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Ofelia García: A Life Dedicated to Giving Voice

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Cover Page Footnote

Zoila Morell, PhD, Associate Professor in Early Childhood and Childhood Education at Lehman College. Her research and scholarship examine bilingual education, school readiness, early childhood education, and conditions impacting educational achievement for Latinx children. She has multiple publications on these topics. She serves on the New York State Education Department Committee for ELLs and DLLs in Pre-Kindergarten where she developed a protocol for the identification of language learners at the Pre-K level.

Patricia Velasco, EdD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education (EECE) at Queens College, CUNY, where she coordinates the Bilingual Education Program. Her research interests include the development of metalinguistic awareness and its role in biliteracy, teacher education, and understanding the language and educational ideologies of Indigenous Mexicans living in NYC. In 2012, she coordinated the work for NYSED Home and New Language Arts Progressions that were part of the Bilingual Common Core Initiative. Patricia co-directed a project for NYSED creating practices for multilingual learners facing the demands embedded in the New Generation Learning Standards. Her newest publication is *Language, Culture and Education. Challenges of Diversity in the United States*, edited with Elizabeth Ijalba and Catherine Crowley and published in 2019 by Cambridge University Press.

Editorial

Ofelia García: A Life Dedicated to Giving Voice

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Those of us who fled the Cuban revolution carry the indelible imprint of forced immigration. Whether immigration is forced or chosen, it elicits complex emotions. The experience is one of sudden loss and displacement, and in the case of Ofelia García, it began to craft an interior narrative about freedom and voice that will fuel a lifetime. The work of García in sociolinguistics manifests the deep influence of her own immigration story marked by feelings of wonder, displacement and perseverance. It is certainly about the power of voice. First, “voice” as in the literal freedom to express ideas and be heard, but specifically, to be heard in one’s chosen voices -- one’s languages.

Ofelia García arrived with her family to New York City at the age of 12. She eventually obtained her Bachelors from Hunter College and continued for a dual Masters in Spanish and Education. Though practicing as an ESL and bilingual teacher during the 1970s, there were no real models to guide the work with a growing population of Spanish-speaking children. In an interview with Estrella Olivares Orellana (2012) for *Esteem Magazine*, García describes those times:

I always say that I started being a bilingual teacher before there was formal bilingual instruction. I was teaching in a progressive school and suddenly all of my students were Puerto Rican, all of them, and I thought, “Well, this doesn’t make too much sense, they don’t speak English, I speak Spanish, why I’m I teaching them in English only?” I started experimenting with bilingualism in education before bilingual education was even something that one could study. In those days there were no programs in bilingual education. I actually did a doctorate in what came closer to bilingual education, which was Spanish literature and Spanish semiotics. I was pursuing Spanish language education, and the only doctorate available to me was a doctorate in Spanish language and literature, so that’s what I did. I had always been a bilingual teacher. At the end

of studying, I didn't know how to put those two things together: my intellectual interest and my commitment in what I was doing practically (Olivares-Orellana, 2012).

Inspired by the insistence of one of her professors, Ofelia García applied for a doctorate at the CUNY Graduate Center. Fluent in three languages, she studied French surrealism under the direction of Angela Dellepiane and eventually found the works of the Argentine poet, Oliverio Girondo (1891-1967). By then, or perhaps because of Girondo, García became interested in semiotics, the quest for how meaning is created and communicated. García was intrigued with Girondo's inventive artistry. She described his poetry as "a joyous act of enunciation" in the Spanish language (García, 1981, p. 48; 1982). His poem *Tataconco* (1922) illustrates not only Girondo's talent for playing with the visual and sound characteristics of words, but also how easily someone who cannot be heard can be discounted:

soy yo
 dí
 no me oyes
 Tataconco
 soy yo sin vos
 sin voz

 it is me,
 tell me
 can you not hear me
 Tataconco
 it is me without you
 without a voice
 [Translation: Patricia Velasco]

In an almost unimaginable, brilliant, presage of translanguaging, Ofelia García (1981) wrote her dissertation entirely in Spanish having conducted all her doctoral course work in English and studying surrealism in French. She focused on Girondo's hidden words and meanings. In what resulted in a major event in García's professional life, she continued as a post doc student at Yeshiva University.

It is safe to say that Ofelia García was the student Joshua Fishman was looking for and Joshua Fishman was the mentor and advocate that she needed. Their relationship lasted decades and it was as engaged and authentic as the ones that García eventually created with her own doctoral students. It became a mutually beneficial professional relationship that led to García becoming the editor of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, created by Fishman.

The second, pivotal moment in García's career came in 2012 when Colin Baker invited her and Ricardo Otheguy, her husband, to Bangor University in Wales. This was a particularly important trip and one that was specifically planned by Baker to introduce Cen Williams -- a Welsh poet and teacher who coined the term *trawsieithu* -- and Ofelia García. In his diary for June 26, 2012 Baker describes this meeting as an awaited and trepidatory encounter:

Simple introductions. Both Ofelia and Cen rarely shy, but this time a little. Some degree of mutual awe. Room full of smiles. We all realize this is an historic occasion.

According to Baker, the conversation started with García asking Williams to describe the story of the birth of the term *trawsieithu*, a pedagogical practice in which the input takes place in one language and the output in another. Williams, a nationally acclaimed poet from a quiet, rural Anglesey village, reported that it was during a coffee break at a teachers' conference in the late 1980's in Llandudno. The first stab at translating the term into English was crosslinguifying, which seemed an awkward term. Baker thought of the term translanguaging and it stuck. Williams started to spread the concept of *trawsieithu* on courses for teachers and its practice grew (Baker, 2018, Diary Notes)

Since then, various scholars in the United Kingdom and North America have popularized the term (Baker, 2001; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Hornberger & Link, 2012). García has defined it as “bilingualism without diglossic functional separation” (García, 2007, p. xiii) and as inclusive of—but not limited to—the practice that linguists coined code-switching (García & Sylvan, 2011). A positive outcome from this definition is that the negative associations that the term code-switching elicited have been obliterated. Most importantly, it has been under Ofelia García (2009) that the term *translanguaging* has gone beyond classroom contexts and practices to refer to the flexible use of linguistic resources across various everyday contexts. According to García (2009), translanguaging is the communicative norm in bilingual and multilingual communities that also garners an ethical and political dimension by positioning it as a practice that reflects social justice in education (García & Wei, 2014).

Across the world, colleagues like us have changed directions, assumed roles as advocates, and dared to transgress against systems that silence children literally and figuratively, because we were irrevocably moved and influenced by García's work. Here too, it was like finding our voice. It is our honor as colleagues and sister exiles to highlight Ofelia García's accomplishments in academia at the moment of her retirement. To do so in the *Journal of Multilingual Education and Research* (JMER) has particular significance. *JMER* was launched in 2010 under the auspices of the New York State Association for Bilingual Education (NYSABE). *JMER*'s creator and senior editor, Aida A. Nevárez-La Torre, invited Ofelia García to contribute the opening article to its first volume, *Bilingualism in Education in Multilingual Apple: The Future of the Past* (García, 2010). Nine years later this same journal has put together this special volume celebrating and recognizing the work of Ofelia García.

Patricia Velasco, longtime friend and colleague, and Zoila Morell, proudly Ofelia García's first Cuban doctoral student, called upon the many contributors in this issue to help us in the task. We asked authors for thoughtful consideration to the following questions:

- What has García's work meant to the field?
- What are García's areas of greatest impact?
- How has García impacted policy at the state or national level?

- Describe the theoretical concepts in García's work that has most influenced your own work.
- What is most memorable to you about García's career?
- What has been García's lasting impact on your scholarship?

Ofelia García's intellectual capacity is only matched by her charisma and the care she takes in advancing the professional careers of her students and colleagues. The articles that conform this issue are grouped to honor two dimensions of García's work. Ofelia García as a scholar and Ofelia García as a mentor. The first group of articles authored by Valdés, Cummins, Fu, Flores, Cenoz and Durk, Helot, and Solorza center their contributions on the influence that Ofelia García has had on their scholarly work. The second section captures the testimonies of Espinosa; López; Ascenzi-Moreno and Vogel; Kleyn and Seltzer; and Sánchez and Menken, all members of the CUNY New York State Initiative for Emergent Bilinguals (CUNY NYSIEB) about García's guidance as a mentor. The primary goal of this New York State funded initiative is to describe and create pedagogical practices based on tranlanguaging, for teachers and by teachers. The CUNY NYSIEB initiative represents a cohesive group of bilingual education scholars who are bound to make strides in the field. CUNY NYSIEB has been directed by Nelson Flores, Maité Sanchez, Kate Seltzer, and Ivana Espinet. The third and last section in this issue presents Colin Baker's journal notes that document the García-Williams meeting as well as Baker's relationship with García throughout many decades. Meral Kaya reviewed García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017) *The Translanguaging Classroom: Leveraging Student Bilingualism for Learning*, a recent volume for teachers and teacher educators on translanguaging.

Even though this special issue is mainly divided into García as a scholar and García as a mentor, the reality is that these two realms merge into one. García's intellect and empathy are equally expansive and intertwined. To be a colleague or doctoral student working with Ofelia Garcia has meant meeting her husband, Ricardo, their children Eric, Raquel and Emma; their spouses Mónica, John and Tim, as well as, their bilingual grandchildren, Gia, Charli, Gabo, and Isabel. We have each grown as she elevated the voices of bilingual students, in work that is powerful, transformative, and close to home. True to her Cuban roots, it has meant being fed picadillo with black beans and rice while translanguaging about translanguaging.

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