

**Cultural Adaptation: A Study in Selected Poems of  
Victor Hernandez Cruz**

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**ABSTRACT:**

This study aims at tracing the effect of the two worlds, Puerto Rico and the United States of America, on the poetry of the Latin American poet, Victor Hernandez Cruz (1949 - ). The study begins with a cultural background about the Puerto Rican indigenous culture and the Puerto Rican diaspora in the City of New York. The study, then, discusses one of Cruz's poems focusing on the ideas of alienation, nostalgia, consciousness, and bilingualism tracing his cultural adaptation throughout the process. It is concluded with the fact whether Cruz culturally adapted to the U.S. literary mainstream or not.

**Key words:** adaptation, bilingualism, Cruz, Cultural, diaspora

There was a Puerto Rican man who  
came to New York  
He came with a whole shopping bag  
full of seeds strange to the big  
city

—Victor Hernandez Cruz, *Maraca, New and Selected Poems, 1965 - 2000*

Alfred Kroeber (1876 - 1960) defines culture as the explicit or implicit patterns of behavior monitoring a certain individual or a group's attitude Culture includes a group's tradition, and its essential core whether historically derived or selected that is embodied in artifacts; ideas and each group's attached values. Cultural systems, Kroeber comments, "may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action." It is either acquired or transmitted and it stands as the distinctive achievement of human groups ( Kroeber'1952 'P.181) .As a result of certain patters of this transmission, individuals are influenced by variety of cultural elements whether these elements are indigenous or foreign in a two-way process which in turn result in the phenomenon of adaptation by which one adopts features of one culture, while the other adapts to adopt traits from the other culture.(Aaker,2001,P.552)

Cultural adaptation is the process by which certain individuals both influence and be influenced by their hosting environment, individuals, and cultural traits by means of direct daily contact. The process usually is a selective one by which a certain individual or group chooses the more adequate traits that make daily life easier. The process of adaptation includes both adaptation of cultural traits by one cultural group from the other, and a mixture and fusion of such traits.(Genkova,2009,PP.6-7)

Cultural adaptation falls into three major types: Assimilation, Acculturation, and Cultural Hybridity. Acculturation encompasses all the changes occurring in a certain cultural system by means of amalgamation and mixture whether voluntary or forced.( Culture Contact,2008,P.1).An example of voluntary acculturation is found in Spain. Washington Irving (1783 - 1859) states in his *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832):

The cities of Arabian Spain became the resort of Christian artisans, to instruct themselves in the useful art. The Universities of Toledo, Cordova, Seville, and Granada, were sought by the pale student from other lands to acquaint himself with the sciences of the Arabs and the treasure lore of antiquity; the lovers of the gay sciences resorted to Cordova and Granada to imbibe the poetry and music of the East, and the steel-clad warriors of the North hastened thither to accomplish themselves in the graceful exercises and courteous usages of chivalry.(Irving,2009,P. 3 )

Assimilation is more radical than acculturation when certain or all the cultural traits of a certain group are replaced by their equivalents from the hosting culture. Complete assimilation is found but it is rare and it occurs when all the traits of certain group are diminished and replaced by that of the other dominant one. (Pauls,2008,P.1)

Cultural hybridity, is the most common type of cultural adaptation. It is the process by which the cultural elements of both the hosting and hosted group are influenced by each other resulting in an in-between cultural system having traits from both systems in addition to other novel traits resulting from the fusion of relatively similar traits of both cultures ( Raetzsch,2003,P.1).

In the case of Puerto Rico, the motherland of Victor Hernandez Cruz (1949 - ), the cultural system has witnessed certain stages of developments and changes through history. The indigenous cultural tradition is traced back to the Arawak and Taino Indians who are the original inhabitants of the island. The Arawak and Taino tribes are primitive tribes varying between savagery and agriculture (Nottage,2011,P.1). This difference allows these tribes to welcome changes easily and that is what happened with the coming of Christopher Columbus (1451 - 1506) in 1492 in the name of the Spanish Crown to the New World where he was welcomed by those tribes who were the first people he met after crossing the ocean.

The Spanish invasion brought along changes into all aspects of life. Changes in language, religion, and norms are clear in nowadays Puerto Rican cultural system. Moreover, the Spanish decree allowing the importing of African slaves brought along another changes in the island's cultural tradition especially with the coming of Afro tribal, spiritual, oral, and

rhythmic traits reviving, supporting and hybridizing the Arawak indigenous tradition. (Kinsbruner, 2008, pp. 17-30) As a result, the new cultural system in the island include Latino, Caribbean, Spanish, Afro, and native Indo traditions.

The Spanish control lasted for about four centuries bringing changes in almost every aspect of daily life in Puerto Rico, yet its most horrible side effect is the extinction of the Arawak within less than one century after the arrival of the Spaniards. The Spanish reign came to an end after the end of the 1898 Spanish-American war after the defeat of the Spanish fleets in both the Philippines and Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico became a U.S. possession. The U.S. invasion brought along North American cultural aspects into the island and it allowed Puerto Ricans to live in the U.S. by granting them U.S. citizenship. This encouraged many Puerto Ricans to immigrate and live in the mainland especially in New York, the Bronx and el barrio where they formed small communities marked, like the Puerto Rican community, by its collectivity which is the contrary of the individualistic style of living of the mainland. Puerto Ricans influenced and were influenced by the cultural tradition of the mainland. They brought certain cultural aspects along with them and they adopted U.S. North American and Afro-American cultural aspects resulting in a hybrid cultural tradition best presented by the Nuyoricans and their living style. (pp. 17-30)

The word Nuyorican is the clipped form of New York Puerto Rican referring to the Puerto Ricans living in New York and the nearby areas. (Nuyorican, 2003, n.p). Miguel Algarin (1941 - ), the co-founder of the Nuyorican Poets café, explains that the Puerto Ricans islanders in Puerto Rico originally coined the term in order to distinguish themselves from those whom they consider inferior, because they think that Nuyoricans have already forgot their language, history, and culture. But in fact those Nuyoricans did not forget their past but they used it as a basis and developed it to fit their present. The Nuyoricans established their style in New York City and reflected it in their poetry and literature (Kanellos, 2008, pp. 820-821).

The Nuyorican literature soon reached the status of a movement reflecting the daily experience of those immigrants, their street life, crime experience, bilingualism and the nostalgia to their motherland, their ancestors and their land, Dorinne Kondo says that it is "a past golden age that never was, a nostalgia that elides exclusion, power relations, and difference." (Kondo, 1996, p. 97). It eventually became a mirror of the Puerto Rican multicultural life in New York City, as these poets were associated with other Latino, and Afro-American poets especially while serving their time at the county jails.

The themes, style, rhythms, language and subject matter Nuyorican poets deal with, reflect their process of cultural adaptation, soon this process was incorporated with the employment of traditional Puerto Rican figures, like el jibaro, a rustic traditional figure, in a new environment and new style of living in order to support the adaptation idea. The new themes and styles employed in Nuyorican poetry lead to a new tendency in the

ideology of Puerto Rican men of literature and the Puerto Rican individuals as well. This tendency is the consciousness felt in the Nuyorican later poetry. Consciousness lies in the distinction of the differences of the two cultures, the consciousness about identity and belonging, and the differences in life experience. Nuyorican poets employ lingual, rhythmic, and thematic expressions to express such consciousness. Victor Hernandez Cruz, as one of the early-still-alive Nuyorican poets, reflects many of the aspects reflecting the cultural adaptation in his poetry.

Cruz was born in Augas Buenos in Puerto Rico where he lived for five years. As a little child, Cruz was introduced to the Puerto Rican oral tradition and the Caribbean rhythms that are still being reflected in his poetry. Cruz became acquainted with the Puerto Rican tradition where there is nature, gatherings, oral recitations, straw hats, and hugs and kisses. (Peckham, 1999, P.1).

As a five-year old boy, Cruz immigrated to the mainland along with his parents where he first met English and the cement covered dull city where he lived for more than forty years. He describes English in his "Snaps of Immigration" from *Red Beans* as "nothing but sound" (Cruz, 1991, P.14) comparing it to "trumpets doing yakity yak" (P.14). He continues to say, "letters deceived the sound." (P.14)

In the mainland, Cruz was educated and graduated, meanwhile he published his first collection at the age of twenty with his *Snaps* (1969) which launched his poetic career leading his to worldwide recognition. Cruz moved to San Francisco and continued his poetic career then during the mid-nineties, he returned to his birthplace Augas Buenos where he carried on publishing collections of poetry and essays dealing with the themes and subjects dealt by the Nuyorican movement.

Cruz's poetic and essay collections include a chapbook entitled *Papa Got His Gun!* (1966), and his collections *Snaps* (1969), *Mainland* (1973), *Tropicalization* (1976), *By Lingual Wholes* (1982), *Rhythm, Content and Flavor* (1989), *Red Beans* (1991), *Panoramas* (1997), *Maraca: New and Selected Poems, 1965-2000* (2000) and most recently *The Mountain in the Sea* (2006) and *In the Shadow of Al-Andalus* (2011).

His poetic importance does not lie in the number of his collections rather than in his contribution to the poetic tradition. His contribution is noticed especially in the American tradition with his vision of literary transformation which is concerned with the close contact of English and Spanish in Hispanic communities in general and the Puerto Rican community in particular. Along with his bicultural rhythmic style and consciousness in poetic language and expression, he was able to achieve this importance. The poetry of this poet reflects the need for adoption in the new environment and his point of view regarding the idea of adaptation is of complementary sense by which he employs certain cultural aspects from his mother culture and other set from his hosting one to reflect in his poetry. The aspects Cruz employs are close to the individual within daily life. He employs music, language, ancestry, motherland, and identity to reflect the idea of adaptation.

Cruz is identified as a poet with Jazz, bilingual, and multicultural poetic tendencies reflecting hybridity through senses of indigenous Indian, Caribbean, Latino, North African, Arab Muslim, Spanish and North American traditions. This grants his literature a sense of action as if it is a journey through time and place especially when he incorporates cultures from different ages and places in one journey like in his poem "Camaron de la Isla" from his collection *Maraca: New and Selected Poems, 1965 - 2000* where the images link the past with the present, and the east with the west in an image of a journey. The poet transcends time and place limits in his imaginary realm to illusionary travel with his readers in both body and mind. The poem's opening lines read,

His voice in the waves of  
the Mediterranean Sea  
Whatever sailed:  
Phoenician barks,  
Greek and Indian gestures  
Moorish vapors out of his pores,  
Arabian carabelas  
into the deep river  
Brahmin chains glittering  
in cathedrals (Cruz,2001,P.288).

In order to understand how Cruz expresses his idea of adaptation, the discussion is arranged into two parts, first related to his sentiments and feelings towards Puerto Rico and his view of the U.S. mainland reflecting the idea of adaptation, followed by the resulting sense of consciousness he gained as a result of the adaptation process, and then a second part discussing his use of bilingualism.

The collection *Mainland* includes "The Man Who Came to the Last Floor" (1973). It is a poem encompassing both the nostalgic feeling, and the idea of consciousness in addition to a process of transformation. The main character transforms from a naïve rustic man into a witty urbanized one. The process results from the association of the character with U.S. culture. The poem is a reflection of the idea of a man who leaves Puerto Rico to arrive in New York as an isolated stranger and an observer of the scenes around him. It is a reflection of a man who arrives in New York with "a whole shopping bag / full of seeds strange to the big / city"(Cruz,1973,P.77). There he lives in an apartment at the top of a six-story walk-up overlooking the streets of New York. This man realizes the differences between Puerto Rico and New York resulting in his sense of alienation. That is why he tries to escape this alienation by creating his own small icelandic atmosphere within his apartment. The man creates a Caribbean atmosphere that will leave its effects in New York where "[t]he neighborhood [becomes] rich in legend."(78)

The man, whom Barry Wallenstein describes as a "mysterious magic maker," plants seeds of mango, a fruit defining the Caribbean nature of Puerto Rico, in the head of a policeman, one of the figures defining New York City. (Wallenstein,1974,P.316) The two actions, i.e. creating a small

Puerto Rico and the planting of seeds serve to indicate a process of cultural adaptation on the one hand, and an indication of the nostalgic feeling the man has to his motherland, and his attempts to mirror an image of the mother culture in his host-land, on the other. The full image of Puerto Rico can be supported by Wallenstein's word "magic" which can be related to the voodoo magic and rituals practiced in Latin America.

The New Yorker figure, now, is different from itself when first stepped in the city of New York. The figure was a benign spirit, and as a result of the direct contact with the multicultural community of New York, the man learned to observe and learn. The poem includes "staring,"(P.77) "look at,"(78) and "He saw."(P.78) It is a technique that transcends man to the state of consciousness. This change resulted in a conflict within the man, a conflict between his heart on the one hand, and his mind on the other. His heart tells him to return to his roots where the simple life is. His mind tells him to stay.

The conflict ends when the heart is overwhelmed by the nostalgia of Puerto Rico. This overwhelming nostalgia is shown in the poem once when the character defines the urban world he is currently living in by means of the rustic one he used to live in. He defines the building as a mountain "the last floor of the mountain"(P.77). Again, it is shown when the character tells his friends that "he is going back to Puerto Rico"(P.81) that is why he is in the "El Aire Porte"(P.82).

This could be described as an autobiographical poem when it is related to the life of the poet Cruz who arrived to New York as a benign spirit, he states his amusement of the scenery in the urban city on his first arrival to New York in his poem "Snaps of Immigration," from *Red Beans* (1991),

to the miracle of scenery  
At the supermarket  
My mother caressed the  
Parsley (P.13)

His character from "The Man Who Came to the Last Floor" also seems to be amazed to the atmosphere in the city

He came and it was morning  
and though many people thought the  
sun was out this man wondered:  
"Where is it" (P.77)

Then both gained consciousness, both observed and noticed the differences between the U.S. mainland and the Caribbean island. Cruz noticed the drug experience in the street life of New York and depicted it in his poems.(PP.312-313) So does his character, the man saw this experience while walking down the streets of New York "With their black hats with the red / bandana around them full of cocaine,"(P.79) and "The heroin in the young girls that / moved slowly toward their local / high school,"(P.79). Eventually both decided to return home. Later on, both returned to Puerto Rico. Taking settings in the same consideration, both Cruz and his character had already lived in Puerto Rico in their early childhood or youth, before

coming to New York, and both of them returned home when they were grownups. This consciousness could be what Nicolas Kanellos (1945 - ) comments about saying that it “represents the culmination of the poet's search for the origin.” (Kanellos,2008,P.6). Eventually both adapted from both worlds and both cultures.

Cruz reflects the idea of adaptation within the poem itself universally. Looking at certain characters and events in a universal look could indicate this process. The two characters taking the largest parts of the poem are the Puerto Rican immigrant and the New Yorker African policeman. The immigrant could refer to all Puerto Rican immigrants who left the island to live in New York pursuing the American Dream. On the other hand, the African policeman figure with his curly hair could refer to the diverse community of New York especially when knowing that the whole famous NYPD (New York Police Department) officers swear to “support the U.S. constitution” which in turn includes the fourteenth and fifteenth articles about equality and diversity. (Cuomo and Perales,2015,P.38)

The whole idea of adaptation is supported by the character's defining of U.S. urban elements like the building with Puerto Rican rural elements such as the “mountain”(P.77). Moreover, the poet tends to implant the Caribbean elements within the U.S. culture in two ways. Firstly when the character tends to redecorate his new environment with Caribbean touches and flavors. The poet suggests that:

All kinds of visitors started to come  
to apartamento number 32  
Wild looking ladies showed up  
with large earrings and bracelets (P.78).

“Visitors,” might recall the collectivistic nature of Latin culture which is missing in the culture of New York that tends to be individualistic. The idea can be supported by the words “large earrings and bracelets”(P.78) which is also a familiar image in a Latin community. The second way, the poet uses, is to implant the “mango seed”(P.80) in the policeman's “scalp”(P.80). Another suggestion of the adaptation process is apparent in the words of the immigrant when he says “he didn't remember / ever leaving(P.81). Whereas the fourth suggestion lies in the use of bilingualism within the poem.

Bilingualism is apparent in this poem when Cruz includes Spanish phrases in the body of his poem. The second stanza of the poem includes the question “'Y el sol donde esta' he asked.”(P.77) The question is a wondering about the sun of New York, though New Yorkers believe it is there, the man asks where is the sun as he considers it is not rising because he is used to the shining tropical sun of the island. Here bilingualism suggests the bicultural elements of New York and the Island. It is a matter of suggesting an idea of dual cultures through the employment of lingual aspects.

Later in the poem, Cruz includes the Spanish word "apartamento" in the lines

apartamento number 32

.....

of apartamento number 32

.....

to apartamento number 32 (P.78).

in a bicultural framing suggesting adaptation and cultural mingling with an apartment in New York filling the atmosphere with Caribbean flavors. The inserting of the Spanish word "apartamento"(P.78) could suggest the roots of the dweller and indicate a process of cultural double-sided influence with the existence of a small Caribbean world, i.e. the apartment, in a larger North American that is New York, on the one hand, and the interring of variety of people into the “apartment”(P.78) suggesting the influence of the dominating culture on the Caribbean one, and vice-versa regarding the apartamento's effect on the atmosphere. The cultural adaptation is suggested by the word "apartment" which creates a world of possibilities when regarding the people as cultural elements and both of New York and the apartamento as two different worlds.

The appearance of the phrase "he said 'para que aproveche el fresco'"(P.78) is a suggestion of the inserting of new cultural elements, i.e. Caribbean when regarded by means of fresh mango seeds, into the dominating culture. The new cultural elements soon will flourish in the new environment as will occur in the poem. The word "fresco"(78) establishes this meaning with its English meaning "fresh."

Eventually, the poet uses the phrase ““El Aire Porte””(P.82) rather than using its English equivalent, followed by the image of the man reading an article about mangoes in English to show both the effect of New York with his learning of English, and his deep Puerto Rican rootedness with his urge to go home. The poem opens all possibilities with this dual and bilingual image.

### **Conclusion**

Victor Hernandez Cruz is a poet who came to New York and developed a unique consciousness allowing him to transcend the difficulties of both worlds and both cultures he lives in. The poet chose and is choosing the cultural traits fitting him best to live in his own adjusted world, a world similar to that he put his characters in as if he is repeating what Thomas Hardy (1840 – 1928) did with Wessex. Sometimes, major similarities tie Cruz to his Characters whether these similarities are character traits, events, or even settings. This might suggest the consciousness the poet gained and the styles and techniques he got acquainted with while living in the mainland.

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التكيف الحضاري: دراسة في قصائد مختارة لفكتور هيرنانديز كروز

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الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تعقب تأثير العالمين، بورتو ريكو والولايات المتحدة الامريكية، في شعر الشاعر الامريكي-اللاتيني فكتور هيرنانديز كروز (١٩٤٩). تبدأ الدراسة بخلفية ثقافية عن الثقافة البوروتريكية الاصلية والجلء البورتريكي الى مدينة نيويورك. تناقش الدراسة، فيما بعد، احدى قصائد كروز مع التركيز على افكار التغرب والحنين والوعي الفكري وازدواجية اللغة متعقباً بذلك تكيفه الحضاري في اثناء هذه العملية. تُختم الدراسة بحقيقة فيما اذا كان الشاعر قد تكيف ثقافياً مع التيار الادبي الامريكي السائد ام لا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تكيف، ثقافي، ثنائي اللغة، شتات، كروز.