

Learning NOT to Forget: A Reflective Narrative on Language and Identity in the Era of Multiculturalism

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I am always sorry when any language is lost,
because languages are the pedigrees of nations.
(Samuel Johnson)

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Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es analizar la experiencia de un aprendiz costarricense de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) a la luz de teoría contemporánea sobre lengua e identidad. Se trata de una narrativa reflexiva en respuesta a un artículo escrito por Benjamin Baez, titulado "Learning to Forget: Reflections on Identity and Language". En el artículo, Baez analiza sus experiencias como puertorriqueño hispanohablante que aprende inglés dentro de la cultura estadounidense, en una época (1978) en que la filosofía del punto de fusión se hallaba en su apogeo. En contraposición, el presente trabajo analiza el estatus quo de la lengua y la identidad en una era donde la filosofía del punto de fusión está siendo desplazada por la de la diversidad cultural, cuyos principios suscitan la necesidad de pluralismo cultural dentro y entre las sociedades. Se espera que este artículo ayude a comprender las transformaciones ideológicas que deben emprenderse para que el multiculturalismo pueda finalmente convertirse en una realidad.

Palabras clave: Multiculturalismo, lenguaje, identidad, narrativa reflexiva.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to verbalize and analyze the experiences of a Costa Rican EFL learner in light of current theory on language and identity. This is a reflective narrative that arises as a response to an article by Benjamin Baez entitled "Learning to Forget: Reflections on Identity and Language". In this article, Baez narrates and analyzes his experience as a Puerto Rican Spanish speaker learning English in the United States at a time (1978) when the melting pot policy was at its best. Conversely, the present article explores the status quo of language and identity at an epoch when such philosophy is being overtaken by that of the salad bowl, which stresses the need for cultural pluralism across societies. This reflective narrative helps us understand the ideological transformation the world needs to undergo before it can finally claim multiculturalism.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, language, identity, reflective narrative.

1. On How English took me to the Rediscovery of my Roots

My story begins earlier than I had ever planned. I think it all began before I even entered elementary school over in Guanacaste. Since I was little, I was filled with a tremendous impulse for freedom and independence. My parents would say I was meant to be born an animal, a unique one; a bird of some kind that would hover above kingdoms and castles, untamed and relentless. But I guess I have long stopped to believe so, for

the boundaries that I mean to hover over do not have a thing to do with castles or kingdoms, not literally, at least. I remember that I would repeatedly have this dream where I would fly across cornfields and vast savannahs, with a huge rush of passion for unknown and faraway places, across cultures and peoples, as in an endless journey of adventure and diversity. But sooner or later you have to wake up. The moment I found myself eye-opened, sad, and awake, I felt like flying and cultural experience were only a dream, a foolish dream, and nothing more.

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I come from a bicultural family. My father came to Costa Rica at a very young age, at a time of great political and social conflict in the country of Nicaragua; just like many individuals who move to neighboring countries in search for better horizons. My mother was born and raised in in the borders of Guanacaste, few kilometers from Nicaragua and was, as she hardly acknowledged while alive, of some Nicaraguan ancestry, too.

None of my parents ever received much of a formal education. My father never went to elementary school, but rather got educated in the woods, clearing forests and pasture, deep within the perils of the jungle. As for my mother, she went to elementary school and was able to pick some reading and writing skills, but she never pursued any further academic goals. Yet I think I should consider myself lucky that they wanted a different future for me and for my brothers. I attended a rural school with limited, not to say no, teaching resources for a child of my kind, who, though poor and humble, saw education as a door into the realms of growth and flying. But my teachers did not encourage my learning much. Instead, they enforced a system that promoted violence, rage, and discrimination. All of them had a ruler to spank us every time we would misbehave, or should I say, every time they thought we misbehaved, and they would often make comments involving sexual, racial, or social segregation. I was never taught to love literature or arts, nor sculpture; though I wish I had, for now my life is so hectic that I don't seem to find the time to catch up on that the way I would like to. But there were, I remember it well, these books in Spanish that I would read after school: LIBRO

ALMANAQUE ESCUELA PARA TODOS. I would sit for hours browsing among the legends, the tales, and the stories of simple people, who had gone through seemingly ordinary events in life but, which to me, were fascinating and eye-opening.

I don't think that should make me see myself as an early reader, but I must say I definitely was an early dreamer. The epiphany came to me when a Sunday afternoon, sitting under an orange tree, facing the sunset in the horizon, I realized that I wanted to travel the world, and why not, take it over. I clearly saw myself visiting England, or some of those places in England and Japan which I read about from the stories in the book. I knew then that I was meant to fly, as I did in my dreams, but how, and what type of flying was I meant to do? I should say that now, the meaning of the word flying has a predominantly figurative meaning to me, at least within the scope of my story.

Years flew by and, like all kids my age, I committed myself to the regular burdens of school and related endeavors, but the dreams of flying didn't stop echoing in my mind, like a huge bell ringing from deep within my heart. The time for graduation from high school came quickly and I, like everybody else in my class, had no idea of what my life would become in just some months later, when we would have to leave our homeland and pursue a different type of life. But the truth was, the bell's echo kept on ringing, endlessly within the confines of my young soul.

So I decided to major in English Teaching at the University of Costa Rica, far from my country life in Guanacaste. And so I came to

live in the residence dorms at the UCR, in San Ramón of Alajuela. I was happy that I was starting a new life cycle and naturally, I thought learning English would allow me to travel in the future and then be able overcome culture shock when I could finally depart from my little country. And thus, a life of books, coffee late at night, reading, and language experiences started, like a journey of infinite magic and fascination. The four years I spent pursuing my degree were and will be—I am compelled to say— the best years I ever lived. I fell in love with English in such a way, that I would study an average of eight to ten hours after I came home from classes. But unlike my classmates, I never uttered a sentence in English outside the classroom; that I considered unnecessary and disrespectful towards those who did not understand English. I would rather absorb tons of random vocabulary from the National Geographic magazines that I'd buy every month, and was delighted to use grammatical and lexical structures that nobody in the classroom was able to comprehend.

I still don't know what learning style I am, but the story is that, fascinated by my ability to use odd and exotic words in the classroom, I turned myself into a compulsive reader of English novels and short stories. At that time, though, I never figured that all such bunch of vocabulary I was "acquiring" would give me the biggest of the trouble in the future, for afterwards I had to spend another four years learning how to accommodate, or use, all that in a contextualized, logical and coherent way, if I should say that I have managed to do so.

I successfully graduated from my Bachelor's program and, because of some

coincidental inertia, I happened to be admitted in a Master's program in English Literature in San Pedro, San José. "This should be my perfect move", I thought. "This will let me fly far and straight, into the endless pages of journeying that books are meant to open". I knew this time flying would be for real.

And so, I immersed myself into reading Shakespeare, Poe, Wordsworth, Chaucer, Hawthorne, and an endless list of big names I can't recall now, for my passion for their masterpieces has long been replaced by one that I think is far more profound, touching, and authentic.

It was while comparing one of Pablo Neruda's poems to one by an English author that, all at once, I felt a sudden burst of enlightenment filling up my body and my spirit. It was like a cold, green piece of ember burning in my heart; like an arrow coming from the golden letters of the poem, straight into my senses, into my flesh and bones, and into my heart. At that moment, feebly holding the old thick book, I questioned the beauty of English; the same way that a child who, for the first time, questions his parents' authority to become a future hero, and prepares himself to venture into harsh paths of initiation.

I was kept spellbound, in awe, petrified by the words and the odd musicality in the poem. I continued to feel all sorts of things like coming from a magic yet unknown drive. I felt like a burning dart thrust within my nerves and, startled by the aesthetic splendor of my Spanish language, the words of the poem abode within my memory thereafter. I still remember two of the last stanzas of the poem, which read:

*“[...] Si existieras de pronto, en una costa lúgubre,
rodeada por el día muerto,
frente a una nueva noche,
llena de olas,
y soplaras en mi corazón de miedo frío,
soplaras en la sangre sola de mi corazón,
soplaras en su movimiento de paloma con llamas,
sonarían sus negras sílabas de sangre,
crecerían sus incesantes aguas rojas,
y sonaría, sonaría a sombras,
sonaría como la muerte,
llamaría como un tubo lleno de viento o llanto
o una botella echando espanto a borbotones [...]”*
*[...]Alguien vendría, sopla con furia,
que suene como sirena de barco roto,
como lamento,
como un relincho en medio de la espuma y la
sangre,
como un agua feroz mordiéndose y sonando [...]”*

Officially an initiated Spanish poetry lover, I couldn't but start devouring all of Neruda's poems, then Darío's, then Martí's, then Lorca's, then Mistral's, and a number of other powerful Latin American and Spanish poets to whom, from then on, I would give all my spare time and devotion. Shortly after, I found myself writing about similar topics addressed in the writers' works, as I felt an inextricable impulse invade my spirit when I read them. But I was not content with my writing; I felt my works lacked authenticity and the stylistic solidity that every piece of writing is meant to have. For months I wondered what the missing ingredient was and, though I pondered and pondered over it, I was unable to come across an enlightening answer.

In great sorrow, I stayed away from reading and writing for some time, until I could come upon the answer that I so desperately needed if I was to keep on writing.

It was while visiting my father during a vacation period in Guanacaste when I asked him to tell me the stories he used to tell me when I was little and, Alas!; that was that; that was all I needed to find the authenticity I was missing in my stories and in my poetry.

It was there, in motionless surprise and astonishment, before my father's rudimentary narrative skills, when I found the real value of writing. I knew that I had to write about Guanacaste and about Guanacasteco-Nicaraguan settings if I wanted my stories to unfold successfully. Naturally, his narrations led me to write about simple, ordinary people who had fascinating stories that I felt needed to be written. I remembered Ana Cristina Rossi's ending of "La Loca de Gandoca" saying that stories must be written if we want them to prevail in the memory of people (p. 114). So, that I did, with no further delay.

My first stories combined traits of naturalism, surrealism, and regionalism around topics related to chauvinism, ecological matters, and social-existential issues typical of the old Guanacaste. My poetry was on the other hand full of nature, symbols, existentialism, romanticism, musicality and even bits of surrealism and seeming insanity.

By then, I hadn't discovered many of the authors that today shape the style and soul of my writings, but I think I had already undertaken an invaluable journey into the kingdoms of something

simply majestic and superior: imagination. Like the premise of the early romantics, imagination was my ticket to an endless voyage; a “journey away from civilization”, as romantics themselves believed. The greatest of my voyages was, indeed, as in Alejo Carpentier’s *Los Pasos Perdidos*, my journey into my roots and my Guanacasteco self. There I found the answer to so many things I had long-since pondered, and it allowed me to reunite myself with my ancestry and with my origins. But allow me not fall victim of my *forgetting* here; a journey into my Nicaraguan-Guanacasteco-Costa Rican *selves*, I meant to say.

I don’t know how often a human being is able to encounter himself with his roots; with his real *selves*, neither whether that brings him piece or self-realization, but as for me, I can assert with the firmest conviction that that has been the greatest gift ever granted to me as an individual. And I’m starting to think a lot of such realization has to do with the different layers of my identity that such events have come to shape in me.

2. On the Construct of Social Identity

Philip Riley defines social identity as “the sum of the numerous social sub-groups (sex, age, profession, religion, etc.) to which an individual may belong [...]” (38). This definition implies that our identity is not one single but the interaction of multiple, countless sub-layers that make up a whole, multifaceted individual. One cannot speak of having just one identity, but of possessing numerous identities that are the result of the different memberships each individual belongs to. These may include political or religious affiliations, marital status, hobbies,

gender, sex, age, etc.; and they are, according to Riley, “related to language in at least three different ways” (88). The first is that “they are encoded in language”, which means that our affiliations are labeled according to the linguistic repertoire “from which they are constructed” (88). Thus, we will be referred to as lawyers, teachers, musicians, Caucasians, atheists, poor or rich, etc., because such labeling represents the linguistic system to which we belong. The second is that our communicative practices, our vocabulary and our language register will vary according to the specific role we play at a given time and during a given space. The last one is that, if one is bilingual or multilingual, one is “a member of more than one speech community”, which enables us to use a particular language for a particular purpose (89). No doubt, then, language and identity are closely intertwined, and the power the former may exert in social interactions may be more complex than we generally comprehend.

3. Melting Pot or Salad Bowl in the 21st Century

When it comes to multiculturalism and multilingualism, two diverging policies play crucial roles in the ways cultural interactions are understood: the *melting pot* and the *salad bowl*. In its simplest sense, the melting pot policy advocates for the need for individuals to *melt*, or blend in the host culture if they want to be accepted. The salad bowl philosophy, in contrast, stresses individuals’ need for cultural amalgamation without giving up their social and cultural identities; that is, adapting into the new culture while keeping and embracing their own heritage intact. In Youngdal’s words, individuals

have their “own unique taste that forms a meal of delicacies” (1). Likewise, while discussing the role of bilingual education in the United States, Black points out that the melting pot philosophy advocates for a type of “traditional assimilation, in which all citizens, including newest immigrants, are expected to replace their native tongues with English”, while the salad bowl policy stresses the need for immigrants to “retain their individual ‘flavors’ even as they blend with the general population” (1).

Evidently, the two policies are unmatched, but more than that, they abide dramatic cultural implications that need to be discussed. If we take a close look at the former, we soon realize that its implications are simply really serious, quite too often relating to great political conflict and chaos. Ideologies following the tenets of the melting pot are and have been, in my opinion, one of the multiple causes of wars, segregation, oppression, and violence across the globe (e.g., the European colonization of the Americas, Mussolini’s Fascism, the Nazi holocaust during World War II, etc.). True, conflict is inevitable as it will always emerge when cultures come into contact (Levy 147; 322), but there is a clear-cut difference between acknowledging the possibility of conflict and the promotion of policies that engender it. At present, many of the challenges concerning educational developments center on the need to use multiculturalism as a tool to prevent social conflict, as long as it is viewed through the lens of the salad bowl. In this respect, Youngdal argues that “acceptance and integration of various cultures will provide a society with a new starting point for creating

a new heterogeneous culture” (1). Despite these new trends in culture and multiculturalism, however, reality often shows rather discouraging scenarios that should be, in my opinion, the core of discussion within the agenda of national education of every country. The issue of language deterioration and slaughter should be, no doubt, part of such an agenda.

4. Why does it Matter to Preserve Languages?

“The language itself is recognized as having a spirit or soul of its own”, states Joshua A. Fishman when referring to the undeniable value of languages as vehicles of a nation’s preservation (13). He explains that some academics have referred to language as being “the soul of the people”, or as “genocide of the souls”, if it is left to die within a community (13). The death of a language is, from this perspective, the death of a culture. Many are the academics who agree that every single language is a representation of the culture that speaks it, which makes its preservation a crucial endeavor to everyone in the language and culture research field. Dahlet, for instance, remarks that, historically, more than 30.000 have disappeared, along with the people who spoke them (20). He goes on to warn that languages are disappearing at alarming rates, and states that, at present, 25 languages per year become extinct worldwide. His prediction is that, if trends are not reverted, between 50 and 90% of languages will have disappeared by the end of the 21st century. Along the same lines, Devonish has spoken of “language slaughter” as being a growing crisis in most of the Caribbean, even “before the arrival of the Europeans in the

15th century” (2). He reports that, in an attempt to minimize this alarming phenomenon, the UNESCO has recently adopted an approach that seeks to safeguard languages from disappearing, on the premise that these are part of speakers’ cultural heritage (21). According to the author, the UNESCO has stated that:

Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage, the performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, as well as knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe and traditional craftsmanship, now benefit from an international legal instrument to safeguard intangible heritage through cooperation. (UNESCO, 2003b, qtd. in Devonish 21)

Taken together, all these claims regarding language death and language preservation should lead us to reflect upon the importance of—as stated elsewhere in this paper—cultural interactions that foster the safeguarding of communities’ linguistic, social, and overall cultural heritage. It naturally follows, then, that curricular authorities should put this issue at the forefront of their educational goals.

5. Benjamin Baez and the Need to Forget

Language has not always been regarded as something to be preserved and protected. It has rather been considered an “instrument of subjection” (Baez 129), which can be used either to empower or to oppress individuals; to tolerate or to discriminate; to communicate or to silence. More often than not, however, language is used to dictate, not to say impose, the dominant group’s

identity on minorities whose success is directly linked to its perfect mastery. Such is the case of Benjamin Baez, a Puerto Rican individual living in the USA who, in order to succeed in life, had to “learn to forget [...] the sights and sounds” of Spanish (123). This is unfortunately—and I am compelled to call this unfortunate— not only the case of Mr. Baez, but that of a huge number of Latinos who move to the USA and find themselves absorbed by a culture that demands the obliteration of their native language. But provided that views on language, culture, and identity have shifted from more oppressive to inclusive ones—at least in principle—, I will take on the claim that a second language can be learned successfully without forgetting “the sights and sounds” of the mother tongue, and more than that, without giving up one’s mother culture.

I agree with Mr. Baez that language has an important role in constituting individuals as subjects of different dimensions such as race, ethnicity, family, culture, etc.; and that it often oppresses and that minorities are often victims of such oppression. I also agree that, in reality, the salad bowl policy is but a utopia that is way too far from becoming a reality; but my agreement stops here.

As a foreign language learner, as a professor of English, as a researcher, and as a social being, I could not disagree more with the idea of becoming successful in the target language at the expense of giving up, not to say, killing one’s own cultural heritage. This is probably a misunderstanding that has arisen from poor interpretation of the theory on language and identity. Octavio Paz’s essay *LosHijos de la*

*Malinche*¹ would serve as an illustration of what may result from betraying our own roots. In his work, he addresses—amongst many other issues—the problem of identity loss and cultural betrayal on the part of those who do not value their roots and who, like the Malinche (an Aztec aborigine who betrays her own civilization by allying with Hernán Cortés during the Spanish colonization), will give away their local tradition in exchange for foreign ones.

Costa Rican writer Abelardo Bonilla² addresses a similar issue in regard to Costa Ricans' cultural and social identity. In his essay, *Caín y Abel en el Ser Histórico de la Nación Costarricense*, he argues that Costa Ricans are individualistic, selfish, trivial, and that they do not have a real cultural identity; that they disguise their lack of nationalism by celebrating social spectacles such as bull fights, soccer, and alcohol drinking. In this sense, Costa Ricans have a strong inclination towards nurturing what Riley termed the *person*; their individual "I", but they fail to cultivate their *self* (see Riley 181 for expansion). Because forgetting a language implies forgetting one's roots, traditions, ancestry, and overall identity, I believe that every language learner should be aware of the implications of following ideas as unhealthy as that of *learning to forget*.

Clearly, there are opposing views that need to be analyzed and refuted before any conclusions are drawn. In first place, my language learning situation is different from that of Baez; I learned English in an EFL context whereas he did so in an ESL environment. Opponents to my ideas might

claim that my reflections lack validity because I did not go through the same experience as did Baez or, that I did not need to forget because the cultural pressures are weaker in an EFL context than those of ESL. Nonetheless, anyone who analyzes the issue in depth soon realizes that times are changing. Our globalized world is at the vortex of a need for international communication that demands changes in the economic, political, and cultural trends that for years imposed an aggressive philosophy on language and cultural literary. Let us as well remember that Mr. Baez grew up in the US at a time (the 1970s) when the melting pot policy was on its heyday, which, naturally, forced him to forget. Of course, I am not implying that Mr. Baez enforces a system of violence and oppression; quite differently, he himself highlights the need to remember his experience, as a way to come across healthier ways to cope with the cultural phenomena surrounding language learning. Indeed, he concludes by encouraging a "transformation of social structures and disciplinary regimes" (132). Nonetheless, I do imply that his experience must be viewed and understood within the right context; a cultural and political era that rejected the prevalence of all forms of cultural plurality. Thus, an updated philosophy on the role of language as a bridge to shorten, not to distance cultures, should be encouraged in every setting that claims to adopt positive attitudes towards multiculturalism.

6. Concluding Remarks

This article set out to analyze the current status quo of language and identity at an epoch

1 Published in the book: *El Laberinto De La Soledad*

2 Published in the book: *Identidad, Invención y Mito: Ensayos Escogidos*

where the melting pot philosophy is being overtaken by that of the salad bowl. I have presented the history of my English language learning and analyzed it in light of current theory on language, culture, and identity. I have reviewed Riley's perception of the construct of cultural identity as being a set of multiple layers that form an individual's identity. Likewise, I have stressed the inseparability of language and identity within a social system that ascribes individuals a set of memberships that they acquire by virtue of different elements like age, sex, political affiliations, etc. I have also outlined the differences between two currents of thought, namely the melting pot and the salad bowl by remarking that the former abides negative implications at both linguistic and cultural levels since it forces individuals to lose and forget their cultural heritages when they come into contact with the host culture. Further, I have discussed the importance of cultural amalgamation by means of renewed, updated, and inclusive policies, of which the salad bowl is a good example. Likewise, I have discussed the need for language preservation, as well as the implications behind the opposite; that is, language slaughter. Additionally, I have analyzed Mr. Baez's arguments on the role of language as a regulatory system and the need to forget as a requisite to fit into a culture. Lastly, I have provided my own arguments on how and why a second or foreign language can and must be learned without giving up our mother tongue and, yet more important, our mother culture.

We live in a multicultural era that demands linguistic and cultural adjustments the world over. As a result of this, English

has become the lingua franca that allows for intercultural communication and commerce in almost every globalized society; but let us not be misled by the idea of a lingua franca. The fact that English serves a useful mechanism for intercommunication does not imply giving up local languages and cultures. Quite the contrary, English should be viewed as a way to gain cultural experience and to help societies become more tolerant and open to plurality and change. Until this ideological transformation is not undergone, multiculturalism will continue to be just an idea; a utopia that is far from relieving societies from the sociocentric thinking that for centuries has led to great conflict, misunderstanding, and prejudice.

I would like to conclude by saying that identities are complex battlegrounds where individuals find themselves struggling to come across a true understanding of their nature. Julie Choi (in Nunan 70), from the University of Technology, Sydney, believes that "self-examination through 'critical incidents' and reflections is crucial in finding and understanding the 'selves' [that] account for our identity". Thus, I can assert that the critical incident herein analyzed has contributed to better understanding the nature of my cultural identity in an invaluable manner. As for my English learning, it has served as a mirror to value, not to dispose myself of my native language and culture. Just like in Alejo Carpentier's *Los Pasos Perdidos*, I embarked in a journey that took me back to my roots. That *return*—to use a psychological term—, is accompanied directly by the rediscovery of not only my Spanish speaker self, but also of my Nicaraguan, Guanacasteco, Costa Rican,

academic, and of many other selves that integrate the multiple layers of my identity. The stories and poetry I write today carry that seal; the seal of cultural rediscovery that should be a goal to every individual. And about flying, I should say I have been flying ever since I started dreaming of it; and since I first flew back into the roots of cultural rediscovery. I have learned to fly higher and deeper, by embracing the roots of the culture I come from. I have not conquered any kingdoms or castles, but I think I have finally conquered my own and authentic *self*, I mean, *selves*, and that is a gift rarely granted to an individual. As for forgetting, I must say, with the strongest of all convictions, that all we need to forget is that there is a need to forget.

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