

Published in "El Tecolote" 9/18/2008

New Book Pushes the Spanglish Envelope

Book Review, by Nina Serrano

Bill Santiago's new book "Pardon My Spanglish ¡Porque Because!" makes you laugh out loud. *¿Por qué? Because!*

First of all it is about the language you use every day: Spanglish!

Yes, even you, with your mastery of pure *Castellano* –if you know enough *inglés* to *leer esto, por seguro estás hablando Spanglish, de vez en cuando*. Because, Santiago states in his list of "Top Ten Things about Spanglish: "You don't have to speak good English or Good Spanish to be completely fluent in Spanglish." This covers *todo el mundo, en la Misión, por lo menos*. Spanglish, Santiago asserts, immediately doubles your vocabulary.

Pardon My Spanglish is subtitled "One Man's Guide to Speaking the Habla." The *habla* is Spanglish, the idiom of the *gente* on the street, in shops and on the transit system. You can hear it everywhere and we do. But Santiago records and studies it with reverence and analytical *gusto*.

There is no doubt which side of the academic debate - about whether it is important to speak completely in English or completely in Spanish- he takes. Santiago endorses and proselytizes the *habla* of everyday speech in the USA, dismissing those who feel that it degrades the Spanish language as "purist" and "fundamentalist." In Santiago's view, Spanglish is as American as apple pie.

As a stand up comedian and comic actor, Santiago has *mucha experiencia* in making people laugh and he does it as skillfully in print as on stage. Probably it is his intelligence that makes him humorous; how he makes us recognize ourselves by the surprising way he juxtaposes ideas. You follow him, so sure of the road. Suddenly he makes a wild U turn and leads you off to a trail *desconocido*. Instantly you are giggling with silliness over the discovery of something in your own head while you map out the connection- in nths of a nano-second. It makes for an exhilarating and validating journey.

One theme Santiago does not touch upon is Spanglish poetry, which emerged in the USA in the late forties and has snowballed across the country and the generations. Among Chicanos it has been called *Pocho*. Now it is reaching it's *altura* in the poetry of poets like Francisco X Alarcon who has just been nominated for California State poet laureate and thinks nothing of mixing an *idioma* cocktail of images and cultural

rituals. As well as poets like Leticia Hernandez, Roberto Vargas, Alejandro Murguia and Raul Salinas to name a few. The *inglés/español* linguistic intermarriage brought Jose Montoya of the Royal Chicano Art Front alias the Royal Chicano Air Force fame to the honor of being named poet laureate of Sacramento. Now, the spiritual, sensual, Mamacoatl emerges on the scene in song and spoken word mixing form and language with her: Jazzimiento, Funk Ranchera, Chilango Blues, Bewitching Boleros, and Spoken Son.

New York was always into Spanglish and built Spanglish a temple calling it the Nuyorican Café in *Nueva York* where poets like Miquel Pineda, Pedro Petri and Sandy Estevez sent out the poetic word. San Francisco has also been blessed with Nuyoricans like Avotcja and Victor Hernandez Cruz who can slip in and out of languages with the flexibility of break-dancers. Oh, ... did I mention the long tradition of the teatros including the internationally recognized Teatro Campesino founded by Luis Valdez in San Juan Bautista, California in the late 60's that is still going strong.

Then, there are Spanglish novelist working in the Spanglish genre like Juno Díaz writing about Dominicans in New York introducing another strain of the *habla* and Ana Castillo writing about the Southwest, as well as many more. I predict that even Isabel Allende may join in – it is so pleasurable.

Yes Bill Santiago is right. Spanglish deserves its place in the sun and in this book he has ensured that.

Pardon My Spanglish ends with the script of a touching and amusing four-generational New York/Puerto Rican family holiday conversation between his grandparents, aunt, mother, brother and little kid cousins. Words gracefully spiral around subjects with many twist and turns – each person adroitly shifts languages around their own themes. “*Cada loco con su tema*”

His story of the stormy, life-long romance between his parents and strong family loyalty takes place in Spanglish. After his father dies, Bill's mother tells her son. “Your father used to tell me, I was married to you previously, and I will be married to you again, in the next life.” *Y yo le decía*, “No way! *Decia el*, “ I am going to come for you Judy.” *Y yo le decia*, “No way once is enough.” *Pero* if he comes for me, I will go.”

Most moving is how he feels supported by his family in the unsteady world of the entertainment business. “But my father wouldn't say “*te apoyamos*” as you would say in Spanish,” or “ We're backing you up,” as you might say in English. Instead *el le daba* his own Spanglish twist. *El siempre me decia*, “Billy, your mother and I, *te estamos backeando* all the way.”

Although ***Pardon My Spanglish*** is a little sexy here and there – (that's why it is so much fun) it would be a good book to gift a student, after you read it. *¿Por qué?* Because while funny, ***Pardon My Spanglish*** is a profound discussion of language

and culture in a *chistoso* and accessible format that helps you understand your own mixed up mind and be happy and proud about it.

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