

“Ich kann nicht”: Hearing Racialized Language in Josh Inocéncio’s Purple Eyes (Ojos Violetas)

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Abstract

In Spring 2017, I brought Houston-based playwright/performer Josh Inocéncio to my campus—the University of Houston—to perform his solo show *Purple Eyes* (for more on the event, see “Campus Organizing, or How I Use Theatre to Resist”). *Purple Eyes* is what Inocéncio calls an “ancestral auto/biographical” performance piece which explores his upbringing as a closeted gay [...]

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Diasporic Sound, Drama



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In Spring 2017, I brought Houston-based playwright/performer [Josh Inocéncio](#) to my campus—the University of Houston—to perform his solo show [Purple Eyes](#) (for more on the event, see [“Campus Organizing, or How I Use Theatre to Resist”](#)). *Purple Eyes* is what Inocéncio calls an “ancestral auto/biographical” performance piece which explores his upbringing as a closeted gay Chicano living in the midst of the cultural heritage of machismo. Following a legacy of solo performance storytelling aesthetics seen in John Leguizamo’s [Freak](#) and [Luis Alfaro](#)’s *Downtown*, Inocéncio plays with memory to understand how the United States and Mexico have influenced his family and his own identity formation. Moreover, [Purple Eyes](#) explores the intersections of queerness and Chican@ identity alongside the legacy of machismo in his family (For more on the play, see [“Queering Machismo from Michoacán to Montrose”](#)).



Still from Purple Eyes (Ojos Violetas), with permission from Josh Inocencio who retains copyright.

During my Intro to LGBT Studies course following the performance, students discussed issues of representation and how many of them had never seen a queer Latin@/x play or performance, with some of them having never seen a live play. Many students picked up on how *Purple Eyes* foregrounds the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. While these discussions were indeed fruitful, what struck me most was how both classes harped on Inocéncio’s use of different linguistic registers. Put simply, what stayed with them was how the performance sounded. My students obsessed over the Spanish in the play, leading me to question why this group of students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution in a city that is over 40% Latin@ had so much trouble whenever Inocéncio spoke Spanish, or the sounds of Latinidad.

In what follows, I discuss how my students heard *Purple Eyes*. While the play is predominately in English, Inocéncio often code-switches into Spanish and German to more accurately embody

particular family members. This blog adds to previous research by [Dolores Inés Casillas](#), [Sara V. Hinojos](#), [Marci R. McMahon](#), [Liana Silva](#), and [Jennifer Stoeber](#) on the relationship between the Spanish language and non-Spanish speaking Americans. Indeed, my students racialized the Spanish in *Purple Eyes* while completely disregarding the German in the play. Why?

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Drawing from sociology, racialization is the process of imposing racial identities to a social practice or group that might not have identified in such a way. Typically, the dominant group racializes the marginalized group; i.e. Latin@s in the U.S. become racialized by the mainstream. Even so, Latin@s are not a race, but are an ethnic group. Yet, I argue that non-Latin@ Americans view Latin@s through a lens of race which often becomes a sonic one, in which language becomes one of the most overt identity markers. In terms of Spanish, while many races and ethnicities speak the language, in the United States it is often viewed as a way to mark Spanish-speaking Latin@s as Other. In this way, language plays a fundamental role in shaping mainstream ideas about race. According to [Dolores Inés Casillas](#), “For unfamiliar ears, the sounds of Spanish, the mariachi ensemble, and/or accented karaoke all work together to signal brownness, working-class,” and as [Jennifer Stoeber](#) argues, the sounds of Latinidad indicate “illegality” in the U.S.

Drawing from the intersections of race, language, and racism, the relatively new academic field [Raciolinguistics](#) has emerged as a means to explain how people use language to shape their identity (For more, see [Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas About Race](#)). Branching off from Raciolinguistics, I am most interested in exploring how the mainstream hears languages and racializes what they are hearing. The result is that Spanish is seen as Other, meaning that monolingual U.S. listeners hear Spanish-speakers as inherently different and a threat to a mainstream United States cultural and, more importantly, national identity.



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Reflecting Inocêncio’s cultural multiplicity, *Purple Eyes* features English, Spanish, and German strategically used at different moments in the play to reflect the temporality, positionality, and relationship to language of each character that Inocêncio inhabits. While the chapter on his father is entirely in English, the final chapter focusing on Josh himself opens with a monologue in Spanish in which the performer narrates the events of the FIFA World Cup before finally announcing to the crowd that the epilogue is Inocêncio’s journey of young love and heartbreak on his journey of queer discovery. This moment features the longest extended use of Spanish in the play. The remaining Spanish is sprinkled in as Josh code-switches between the two languages for added cultural specificity.

While some of my Spanish-speaking students appreciated hearing a play that reflected their linguistic identities, monolingual English speakers in my class claimed that the Spanish confused them and made it difficult for them to follow certain parts of the play. After several students echoed these thoughts, a student from Mexico without full fluency in English comprehension told others about how her experiences were the exact opposite. She had trouble following some of the parts in English since she is still learning the language. I then pivoted the conversation to discuss how my English-dominant students approached the play with the assumption that English is the norm and a performance on a university campus should reflect this. Case in point: several told me that the show should have been subtitled.

But what was most telling was the following exchange. After several expressed confusion over the Spanish, one particularly woke student from Nigeria raised her hand and said: “I haven’t heard anyone say anything about the German in the play and not being able to follow the play during the German part.” She then noted how, in the United States, Spanish is racialized whereas German is not. In fact, most of the students did not even recall German in the play. Admittedly, the play features far more Spanish than German, but the scene in which Inocêncio speaks German occurs while dramatizing his Austrian grandmother’s abortion. As Inocêncio (as Oma) frantically repeated “Ich kann nicht” (I can’t), my students had no trouble; to use some Millennial vernacular, it was with Spanish that they “couldn’t even.” Arguably, this is the most intense scene in the performance and one that my students wanted to discuss. That the majority of them understood this scene without fully registering the German, coupled with their confusion over lines spoken in Spanish, speaks to not only how race and ethnicity impact how languages are heard in the United States. German is viewed as familiar and accessible whereas Spanish is immediately heard as foreign, i.e. undesirable, not welcome here.

As the Latin@ population continues to grow and the Spanish language becomes an increasingly present reality in U.S. everyday life, audiences must consider possibilities not grounded in an English-only narrative. My experiences with *Purple Eyes* are not unique. I have witnessed and

heard many stories about audiences at mainstream theatre companies who have struggled whenever a play included Spanish. While I don’t claim to have the answers to address this across the nation, as an educator, I question what tools I can give my students to help prepare them for sonic experiences outside of their comfort zone and, specifically, how they become aware of subconscious racialization practices. What will they hear? And, more importantly, how will they react?

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Featured Image: Still from Purple Eyes (Ojos Violetas), with permission from Josh Inocencio who retains copyright.

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Trevor Boffone is a Houston-based scholar, educator, writer, dramaturg, producer, and the founder of the [50 Playwrights Project](#). He is a member of the National Steering Committee for the Latinx Theatre Commons and the Café Onda Editorial Board. Trevor has a Ph.D. in Latin@ Theatre and Literature from the Department of Hispanic Studies at the University of Houston where he holds a Graduate Certificate in Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies. He holds an MA in Hispanic Studies from Villanova University and a BA in Spanish from Loyola University New Orleans. Trevor researches the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and community in Chican@ and Latin@ theater and performance. His first book project, *Eastside Latinidad: Josefina López, Community, and Social Change in Los Angeles*, examines the textual and performative strategies of contemporary Latin@ theatermakers based in Boyle Heights that use performance as a tool to expand notions of Latinidad and (re)build a community that reflects this diverse and fluid identity. He is co-editing (with Teresa Marrero and Chantal Rodriguez) an anthology of Latinx plays from the Los Angeles Theatre Center’s Encuentro 2014 (under contract with Northwestern University Press).

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