator of the story, a voice we assume mimics Vega’s own, is downright cruel to Suzie. The ideological project of “Pollito Chicken” brings together the politics of language and national identity, a complex relationship prompted by the battle for Suzie’s identity. According to Diana L. Vélez:

The culturally encoded “Pollito Chicken” refers to the mindless lyrics through which a whole generation of island Puerto
Ricans were miseducated in English, and not to the members of a later generation—the Nuyoricans—whose parents were forced to emigrate to the mainland following the establishment of Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico ... the ideological project of this story is that of national unity, unity between the assimilados and the islanders, for, though she may deny it, Suzie Bermudez [sic] is, in the final analysis, a Puerto Rican just like the island puertorriqueños who are Ana Lydia Vega’s ideal readers. (69-70)

Language espousing a political point of view is not a new idea, but it is one that is especially pertinent when Spanglish is the language of choice. Author Giannina Braschi, in a recent talk at Harvard deemed “a bilingual manifesto,” defined Spanglish as “un semicolon entre la independencia y la estabilidad, un estado libre asociado....” (qtd. in Stavans, “Spanglish” 3). If Spanish is thought to be synonymous with “un estado libre asociado,” it may be just the language to express the complicated history of Puerto Rico. Yet Stavans reminds his readers that “a language cannot be legislated; it is the freest, most democratic form of expression of the human spirit. And so, every attack against it serves as a stimulus, for nothing is more inviting than that which is forbidden” (Stavans “Spanglish” 3).

If one considers the Spanglish in “Pollito Chicken” to be a political project, one can agree that Vega neglects to heed Stavan’s warning that “a language cannot be legislated.” Thus, if every attack against language is nothing but a stimulus because “nothing is more inviting than that which is forbidden,” as Stavans suggests, then language for Vega, metaphorically speaking, is the forbidden fruit of which she takes a huge chomp. For Vega, Spanglish is anything but a validation of English; it is instead a strategy of appropriation. This strategy is subversive in the sense that she reverses the role of the dominant language, English, refusing to view it as the passport to heaven—or at least to a better life—as others have (Ashcroft 84). “Pollito Chicken,” for Vega, is evidence of “el rechazo a la comunidad puertorriqueña residente en los Estados Unidos que ha incorporado el inglés como lengua de uso cotidiano y que es caricaturizada mediante el personaje de Suzie Bermúdez” (Centeno 135). If one considers the historical context of Puerto Rico at the time of the story’s publication in 1981, it is evident that, as Centeno states, “la
literatura puertorriqueña de la diáspora no había tenido tanto auge,” a clue that helps one conclude that Vega had an alternative motive for writing the polemic story, her incentive not strictly for show or to increase readership (Centeno 135). Further allowing one to determine the stance of the author, the late seventies and early eighties were a time when islanders first began to take note of the return of many Puerto Ricans emigrants, a return met by the majority of islanders with an obstinate rejection of the English that such returnees brought with them. 7

The interjected use of English in Vega’s writing is abrupt and ceaseless, and purposefully so. Vega’s relationship with English, however, has not always been so chaotic. Introduced to English at a young age, Vega attended a Catholic parochial school with all instruction entirely in English. She stated in an interview that her first literary context was English, and that for years she was prevented from being exposed to literature written in Spanish (Hernández 2). For Vega, regardless of her background in English, and in large part due to the fact she is a self-defined “islander” with access to Spanish as a literary language, she feels it is illegitimate to write in English. She feels she has no reason to abandon Spanish, her native tongue. The abandonment of English as a literary language, a personal choice, stems from Vega’s belief that “in Puerto Rico the question of language is not irrelevant,” as Puerto Rico is a country with a long colonial past where writing in English “flies in the face of a strong tradition of defending Spanish” (Hernández 6). Vega has publicly criticized fellow Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré for writing in English, and views her choice as indisputably political. This critique seems somewhat hypocritical when considering Vega’s own “Pollito Chicken,” an example of code switching for equally politically charged reasons. Perhaps the key difference is that Ferré’s literary, and certainly at times political, projects are written completely in English, whereas Vega writes in Spanish, or Spanglish, but always adheres to Spanish grammatical structures. In the same previously mentioned interview, Vega responds to criticism of “Pollito Chicken,” concluding that the story pokes fun at Nuyoricans, a group of people who have been the subject of significant prejudice and racism. She notes that the story’s protagonist, Suzie, is not herself a Nuyorican, having been in the States for only ten years. Vega also comments on the often problematic, if misunderstood, use of parody, satire, and irony, categorizing it as “a highly codified kind of writing, and if the reader does
not have the key to it, he or she may misinterpret what is being said” (Hernández 5).

To heed Vega’s advice, in an attempt to avoid misinterpreting what is “being said,” it is of paramount importance to look further into the conflicted protagonist Suzie’s seemingly pro-American and pro-English stance as an introduction to the unconscious meaning Vega attributes to the Spanglish in the story. This “stance,” however, is proven contradictory upon reading the very last line of the story, and the conclusion serves as a combination of the two political projects, and the protagonist at last is on the same level as her creator. With this climactic conclusion of “Pollito Chicken” in mind, one should consider the question: what is the language trying to express? Or, alternatively, what does code switching represent beyond the linguistic level?

Humor, namely carnivalesque humor, is one of the thematic elements often studied in Vega’s work. In her book *Humoring Resistance: Laughter and the Excessive Body in Contemporary Latin American Women’s Fiction*, Dianna C. Nieblyski defines Vega’s humor as “carnivalesque both in its sexual explicitness and verbal excess,” a humor further characterized by the Nieblyski as “conflicted” and “in-your-face” (27). She frequently renders humor into a gendered vehicle in order to more pointedly expose cultural prejudices that allow stories like “Pollito Chicken” to be read as “defining moments in the development of a Caribbean cultural awareness” (Nieblyski 55).

Although it is apparent that Vega’s linguistic hybridity typifies the passages considered humorous in her work, one must keep in mind the fact that language precedes humor, laying the framework from which humor can be constructed, in this way impacting the way the story is received by the readers. In other words, language comes first, and in the case of “Pollito Chicken,” it marks Suzie Bermúdez as a foreigner from the very first sentence when she “puso un spike-heel en la oficina” (Vega 74). Vega’s first description of Suzie invokes what Kristeva might call “a non-native trace” of an imperfect language, labeling a foreigner who almost, but not quite, is able to blend in with the native crowd. This “crowd,” however, recognizes that there is another language at play and that “he” (or “she,” in Suzie’s case) “is not one of us” (Kristeva 241). Suzie might be wearing spike-heels—probably purchased on sale from one of the popular shops all the twenty-somethings frequent in New York—but she is presented to the reader in her oficina; signaling an
automatic discord for the native English speaker, a tell-tale sign that she is indeed “not one of us” and not your run-of-the-mill gringa secretary.

Vega presents Suzie as a split subject. This split subject, however, chooses a side at the story’s end—an ending that sparks discussion about the meaning Vega, perhaps unconsciously, attributes to Spanish through her representation of Suzie and her decision and ability to code switch. This meaning, the second and final meaning to be examined in this essay, seems to be a beckoning call to Puerto Ricans on the mainland, a welcoming by means of language inclusivity in the sense that Vega writes about a young woman who is just like many of them.

If the human subject can be constituted through the signifying practice of language, the fictional protagonist of “Pollito Chicken”—who embodies not one, but two national languages—becomes “lost in translation.” As Vélez points out, Suzie “is even further split because she cannot decide just what nationality she does have and, anyway, she is only on vacation trying to have a good time, so why ask her to define herself?” (69). It is apparent in the text that Suzie desires to distance herself from the “other” Puerto Ricans, going so far as to stereotype her compatriotas as “esos lazy, dirty, no-good bums” (Vega 73). From Suzie’s jaded perspective, the other Puerto Ricans inhabiting her New York are dying of hunger, they are associated with the lowest rungs of society, with welfare and food stamps. However, despite Suzie’s seemingly desperate desire to create this distance, she remains the very “other” she despises, a fact confirmed at the story’s end when Suzie’s orgasmic cry, shouted in a Puerto Rican Spanish nonetheless, rivals any political slogan: “VIVA PUELTO RICO LIBREEEEE!” (79). Critics recognize this voice as the negated, the repressed; the cry is the “literal undermining of Suzie’s self-hating discourse by another voice ... it is the voice that has been refused, the other side of Suzie” (Vélez 73). It is a culminating bellow of which the story’s protagonist and author share ownership, putting to rest any speculation as to an ambivalence toward language on the part of the author. The tension Suzie’s character releases is evidence of this non-ambiguity, an apparent return to the underlying narrative tone—this time for both Suzie and Vega—of “No English Spoken Here.” The voice that this cry represents is pro-independence Puerto Rico, and with this ecstasy-laden groan, “el personaje se identifica como puertorriqueña y el lenguaje funciona, en el ámbito autorial por medio del personaje, como un medio de liberación para renegar de una
identidad impuesta” (Montañez 36). Brought about by her sexual escapade with a native islander (after realizing there were no suitable gringos in the hotel), Suzie gives in and betrays the American mask she wears so well. The “melody or mentality that does not quite tally with the identity of the host” (Kristeva 240), the host in this case being Suzie’s boss or fellow non-Puerto Rican New Yorkers, rings true when Suzie at last cries out, affirming that she is still a boricua—although maybe not de pura cepa—and that she has not forgotten her mother tongue.

Suzie views English as the key to her new (York) identity. As Kristeva puts it, the abandonment of the maternal source language in the “intrinsically wounded translator” is a result of the subject being pushed toward the target language of the hosts, this language being “the object of a lucid yet passionate love ... a pretext for rebirth: new identity, new hope” (241). The importance of speaking “good English” for the protagonist, Suzie, is paramount. It is English that opened the job to her as an executive secretary. It is English that allows her to pass as non-Puerto Rican when approached poolside by the “awful hombrecito.” It is English that permits her to order room service at the Hotel Conquistador just as any typical gringo tourist would. As Centeno clarifies, “el dominio del idioma de mayor poder les permite [a los bilingües] alguna movilidad social” (81), and Vega’s protagonist knows it. Suzie would not be caught dead seeking welfare or food stamps like the stereotypical New York Puerto Rican. She later hypothetically suggests to the islanders that they should “aprender a hablar good English.” Yet, in spite of Suzie’s apparent mastery of the English language, Vega does not represent her as having completely apprehended the “American way.” Suzie is 100% a split subject, neither totally Puerto Rican nor entirely American. Her difference from a completely Americanized character seeps through the textual cracks created by Vega, and not just in the orgasmic finale analyzed above. In fact,

The text’s irony is structured around Suzie’s “impure” monologue, for her utterances are caricatures of a colonized discourse known to islanders as that of the pitiyanqui. The play of language makes the text a kind of burlesque or low comedy on the theme of linguistic and cultural assimilation. Since both the implied author and the reader know more and understand more than does the character, the text is a joke on Suzie Bermudez.
Her utterances are implicitly counterposed to the possible responses of an implied reader, one who can laugh at the character’s blindness. (Vélez 70)

Kristeva writes in her essay, “The Love of Another Language,” in a subsection entitled “Proust, the Translator,” that “the function and the task of the writer are those of a translator” (248), further concluding that the translator is also a foreigner, a metaphor that can be inverted to “highlight the role of the writer who, in one language, translates a rebellious sensorial foreignness” (249). Vega, in “Pollito Chicken,” inevitably departs from the stereotypical code deemed a national language in Puerto Rico—Spanish—by choosing to write the story in Spanglish. It is her seemingly casual, simple decision to do so that calls her complete rejection and mockery of the former islanders speaking English and/or Spanglish into doubt. At the same time, this unconscious decision adds her name to the roster of Latino writers who have also resolved to write in Spanglish, representative of, as William Luis suggests, the “double bind” in which they find themselves, a “bind” that refers to the cultural dominance of their parents’ country of origin and that is “most visible in the language in which some writers choose to write, which speaks simultaneously to their marginality and centrality (xvi). Referring specifically to Vega’s use of Spanglish and her adherence to Spanish syntax, it is through the process of code switching that she takes on the role of translator, a singular expression in which we “unceasingly lay bare the foreignness of our inner lives” (Kristeva 254). Such code switching allows Vega to distance herself from the mother tongue, and more precisely, remove herself from what is troubling about the language of origin, Spanish. By electing to write the story in Spanglish, Vega allows herself to take a step back from the language that she is critiquing, and the politics surrounding that language.

Kraver, in her essay discussing Kristeva’s theory of code switching, focusing specifically on her distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic, presents texts, on a general level, as a “site of confrontation between the writer and the ideologies of culture” (194). Thus, it is within this confrontational space identified by Kraver that the writer “decenters or displaces these ideologies by using language in unexpected or unaccepted ways” (194). This definition of the text as a space for a writer to
decenter ideology and culture by means of an unusual, surprising approach to language rings true when considering Vega, whose startling and innovative use of Spanglish certainly qualifies as a language used "in unexpected or unaccepted ways." As Kraver argues, code switching, in either its conscious or unconscious form, reflects the disruptive influence of the semiotic. Although for Kristeva the semiotic is not necessarily a language, but instead a pre-linguistic flux of movements, gestures, sounds and rhythms, Kraver concretely links the term "semiotic" to language in an attempt to suggest that "to impose language or to regulate language choice becomes an attempt not only to silence a 'political' act, but also to control primary political impulses" (197). According to Kraver, Vega, a bilingual individual educated primarily in English, may employ Spanish in order to effectively upset or "deconstruct" the binary oppositions—especially English/Spanish—upon which Anglo society depends" (196). However, what one encounters in "Pollito Chicken" is not the classic case of a writer introducing the minority language, in this case Spanish, to disrupt the symbolic, and thus displace the dominant ideologies of culture. Vega does not write in Spanish, she writes in Spanglish—a blending and blurring of the authoritarian discourse and the minority language. Vega, as translator and writer, steps away from her mother tongue without completely abandoning it—a fact that again speaks to Vega's possible ambivalence to her mother tongue apparent in "Pollito Chicken" suggested previously. Vega's decision to straddle two binary opposites, English and Spanish, unable to place one language on a level above the other, lands her in neutral territory, despite her ideological intentions.

In order to understand the dualistic approach to two possible meanings of Spanglish in Vega's story, one conscious and the other unconscious, it is beneficial to consider the exercise that rid the story of the ambiguity in regards to language—an ambiguity produced by the two paradoxical significances of code switching. Although the two opposing meanings of Spanglish in the story appear to negate one another, problematizing the arrival at a conclusion in regards to Vega's code switching, this final exercise in translation reopened the possibility for a final diagnosis on the topic (see the Appendix). In translating "Pollito Chicken" into English, I desired to purge the story of this neutrality or ambivalence, positioning it completely on the side of the authoritarian
discourse—English. The translation was interesting to me for two specific, interconnected reasons, in part because an English translation would rid the text of the disruptive influences of the semiotic as outlined by Kraver, and also because I wanted to reflect upon the act of translating itself, and to conclude whether or not there is something to be gained by translating a story written in Spanglish. Just like writing the story in Spanglish instead of Spanish perhaps offered Vega a comfortable distance from her mother tongue that better allowed her to present her projected political project, translating the story into English also allowed me to create distance between the critic, me, and the text. This distance offered a better understanding of the tensions in the story, revealing these anxious, problematic pulses that remain hidden in the text’s original tongue, Spanish, and the elimination of the intermediating language, Spanglish, permitted the semiotic rhythm of this “original language,” or mother tongue to surface.

By translating the story into English, stripping it bare of its dual-language coding, the sarcasm—a defining characteristic of Vega’s Spanish version—intensified. Nearly every sentence seemed weighted down with an acerbic and scalding undertone, positioning the protagonist as the primary source of laughter, Vega’s fictional representation of a pitiyanqui. Another textual feature that became apparent through the translation process was the strong sense of community that the text harbors. There are many instances in the story of a verb, in Spanish, conjugated in the first-person plural nosotros form.¹⁰ It is not just Suzie with her cry of independence at the story’s end, a bellow that echoes Vega’s narrative tone, but the over-arching presence of “we” that allows Suzie’s conclusion to be an all-encompassing one—suggesting that we are all independentistas under the skin. Puerto Ricans, on the mainland and the island, are grouped under the same historical and political umbrella, sharing a colonial past and national history that legitimizes Vega’s use of the nosotros form. When translating the story, Vega’s linguistic choices—the specific instances of code switching in a particular sentence, for example—took on new meaning. I realized many of the English words employed are obscure, often brand names. “Spikeheel,” for example is a word rarely used in English, and “Curl Free,” “Gimbers,” and “station wagon” all refer to specific American brands. If Vega writes for her fellow islanders, do these uncommon words and popular references communicate any meaning? With the inclusion of
such particularized words, Vega envisions a hidden audience, one apart from her regular readership consisting mainly of Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans. This potentially unintended audience consists of readers who understand such obscure American references, and in this way, Vega opens a door of inclusivity to the non-islanders reading her story. Taking the question a step further, does it matter if meaning is lost for the monolingual Spanish speakers as a consequence of such branded and specific references? Perhaps not. What is most important in “Pollito Chicken” is the act of code switching itself—the incessant blending of Spanish and English—not a precise understanding of every textual reference.

At first glance, Vega, in “Pollito Chicken,” created a protagonist with an opposing stance to her own in regards to Puerto Rican politics of the late 1970s and early 1980s. But Suzie also symbolizes a tension that maybe exists within Vega herself, a tension encompassing the linguistic, cultural, and political “exports” of North America and how they might be perceived by an islander. The creation of this protagonist brings to the forefront unintended consequences that are at odds with Vega’s purposeful political and ideological project. It also gives way to the possibility that Vega suffers from an ambivalence about language. The same conclusion can be drawn again when considering Vega’s role as a translator posited between two binary opposites, on “safe ground,” and neutral, ambivalent territory. However, the story’s conclusion, a literal and figurative climax, ultimately resolves this ambiguity, forcing the reader to acknowledge the ideological strain of “Pollito Chicken” as the idea of national unity. Or rather, that the asimilados—like Suzie—and the islanders—like Vega and her primary audience—are one and the same. Just as I discovered when I stripped the text to its bare (chicken) bones, the strong sense of “we” and the constant use of sarcasm and irony in the code switching make the message in “Pollito Chicken” clear: you can be a pollito or a chicken, speak English or speak Spanish, dye your hair wild auburn or keep it natural, be an asimilado or an islander, but in Vega’s eyes you are still, in the end, the same—still Puerto Rican, and thus, still independentista. This conclusion points to a Puerto Rican national unity, but not in the way Vega outwardly intended, with the islanders pointing a finger at the mainlanders, the anglohablantes. Instead, Vega’s story, “Pollito Chicken,” unfolds with an all-inclusive message, an embracing resolution that recognizes all Puerto Ricans, near and far, as Puerto Rican
at heart. Even a *casi gringa* Americanized secretary can cry out for Puerto Rico on the brink of orgasm—a nationalistic climax attainable not only for "pure" islanders, but for any and all Puerto Ricans.

**Appendix**

"Pollito Chicken"

Transcribed by Megan Jeanette Myers

As soon as Suzie was in the office and slipped into her spike-heels, she said to her boss, I had a really wonderful time.

Her boss added kindly, San Juan is wonderful. He resisted the urge to add: I wonder why you Spiks don't stay home and enjoy it.

And so we share the surprise return—after years of ongoing interior battles—of Suzie Bermúdez to her native land.

What convinced her was the breathtaking poster of Fomento that she saw in the travel agency in her building's lobby. The breathtaking poster pictured a beautiful couple holding hands in the Hotel Conquistador's famed cable car. The beautiful people looked deliriously happy, the ocean strikingly blue, and the sunset—for we must not forget the delicious Winstonesque sunset—so shockingly pink in the distance. Suzie Bermúdez, in spite of her refusal to pass by the Puerto Rican neighborhood by foot; or by any alternative route because she felt her life threatened by the Mafia's presence; in spite of the fact she preferred to lose her fabulous job 1,000 times over before writing Puerto Rican on job applications; and in spite of the fact she would die of hunger before receiving Welfare or food stamps like all of those lazy, dirty, no-good bums that were her compatriots, had taken out all of her savings as a secretary at a housing project for blacks—people who were no better than the New York Puerto Ricans, but who were, at least, not New York Puerto Ricans—boarded a 747 with quick and direct service to San Juan.

Upon arriving, all of the sudden she felt like a frankfurter turning slowly in a glass case. She gasped for air and had to desperately grab hold again of the breathtaking image on the poster to stop herself from running back to the plane. The vision of the boisterous crowd dressed in bright colors and crowned with miles of hair rollers made her consider catching a bus and seeking refuge in the loving arms of her Grandma in the countryside of Lares. But, on second thought, she told herself she had already made reservations at the Conquistador. And, after all, she remembered her Grandma had been pretty bitchy to her and her mom ten years ago. Dad never wanted to marry Mother to begin with—an
attempt to avoid caring for Grandma, a cross to bear, always sick with headaches and spasms and athlete’s foot and rheumatic fever and abscesses all over and a million other ailments. Plus, Grandma couldn’t stand the sight of him, even a painting of him, because he always had kinky hair. It was for these reasons that Mother brought Suzie to New York, and thank God; had she stayed in Lares, her poor Mother would have died even earlier than she did in the Bronx and surely of something worse.

Suzie Bermúdez got into the Hotel Conquistador’s station wagon, filled to the brim with full-blood, flower-shirted, Bermuda-Shorted Continentals with Polaroid cameras hanging from their necks. Perhaps because the station wagon was air conditioned, she felt as if she were dancing fox-trot on the terrace of the Empire State Building.

With certain amusement, she thought about what would have become of her had the brilliant idea of emigration not occurred to Mother, if she had married one of the drunken bastards always playing pool, the type that was born with a rum bottle glued to his hand and trapped his fat, ugly housewife with the cellulite thighs in his house with ten screaming kids while he slept with any shameless bitch he could get his hands on. No, thanks. When Suzie Bermúdez married, it might be to pay less income tax, and it would certainly be with a straight All-American, Republican, church-going, Wall-Street business-man, just like her boss, Mister Bumper. Yes, these men make good husbands. The ones that refer to Amy Vanderbilt’s manual and treat their wives like real ladies.

Nevertheless, on the way to the hotel she observed Puerto Rico’s transformation. The spread of urbanization, factories, condominiums, highways, and shopping malls seemed very encouraging to her. And yet, these filthy, no-good, Communist terrorists were still talking about independence. They were not going to make her—who left the island ten years ago behind-its-time and underdeveloped—swallow this crap. They needed to stop fussing and learn to speak good English, clean up the trash that they threw like savages into the streets, and behave themselves like decent people.

The Conquistador appeared like a castle from the Middle Ages, emerging from the waves. It was exactly as it was in her dreams. Before this ravishing view, her untimely one-week leave started to make sense. After making all the necessary arrangements, Suzie rushed to her deluxe suite to put on the sexy polkadot bikini she bought in Gimbers specifically for this fantastic occasion. She brushed her Wild Auburn hair—dyed of course—and straightened with Curl-Free; she put on Bicentennial Red lipstick to bring out her white teeth, and dabbed a drop of Evening in the South Seas behind each ear.

Minutes later, she suffered her first blow when the hotel staff informed her that the cable car was out of order. She would have to trade the white-sand-ed, palm-lined beach for the pentagonal swimming pool, leaving behind the exciting dream of the breathtaking poster.
But,
—Such is life

Suzie said, as she rented a lounge chair alongside the pentagonal swimming pool just beside the bar. In an instant, a young man served her a piña colada, a typical drink that positively surprised the young woman (who belonged to the generation of Puerto Rican typical drinks made from sugar cane)—although she would not exactly call them her favorite drinks.

Local fauna surrounded the pentagonal swimming pool, as did the full-blood Americans. A loudspeaker played soothing music from the Tropics, some crooner with a quivering voice and horrific English accent, while the athletic Latin specimens showed off their biceps on the trampoline. Suzie Bermúdez searched, without luck, for someone with a freckly face and crew-cut strawberry blonde hair to whom she could direct her batting eyelashes. Unfortunately, the surrounding group was rather senile, a bunch of middle-class, suburban Americans using their first Social Security checks.

—Uité ej puetorriqueña, ¿noveldá?

asked an awful man, no more than three feet tall, wrapped like a baby banana in a knock-off Pierre Cardin swimsuit.

—Sorry

Suzie murmured with indifference. And, putting on her sunglasses, she opened the newest bestseller to the exact page where the black Haitian hypnotized his white victim to perform some primitive Voodoo rites on her naked body.

Three piñas coladas later, and after the violation of the best seller’s protagonist, Suzie had no other option than to precariously inspect the native specimens. Just then, perhaps because the poolside was not air-conditioned, our heroine realized that the bartender was hotter than the three o’clock sun on a zinc roof.

Each time Suzie’s supple breasts came close to toppling out of her bikini top like two ripe grapefruits, the man’s eyeballs nearly popped out of his head. Starting with a few subtle glances, it wasn’t long before the timid, ladylike New York housing project secretary dared to affix her eyes on the hairs of his Tarzan-like chest. In the meantime, the eyes of the bartender dropped like descending elevators to the most fertile and abundant stopping-points. Suzie Bermúdez felt the glares pushing her, at her most feverish moment, towards a sweaty, smelly, and uncontrollable streetcar named desire.

The blushing young lady found herself suddenly so confused upon this discovery that she grabbed her Coppertone suntan oil, beach towel, and terrycloth robe, and she desperately fled to her deluxe suite, hiding herself under the mauve bed sheets of her queen size bed.
Blushing like a frozen strawberry, she murmured, Oh my God, as she felt her platinum-frosted fingernails involuntarily searching for the phone. With her best executive secretary falsetto and her head spinning like a runaway merry-go-round, she said:

—This is Miss Bermúdez, room 306. Could you give me the bar, please?

—May I help you?

asked a virile baritone voice with an accent worthy of a Resident Commissioner in Washington.

That same night the bartender confessed to his buddies hanging out in the lobby:

Guys, the chick in 306 doesn’t know if she is gringa or Puerto Rican. She asks for room service in legal English, but when I’m banging her she cries out in Puerto Rican.

—And what does she say?

Responded a member of his fan club, composed of anxious, gringaseducer wannabes.

The resident babeologist continued his story, narrating that in the exact moment her platinum-frosted fingernails were embedded in his afro, from the unreachable skyscrapers of an intra-uterine orgasm, from Suzie’s half-opened lips came a resounding ancestral cry:

—Long live PUELTO RICOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

NOTES

1 Vega’s 1981 novel, Virgenes y mártires, co-authored with Carmen Lugo-Filippi, is a collection of short stories. The stories contain metaphors of the political, social, and economic situation in Puerto Rico, and are a complex, realist representation of Puerto Rico in the early 1980s. This collection is often read alongside the 1988 publication Maldito Amor, by Rosario Ferré. According to Gloria Gálvez-Carlisle, both texts highlight the prominent moment in Puerto Rico’s history “en que España cede, mediante el tratado de París, la posesión de la isla a los Estados Unidos,” and in this way represent “este perturbador tratamiento de la compleja realidad puertorriqueña” (11). Virgenes y mártires forms part of a rich Puerto Rican literary production of the 1980s, including writers such as Juan Antonio Ramos, Magali García Ramis, Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, and others (Gálvez-Carlisle 11).

2 Sotomayor’s and Fernández Ortiz’s reflections on Vega’s “Pollito Chicken” are discussed at length in Den Tandt’s book Virgins and Fleurs de Lys, a work that attempts to draw parallel ties between the status of Québec with Canada and Puerto Rico with the United States. Den Tandt appears to agree with
the two aforementioned critics in regards to Vega’s short story when she evades Vega’s authorial presence in the text.

3 The use of the term *boricua* here refers to a person born in Puerto Rico. "Pollito Chicken" reveals that Suzie was born in Puerto Rico and later emigrated to the United States, thus authorizing the use of *boricua* to describe the protagonist. *Boricua* is a Taíno word—the Taíno people being the original inhabitants of Puerto Rico—and it stems from their name for Puerto Rico, *Borikén*. Refer to chapter XIII of Frances Negrón-Muntaner’s *Boricua Pop* for a more detailed description of the term.

4 According to Joaquin Garrido, Spanglish has two sides. In English, it is a style or a choice. In Spanish, however, it is a sociolect, and not a choice, but instead part of the adaptation process to life and culture in the U.S. It is also helpful to refer to the work of Ana Celia Zentella in the field Zentella herself coined "anthro-political linguistics." Her 1997 book, *Growing Up Bilingual*, examines the social constructions of bilingualism.

5 Stavans is of Mexican descent and is currently a professor at Amherst College. He was born in a Jewish community in Mexico and educated in Yiddish. Moving to New York City in 1985, Stavans was placed in a category apart from other Latins due to his red hair (Stavans, "Latin Lingo"). His work looks to standardize the spelling and usage of Spanglish words.

6 Herrera and Laviera are representatives of the many writers who have chosen Spanglish as a literary language, Herrera in his novel *Crash boom love* and Laviera, alongside other works, in his book of poetry, *La carreta made a U-turn*. Herrera’s and Laviera’s poetic employment of Spanish/English code switching stems from their backgrounds in bilingual competence, signaling an access to both languages in similar contexts. Other writers who have provided Spanglish with a literary legacy of sorts include Miguel Algarin, Junot Diaz, Piri Thomas, Luis Rafael Sánchez, and Giannina Braschi, to name a few.

7 If one considers the time of publication of "Pollito Chicken" in 1981, it is important to note that a mere ten years later Rafael Hernández Colón, affiliated with the Popular Democratic Party, specified the official language of Puerto Rico as only Spanish. This government action was filed as a bill in the mid 1980s, and is also known as the “Spanish Only Law” (Muñiz-Arguelles 459).

8 As the Spanish language tends to differ by country and region, taking into consideration divergent features in regards to pronunciation, vocabulary, and (less so) grammar, the Puerto Rican variant of Spanish has specific features. One such feature is the change of /r/ to [l], which is present in Suzie’s pronunciation “Puelto Rico,” instead of “Puerto Rico."

9 For a brief list of writers who have written in Spanglish, refer to footnote number six on page five.
One example of such usage is on the first page of Vega’s original text: “Todo lo cual nos pone en el aprieto de contarles el surprise return de Suzie Bermúdez....” The result of this sentence translated into English is the following: “And so we share the surprise return—after years of ongoing interior battles—of Suzie Bermúdez....” (See Appendix).

WORKS CITED


Gregory Helmick se doctoró en literatura hispanoamericana por la University of Texas at Austin con una tesis titulada “Archival Dissonance in the Cuban Post-Exile Novel”, en la cual trabaja a efectos de su futura publicación. Sus investigaciones se centran en la narrativa histórica caribeña, y la simbiosis entre la música popular y la literatura. En la actualidad, es profesor en la University of North Florida, donde dicta cursos de lengua española y cultura y literatura hispanoamericanas.

Tomás Hidalgo Nava es candidato a doctor en Literatura Hispánica por The Pennsylvania State University. Cursó la maestría en Literatura Comparada en la Brigham Young University y la licenciatura en Periodismo y Comunicación Colectiva en la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Ha trabajado como periodista en el diario Reforma en la ciudad de México, editor en el Grupo Santillana, asesor en el área de comunicación en Fomento Cultural Banamex y subdirector de difusión en la Coordinación Nacional de Literatura del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, también en México. En el año 2001 ganó el Premio Casa de América Latina, que es parte del Premio Internacional de Cuento “Juan Rulfo”, auspiciado por Radio Francia Internacional.

Megan Jeanette Myers cursa estudios doctorales en la Vanderbilt University, especializándose en literatura latinoamericana. Se interesa particularmente en las letras del Caribe y en la literatura latina/o. Su tesis versa sobre la representación haitiana en la literatura dominicana. Myers es la presidenta de la Fundación Alta Gracia y una organizadora del evento anual “Border of Lights”, que tiene lugar en la frontera entre Haití y la República Dominicana con el objeto de conmemorar la masacre de haitianos ocurrida en 1937.

Héctor Santiago (Santiago de las Vegas, Cubas, 1944) es un dramaturgo, narrador, poeta, ensayista, director de teatro, coreógrafo y pintor radicado en Nueva York. Tiene publicadas y estrenadas varias piezas dramáticas entre las que destacan los siguientes títulos: Vida y pasión de la Peregrina (Premio Letras de Oro de 1995), Balada de un verano en La Habana, En busca del paraiso, Las noches de la chambelona, El milagro de Madame Kirovska, La diva en la octava casa, El último vuelo de la paloma y La eterna noche de Juan Francisco Manzano. En 2012 apareció su novela La memoria del agua, Ediciones Aduana Vieja, que ha sido traducida al inglés, francés y catalán. Es autor también de un poemario titulado Ochún en el Hudson. La portada de este número de Caribe se basa en un cuadro suyo titulado Nacimiento de Changó. Pertenece a la colección privada de Armando González-Pérez. Aparece en este número también su obra Changó Olufina alafín de Oyó.