

The construction of 'otherness' in the Caribbean island of St. Croix and its pertinence to decisions about language and education policy for diaspora groups at the community and governmental levels: A socio-cultural and historical perspective

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to place socio-cultural and historical perspectives at the center of any language and education planning situation that is targeting a speech community that is characterized by multiculturalism and multilingualism as a result of the arrival of various diaspora groups. The end-in-view is to engage in the type of research about the community under study, which would enlighten the discussion of multi-otherness, a concept that is proposed and discussed by the author with the aim of triangulating information about cultural and historical documentation and 'othering' practices. A brief historical account is given of the Caribbean islands and specifically about the island of St. Croix, one of the islands and islets that make up the unincorporated territory of the US Virgin Islands. There is initially a description of the people of these islands through the optics of a 16th and 17th Century European mindset later shaped by important migratory events.

Key words: Caribbean, St. Croix, language planning, education planning, otherness, multilingual community, diaspora groups

La construcción de la otredad en la isla caribeña de Santa Cruz y su pertinencia a las decisiones sobre políticas de lengua y de educación para grupos de diásporas en los niveles comunitarios y gubernamentales: una perspectiva socio-cultural e histórica

Resumen: El objetivo del presente trabajo es el de colocar perspectivas socio-culturales e históricas en el centro de cualquier situación de planificación lingüística o educativa que trate de impactar una comunidad de habla que se caracteriza por una multiculturalidad y un multiculturalismo que es el resultado de la llegada de varios grupos de diásporas. La meta es la de lograr un tipo de investigación sobre la comunidad en cuestión que arrojaría luz sobre la discusión de lo que llamamos la 'multi-otredad', un concepto que propone y discute la autora con el fin de triangular información sobre la documentación cultural e histórica y sobre la práctica de realizar la alteridad. Se provee una discusión de corte histórico sobre las islas del Caribe y específicamente de la isla de Santa Cruz, una de las islas e islotes que constituyen el territorio no incorporado de las Islas Vírgenes estadounidenses. Se hace una descripción de la población de estas islas a través de la óptica de la mentalidad europea de los siglos 16 y 17, la cual tomó nueva forma al ser influida por acontecimientos importantes de corte migratorio.

Palabras clave: el Caribe, Santa Cruz, planificación lingüística, otredad, comunidad multilingüe, grupos migratorios

I. Introduction: The construction of 'otherness' in the islands of the Caribbean Sea

According to Roberts (2008), it was not until the 17th C that writers interested in the islands of the New World began to focus on these societies, not only to assess them but "to construct for themselves an interpretation of people and events..." (26). Earlier writings included reports on voyages, flora and fauna and accounts about the inhabitants encountered by the Spanish in the early 1500s. Art work also had an active role in the depiction of the peoples that lived there, even when these depictions, such as is the case of the well-known engravings by De Bry (1590-1634) were not the result of personal experience but the product of personal reports given to the artist. Natives of the islands engaging in fantasized cannibalism, feasts, games and warfare became the centrefold of both artwork and writings and with them, the first constructed representations of the people of what was to be known as America. More than a hundred years had already gone by since the first news of the discovery and the early myths that were constructed as part of this major saga began to be replaced in the

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seventeenth century by news of the wealth that was there to be found in the newly discovered lands. This was an important happening that did not go unnoticed to other European nations such as England and France. They, in turn, following the competitiveness that reigned among them, condemned the behavior and actions of the Spaniards in the islands but, having no personal experience in this part of the world, could only but reproduce the Spanish account of the islands' inhabitants (27). Seventeenth century writers were thus prisoners to their enemies' reports of the first one hundred years of settlement. Thus began, first in the 16th C and then in the 17th C, the initial construction of 'otherness' in the islands of the Caribbean.

This focus on the difference of other people or events and its propagation to other people did not have its birth in the Caribbean. The Old World is replete with examples, now and then. Spanish speakers learn early in their educational process that Greeks called Barbarians all those who were outside their circle of identity. Later the Romans learned to call Barbarians those who were outside the Greek or Roman circle. This helps in the understanding of the use of 'barbarism' as a term that is given in Spanish grammar to any word of foreign origin that has not been incorporated into the language. What the Spanish world vision brought to the new lands in the final years of the 1490s was an extension of its own perspective of those people whom they viewed as different and their particular ability at concocting linguistic terms for those whose attitudes towards them was not harmonious with their vested interests. However, it must be made clear that it is not being argued that this practice did not exist among the indigenous population. Any elementary book on the pre-Columbian history of the Americas establishes that battles were fought out between various cultural groups in the region, and these groups must have manifested through their languages special terms to refer to their enemies. However, because these were basically spoken languages, the durability of the terms did not have the same degree of impact that the written language of the Europeans had for a long time to come.

II. The notion of 'otherness'

Before delving any further into a discussion of present-day otherness in the island that occupies our interest and its pertinence to language policies for diaspora groups, it would do justice to this paper to discuss briefly the term 'otherness' and what scholars have said about its incipience. Bhabha (1994) believes that the representation of those that belong to cultures different from ours is the result of an unconscious dimension of thinking. Riggins (1997) states that the term 'others' is used to refer to all people the Self perceives as mildly or radically different. While both of these scholars view the phenomenon of 'othering' or the construction of 'otherness' as a natural process of human experience formation, Lustig & Koester (2010) affirm that most people use it to classify, make interpretations, and evaluate other people and the activities in which they engage. Anthropologists assert that before the term 'othering' is understood, it is important to first identify another phenomenon intimately related to it. They call this phenomenon 'ethnocentrism,' the use of one's culture as the center or frame of reference for the evaluation of anything that is not part of it or the use of our cultural core as the axis or frame of reference for the evaluation of other people and events. According to Grimson et al. (2011), anthropologists coined this term to explain our participation in understanding those different from us. Therefore, we cannot understand immediately those views that are different from ours unless we engage in deep reflection. Ethnocentrism elevates the values of the society to which we belong to the category of universality. Thus this social construct becomes the only frame of reference in our observation of others (Todorov 1991 as cited in Grimson 2011).

There are two other aspects to the notion of ‘otherness’ that we wish to discuss because of its pertinence to the socio-cultural situation in the island of St. Croix. First, although scholars who have written on this topic identify the process that goes on inside the mind of the perceiver (the ‘othering’) and adjudicate this process to a phenomenon at the group level (‘ethnocentrism’), which provides the fertile ground for the process to take place, there is very little discussion on the reciprocity of these two aspects in the two groups concerned with the assessment of one another. That is to say, ‘othering’ proceeds in a back and forth direction so that Group A others Group B, and Group B others Group A. Second, in societies which are characterized by their pluriculturalism, that is, they are constituted by a plurality of different cultural groups, the nature of their diversity will bring forth a societal situation characterized by a ‘multi-otherness’ that must be viewed as a continuum in terms of time and degree because the others of today will, in time, other not only those who ‘othered’ them but new others such as those that arrive as members of new diaspora groups.

III. St. Croix: A brief history of the island and its major diaspora groups

St. Croix is the largest of the three main islands that comprise the US Virgin Islands, a small group of islands in the Caribbean archipelago. Europeans first set foot on St. Croix on November 15, 1493, and the encounter ended up in scuffle between the Spanish and the natives, who were startled by the large ships they suddenly saw before them as they paddled their canoe around a bend of the island. It was at the end of this brief encounter that the first indigenous woman from the Americas, the ‘cacica’ or chief of the local indigenous group, was raped by a European man on board Columbus’ ship (Cuneo 1495). After Columbus’ first encounter with the local population in St. Croix, there occurred an eventual dispersion of all indigenous people from the island. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries continued waves of migration brought thousands of Europeans to the Caribbean. They settled down and established centers of diaspora groups. Eventually the recently arrived Europeans began to substitute the original inhabitants with thousands of enslaved people who were brought from Africa as part of the ignominious Atlantic slave trade. These slaves eventually became the numerically larger segment of the population of these Caribbean islands.

Virgin Islanders are now US citizens as a result of the congressional enactment of 1927 following the US purchase of these territories from Denmark in 1917. Throughout the history of its colonization, seven flags have flown over the territory: the flags of Spain, Holland, England, France, Knights of Malta, Denmark and the United States, in chronological order. Notwithstanding the multilingual character of its history, English has been the predominant language in Saint Croix (Boyer 2010). This was due to the English settlers on the island who provided the island with a sense of continuity. However, it must be made clear that, from a sociolinguistic optic, we are speaking of St. Croix as a bi-dialectal community in which Standard American English is now considered the formal register and prestigious variety of English while Crucian English, an English lexifier Creole (Faraclas 2012; Vergne 2012) left over from the time of slavery is the chosen variety for everyday interaction. Other dialects of English spoken by people from the other Anglophone islands are also part of the linguistic diversity of the island. Despite the continued use of English on the island under many nations of different linguistic backgrounds, still the use of a plurality of languages and dialects is what has characterized the Crucian speech community to the present (Simounet 1990).

In addition to the many Europeans that settled in St. Croix and the enslaved population that was brought in to do the heavy work in the fields, other ethnic groups

have had an important impact in the socio-cultural fiber of the island: people from Puerto Rico, from the Lesser Antilles, all referred to as ‘down islanders,’ from the US, from various Arab countries, from the Philippine Islands and most recently from the Dominican Republic. Among all these, it can be stated that the ethnic groups from Puerto Rico and the Lesser Antilles or Eastern Caribbean islands have left an indelible mark on the island, most of all, because of the linguistic implications of their children’s education.

With a population characterized by such diversity, it should be clear that a harmonious co-habitation within such a limited amount of territory and resources is a difficult feat. On the basis of what we discussed earlier concerning the construction of ‘otherness,’ the island of St. Croix, just like many other islands in the Caribbean, have had a history of receiving people from different lands whose cultures are indicative of salient differences. Thus, it is safe to state that in the case of the people of St. Croix, they have been in a constant process of receiving new masters, new settlers or new workers for centuries and that ‘othering’ would be an acceptable way to characterize this society because the islanders have had to make sense of those others who are members of a variety of diaspora groups and whom Crucians have labeled as ‘mildly or radically different’ (Riggins 1997: 3). In fact, we must make it clear that at this very moment , the US Virgin Islands, in their territorial entirety, have no clear majority group, demographically speaking, so that the question of identity as to who is a Virgin Islander and who is not has not been resolved yet (Simounet 2010). The importance of this factor will gain saliency when we discuss the issues of rights concerning language instruction, in the case of the Puerto Rican diaspora and access to public education in the case of the so-called ‘down islanders’ or Eastern Caribbean Islanders.

IV. The Puerto Rican diaspora and the issue of language of instruction

An important diaspora group of ‘others’ that Crucians had to encounter was the Puerto Ricans. The islands of Puerto Rico and St. Croix are geographically speaking very close. Although Puerto Ricans have migrated to a number of important cities in the States such as New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, New Haven, Orlando and Hawaii, the migration to St. Croix is being recognized quite recently due to the commendable work of Ríos Villarini and González Vélez (2010). The first important Puerto Rican migration occurred in the 1920s to help the local labor force in the farming areas (Dookhan 1974). Clarence Senior (1947) focused attention on these migrant workers in an important early contribution from the Social Science Research Center at the University of Puerto Rico. This was followed by later migrations lured by higher salaries given to government employees. These two factors together with the additional incentives of geographical proximity, equality of citizenship, and acceptance by the local Crucian population made possible an increasing migration from Puerto Rico of which 70% originated in Vieques and Culebra, two smaller islands which are part of Puerto Rico’s territory (Boyer 2010). We believe it is noteworthy to point out that, notwithstanding the identification of various migratory waves of Puerto Ricans to St. Croix, there is documentation that validates the earlier movement of Puerto Ricans from Vieques to other Caribbean islands and of individuals from other islands to Vieques (Rabin 2010). This displacement of population is also how all of these islands had come to be inhabited thousands of years ago because of “maritime expeditions carried out by people of the indigenous cultural groups from South America, specifically those close to the entrance of Orinoco River in today’s Venezuela” (Simounet 2010: ix).

The year 1941 marks an important date in the lives of Puerto Ricans from Vieques. That is the year that the US Navy began to expropriate land in Vieques,

taking away 72% of the territory of the island for the construction of a firing range (Rabin 2010) as part of an amphibious expeditionary forces exercise base. As a result of this decision of the Puerto Rican government to allow the expropriation of land, the 'Viequenses' were left with no other choice but to find a place for their families to settle and begin a new life. Oral histories found in the Vieques Historical Archives under the leadership of Robert Rabin provide a fascinating story of the many that decided to join family members who had already moved to St. Croix because of earlier harsh economic conditions on the island. Upon arrival in St. Croix, the label of 'otherness' already branded on the first Puerto Ricans was extended to this new group.

The Virgin Islands were already an unincorporated territory of the United States like Puerto Rico when the first important migration of Puerto Ricans arrived in St. Croix in the 1920s. According to Hernández Durán (2010), there are two stages that are important educational crucibles for the population of Spanish speaking children from Puerto Rico. For the first stage of the migration that Senior documents (1947) the children attended public and private schools and received their education in English. González Vélez and Ríos Villarini (2008) uncovered evidence of the recruitment of bilingual teachers on the part of the government during this initial stage. Because there was no official language policy in place to confront this type of situation neither in St. Croix nor in the US government, the response was one characterized by haphazard decision making. The response of the island's receiving community was characterized by much negativity. Senior (1947) explains that most of these students attended school in the countryside and absences were so common and constant that school officials referred to these children as truants (25), for they were actively involved with their parents' agricultural work, they had no shoes or acceptable clothes and their walks to schools were extremely long. Although employees of the public system believed that this was a problem, they did not consider the education of these students in particular to be their responsibility. Problems with the mastering of the English language obviously compromised the education of these children (Hernández Durán 2010).

We would like to underscore at this point in the article the importance of mastering the language of instruction according to the sociocultural theory of learning (Swain and Lapkin 2005 as cited in Baker 2011). This theory holds that a classroom should not operate solely through a second language, even in an immersion situation. The theory also is based on the belief that "when [students] cannot cope with processing in their second or third language...then they naturally turn to their first language for thinking... and to be cognitively successful" (289).

These Puerto Rican students, then, together with their relatives, were 'othered' by some members of the community for being "uneducated, poor and attached to their home culture" (González Vélez and Ríos Villarini 2010: 40). It must be added at this point that we believe that this was not the feeling of the entire Crucian community, for Puerto Ricans received the support of other groups in St. Croix such as 'down islanders' and people who would traditionally be labeled as members of the working class whose sociolect clearly represented a large number of uneducated people in the community and who having been 'othered' gave important emotional support to these families. This is a good example of the discussion on multi-otherness mentioned above.

During the second stage identified by Hernández Durán (2010), from 1962-to 1980, more or less, the government had now begun to implement specialized bilingual programs despite the negative feelings in school environment. We must not forget that this second stage responds to the migratory wave from Vieques as a result of the land expropriation by the US Navy. Other local events in St. Croix must be pointed out. In the 1960s St. Croix faced dwindling numbers of the local population due to earlier

circumstances that forced Crucians to leave the island such as economic depression, war and the initiation of important industry programs in the United States. It is then that the Spanish speaking population begins to see a change in official governmental policy towards the education of their children. Among many other initiatives, in a 1969 document sent to the Department of Education of the Virgin Islands, a Puerto Rican community organization demanded that the linguistic needs of their children be addressed. “A previous Governor’s Report and this document illustrate that both the government and the community acknowledged through their actions the need and the urgency of addressing the needs of Puerto Rican youth” (Hernández Durán 2010: 24). The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 led the way by making official the rights of these children and financially making it possible for these children to receive an education of quality.

The construction of ‘otherness’ in the environment of the schools and in parts of the community of St. Croix proved to be a difficult obstacle to surmount. This was a case in which only legal action on the part of the mainland government, despite local group cultural politics, was able to execute justice for these children.

V. The Eastern Caribbean Diaspora (‘downislanders’) and the issue of rights to an education in the 1960s

While the Puerto Ricans faced a problem associated with the language of instruction in the public school system, the plight of the children of the diaspora group from the islands in the Eastern Caribbean was that of the right to receive an education. Puerto Ricans were US citizens, but ‘down-islanders’ were not. According to Richards (1966 as cited in Hernández Durán 2010) the V. I. Department of Education made special arrangements to accept only those children whose parents had the necessary residency permits and complied with a number of requirements. Given the large number of so-called ‘alien workers’ that arrived in St. Croix, without the required permits, the only other alternative for these children was to attend private school—a solution that was totally beyond their means. The community was already complaining about the number of ‘alien’ children who were getting into trouble and were becoming, according to some statements given ‘a problem for society’ on the island. Gordon Lewis (1972: 225) speaks of “an unofficial, third, alien-parochial school system, with second-rate standards” that was thus created in order to target the problem directly. According to Hernández Durán (2010), the Eastern Caribbean community worked together in order to make sure their children received a good education. Lewis talks about day-care providers that were developed in people’s houses and alternate schools that were established and run by the community.

Different organizations such as the Catholic Church, VISTA (Volunteers in Service of America), and AmeriCorps National provided much needed help in terms of allowing the use of buildings and giving supplies and other resources. Their help continued for such an extended period of time that the local government could not ignore the role of these organization in the access to education the children of ‘downislanders’ had achieved without official help. Hernández Durán (2010) believes that a debate that came up over the establishment of a particular school was the trigger that placed the issue of the education of these children before the public’s attention so that the Department of Education had to involve itself in this important issue. Community groups backed the school, but the education officials argued that an investigation was called for before they would make any commitment.

It is interesting to address a particular issue at this time that is closely related to our argument of the relationship between the construction of ‘otherness’ and the establishment of language policy. ‘Downislanders’ are considered not only

emblematic symbols of ‘others’ but also ‘aliens’ in the community, even at this moment in which many of them have been born in St. Croix and are therefore US citizens, an achievement that has made it impossible for non-alien members of the community to legally exclude them from participation in formal community affairs. Early on in this debate, community sentiment against these people influenced the mindset of education officials who were themselves bona fide members of the Crucian community and, most probably, harbored the same negative attitudes towards this population. We remember our experience when holding a visiting professorship in Spanish at the St. Croix Campus of the University of the Virgin Islands in 2005 when a student privately expressed her disgust with one of the students in the class because the other student’s behavior was typical of a ‘downislander’. She was so enraged that she added: “I don’t need for you to confirm to me that he is a ‘downislander’ because I can smell them.” We believe that this type of statement is emblematic of the negative feeling many Crucians still feel towards these ‘others’ from ‘downisland’ whom they detest. In 1970, Judge Almeric Christian, a Crucian with impeccable knowledge of Spanish learned from Puerto Rican neighbors, determined in the case of Hosier vs. Evans that the Department of Education and the local government had the legal responsibility to receive immigrant children in the public schools. As an ironic twist to all this reality, we would like to add that as of this moment, in 2012, the ‘alien’ or ‘downisland’ population in St. Croix, taken together, has a clear majority in terms of numbers within the group of legal voters.

VI. Conclusion

We have argued in this paper, through the use of two examples from the island of St. Croix, how language planning must engage in, among many cultural areas of the population under scrutiny, a study of the socio-cultural and historic formation of the community and its conceptualization of the construction of ‘otherness,’ especially when it deals with the linguistic rights of diaspora groups. We must also be wary of governmental stances that try in surreptitious ways to impose ideological stances that are contrary to the engagement of just social issues. As Mar-Molinero states in her 2000 book that there are those who argue in excellent and provocative critiques of Language Planning, that we must be warned of the “naivety of not seeing the highly political and ideological way governments can construct language policy.” This statement, although it concerns the role of the government in the endeavor of our concern, it also speaks to the argument we have presented here in terms of how a government may back the posture of the community they represent as to the people’s racist attitudes towards peoples from different diaspora groups. Concerning these groups, we would like to end this writing with a quote from Esman’s publication on diasporas of our contemporary world. It represents the thinking pattern of those who find issues of contention with diaspora groups.

Economic costs and benefits are not the only determinants of native attitudes toward immigrants. Middle-class individuals may be upset by the foreign speech that they encounter on the streets of their cities and the foreign language signs that appear on store fronts. Fear that their nation is being overwhelmed by a flood of undesirable, often dark-skinned foreigners who abuse its welfare programs and bring crime and disease to their community is more a middle-class than a working-class reaction to visible foreigners. Middle-class concerns are more likely to be highlighted politically than those of the working classes. In the United States, for example, middle-class outrage about “amnesty” for undocumented law breakers has yielded more political traction than

working-class concerns about immigrants threatening their livelihoods and “stealing” their jobs. (Esman 2009: 12)

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