En español: A Mother's Obsession and Self Discovery

By Gisela Norat

I confess. *Mi culpa. Mi culpa. Mi máxima culpa.* Spanish has turned into an obsession. The desire to have a Spanish-speaking daughter has consumed many of my days on earth. I have threatened that should I die before her attainment of Spanish proficiency, I will come back as the Cuban Llorona. Immune to my wailing about my misfortune, my teenage daughter shrugs and declares, "Get over it mom." Surely, my obsession could be worse. Compared to eating detergent or filling the house with mannequins as people fess up to doing on the TV show *My Crazy Obsession,* my insisting on Spanish at home is down right normal. "There is no such thing as normal," my husband chimes in.

As I read *What to Expect When Your Expecting*, the obligatory prenatal book of my generation, I assumed that any child of a Cuban mother naturally would grow up speaking Spanish. Fast forward fifteen years, my daughter's lack of interest and fluency in my native language has turned into a joke in the family and an existential angst for me. Why can't I let go of this desire for my daughter to share my mother tongue, the link to my mother's people, to my place of birth? To reflect on my obsession requires unraveling a fistful of childhood memories and reweaving recollections of life in the adopted land where, for now, English offers the surest bridge between an obsessed mother and a reluctant daughter.

I grew up on a tropical island with an abundance of fruit, on trees, bushes, in backyards, front yards, fields, and everywhere on the farm I used to visit as a child. *Caimito, zapote, chirimoya, mamoncillo, frutabomba, anón, mamey*—slimy fruit in short, chubby fingers, sweet juices dripping down the corner of my puckered mouth trying to keep in too big a bite for a child of five. The cornucopia of fruits of my early childhood, their texture and flavor sealed on my

palate with homemade compote suddenly became exotic or unknown in Spain, the first land of exile, and later in the United States where we finally settled. I'm lucky to find *frutabomba* under a sign scribbled "papaya" now at our neighborhood farmer's market. Once, at the sight of *mamoncillos* in a street market on the island of Jamaica I felt a tug of excitement as if spotting an old heart throb in a crowd. The lack of English translation, the very need for translation of such familiar childhood staples, points to the essence of exile as a displacement from the native language as much as from the motherland.

The portability of language makes it all that more difficult to give up. When all possessions are left behind, language is the only legacy, the only connection with a past life. In Cuban popular usage, fruit can circumvent impolite words. In context, *mamoncillos* could mean small breasts and *melones* big boobs. A *limón*, lemon, means a sourpuss, a grouch. A two-faced person is like the leaf of the *caimito*, "como la hoja del caimito," green on top and purple underneath. *Pasas,* raisins, can refer to kinky hair. And when it comes to vegetables, *ñame,* or stupid, you don't want to be called. To stand someone up is *darle calabaza*, to give them pumpkin. In a patriarchal society where masculine conduct is often revered, a show of fierceness can be captured by one kind of hot pepper, *bravo como el ají guaguao,* whose name may derive from the Spanish onomatopoeia of a dog's bark. In popular Cuban language one can express the equivalent of "BS" with a fruit phrase tinged with humor, *Piña, mamey y zapote*. Growing up in La Habana that phrase rolled off the tongue, chanted back while swaying head, shoulders and hips with as big a smirk as one could muster. Spouting "bull" just doesn't leave the same taste in your mouth.

We're all born into language. We learn a particular one from our primary care-taker, whoever she or he happens to be, not necessarily biologically related, though most often this is

the case. Over time that language of instruction, songs, caresses and reprimands creeps into our memory where it is stored, internalized and eventually reproduced by us to in turn communicate with others. From that repository of words we articulate instinctively our needs, desires, and thoughts. We can identify a mother tongue when we feel a visceral connection to it—the stirring you feel when hearing the national anthem— the deep-in-your-gut language that we use to express, even in thought and without words, the kaleidoscope of our humanity.

Speaking Spanish to my infant daughter was innate, not like the array of other caretaking tasks that, far from instinctive, I had to learn. With her birth I discovered the strangeness of mothering in English, the impossibility of baby-talk in a second language. I had navigated my way in the United States successfully from first grade to a Ph.D. and yet lacked cuddle words in English for my baby. The vocabulary of nurturing gushed out only in Spanish as if giving birth had cracked the floodgate of a reservoir until then dammed. Her cooing tapped the natural flow of my native language and later I delighted in teaching my toddler to name the world differently, *en español*. Why did I assume that our early bond in Spanish would carry us through life, as mine with my mother and hers with her mother, and as far back the family line as oral history can summon? By age three, the growing precariousness of our Spanish language alliance worried me as English engulfed my child, drew her in, wanting to claim her for the Anglo community.

At age four I noticed a slight southern twang. My little girl sounded foreign, as if a miniature version of her pre-school teacher rode home with us to play with her toys, sit at our supper table, and call me "mama." Till then she had always called me *mami*, how Cuban kids say mommy. Video recordings taken of her are the only proof I have that Spanish was the language of her initiation into the spoken word. But once in pre-school Mrs. Joy, her caregiver, would come and go in her voice, catching us by surprise. Why was I baffled? She is a certified

Georgian, after all. A birth certificate and a note from a former U.S. president record her Anglo legitimacy: "Welcome to a wonderful family, a fine state and a great nation." Signed: Sincerely, Jimmy Carter. Whenever I teased her: "You're a Georgia peach, and I'm a Cuban mango," between giggles she insisted, "no, no, I a Cuban mango."

Mangos, popular now, from Mexico and Costa Rica go on sale in the summer as often as bananas. But, my daughter had turned five and still refused to try the orangey, pulpy meat. Again and again she rejected a taste of my childhood with every slice I offered. Somewhere I read that a new food should be introduced to a child at least ten times. That didn't work. "Pronounced *mango*, I remember insisting, "not, *man go*." Even her Anglo daddy chuckled at the gringo accent. "*Queso*, not Kay so," he too would correct her attempts at Spanish while I held my breath with every distorted Spanish syllable.

"Dear Lord," I besieged in prayer then, "how can a child half Cuban not speak the language she is mothered in? Is this genetically possible?" Maybe she was switched at birth at the hospital. My mother, *abuela Lala*, reassured me that she had followed the nurse out of the birthing room and watched through the glass while our baby was scrubbed down and dolled up. "No *m'hija*, that's your daughter. Don't worry, she'll speak Spanish. You didn't eat vegetables as a child and now you're practically a vegetarian." Well, mothers can be so wrong because many years later and after several serious monetary investments in two summer camp experiences in Spain, *chi chin, chi chin*, and a five-week total Spanish immersion camp at an elite U.S. college, *CHI CHIN*, my daughter is placed in high school Spanish for beginners. *Imagínense*. What is that, bad karma for being a pushy mother in a previous life? As a Spanish Professor I felt licensed to have a breakdown, but it was out of the question. Can't call for a "substitute" when you teach college.

Trying to recall those early years when I was full of hope for a Spanish-speaking daughter, my "teaching" jumps to child's play in the *portal* at our house on Miraflores Street in Los Pinos, Cuba. Wearing *mami*'s navy blue high school uniform I'd point to a chalkboard and impart some lesson to my playmates. Were those neighborhood children or my dolls that sat attentively? My husband shakes his head in disbelief when I mention how much I've always enjoyed school and how snow days upset me as a child growing up in New Jersey. He quotes Ivan Illich and his theories on deschooling society. Maybe I shouldn't have bought the irresistibly cute chalkboard for my daughter. It started in Kindergarten and continued in first grade, her coming home from school to set up a classroom in our kitchen. She pulled me away from cooking because only a live student would do. After a day of teaching at the college, I'd sit in a tiny chair and table, spelling, completing worksheets she'd concocted and raising my hand to be excused. My rice will stick, I argued when she refused me permission to leave my seat. "Two minutes," she'd concede with a stern tone.

A few years earlier I had devoured parenting books when I thought my little girl showed signs of a debilitating bashfulness. In pre-school, screechy extroverts turned her invisible. I worried needlessly about her delayed speech. Eventually, I figured out that her brain had been working double duty since birth, processing both Spanish and English at once and making her appear as if you spoke neither. Was it fair, or selfish on my part, to impose Spanish on her when the dominant language is English? Despite my sincere reflections, I could not let go of the wish for a bilingual daughter.

In first grade, I started her on formal Spanish lessons—just ten minutes every day before leaving for school. "Spanish is very easy," I'd repeat enthusiastically. "The vowel sounds—a, e, i, o, u—never, ever change, *nunca*! It's not like English with short and long vowels." She

delighted in the childhood jingle I recited: A, E, I, O, U, el burro sabe más que tú (A, E, I, O U, a donkey know more than you). Maybe it sounds a bit insensitive, but what the heck, this was a matter of language legacy. After the vowels drill, we progressed to reading single words, then short silly sentences that I made up to egg her on. On a roll, I wrote mini stories with rhyme to encourage her reading in Spanish. That's when the Kindergartner made her resistance clear. But this *mami* would not ease up. Under duress my daughter of five wrote out the words I dictated. Then I enlisted the *abuelitos* who brought a beginning reader from Spain. When I talked of school in a Spanish-speaking country some day her body language screamed opposition. I repeated endlessly that "e" in Spanish is not, not, not pronounced like "e" in English. She would tell me I was mean. But I did not relent in fighting for my mother tongue.

Guilt did come over me at times. Would my push for Spanish acquisition backfire? Oh, how my daughter squirmed during the mandatory reading sessions. "*Sólo diez minutos*. Just ten minutes," I tried ridding my voice of pleading. We often locked horns and negotiated like savvy merchants.

-*Sólo esta página, mi amor.*

-No, mommy, only two more sentences.

- *Mira, si lees esta página puedes ver Arthur*." (Dangling a favorite TV program as carrot sometimes worked).

Or the punitive—"No Spanish, no dessert tonight." "Work before pleasure." Every milestone had its battles. Dictation was rough:

-How many more words?

-Eight.

-Eight? No, five.

- No, eight or I'll make it ten.

We pushed, shoved, and stretched each other's stubbornness. On weekdays those quick lessons before the commute to work and school left us drained, moods sour, our bond frayed a tat more. When I felt like the wicked witch of the West I toyed with the idea of giving up, letting her be an American girl. Why torment her with my obsession?

Honestly, speaking only English to my daughter has crossed my mind, but choosing one language over the other would be like a mother privileging one of her two kids. When I do speak to her in English, it feels unnatural, mothering gone awry. There's a haunting scene in the 1982 holocaust movie *Sophie's Choice* where a Nazi officer makes Meryl Streep choose between handing over her young son or daughter. He permits her to keep only one child. Existential pain will tear her up no matter whom she chooses.

Most mothers will agree that news of a pregnancy stirs public jubilation and private fears of death, the child's or her own. Such anxiety may ameliorate after delivery, but never disappears completely. After my daughter was born, I wondered what she would remember if I passed on while she was still a child. What if our bond is severed today? Will the aloof teenager resent her Cuban mother for pushing Spanish so fiercely? Our local paper featured the story of twenty orphans who were flown out of Vietnam during Operation Babylift, almost forty thirty years ago, and are returning to mark the anniversary. They are lucky, being able to return. But once there, will they find their village and family members? Was their personal information accurately documented during a war and the emergency evacuation? Will they find people who knew their parents? Surely, they will want to know about their ancestors. Will their thirst to know and to connect be satiated? Maybe my daughter one day will want to know about her Cuban side of the family. Who will tell her the stories of my early years on the island and the new life forged in the

United States? For several years I woke early to journal a life story. I scoured my memories to fashion for my daughter a written legacy as roadmap back to my first home and the places and neighborhoods where I thrived surrounded by the Spanish language and culture of my people. Once satisfied, I stash the manuscript for posterity. I will not push its reading on my daughter. Surprisingly, the introspection from writing proved transformative for me.

During my forty five years in exile, with travel to Cuba prohibited by U.S. law, my native language has nurtured and sustained a Cuban identity displaced when my parents chose freedom from political, economic and religious oppression. I share a history with countless other similar diasporas from Vietnam, North Korea, China, Germany, Poland, and the former Soviet Union. The pulse of the adopted country, land of immigrants, throbs with generations of refugee parents obsessing over the loss of a heritage language. For me, Spanish feels as essential as air, water, food and sleep. A mental inventory of my closest friends made me realize that they were all Spanish speakers. Remarkable. In order not to feel weird or prejudiced, I rummaged through my crumbling address book, labels torn from envelopes and cards announcing relocations haphazardly crammed into its pages. It was while writing for my daughter that I became conscious of the importance of this self discovery. Spanish was the password for entry into my inner circle, the necessary language for true connection with others. Unconsciously, I had been circling my wagons around Spanish. In my world "monolingual" meant "outsider." Fearing an irrevocable mother/daughter divide, I understood then the absolute need to modify my requirement for intimacy and welcome other bonds not based solely on Spanish language proficiency.

At the heels of deciphering the angst I felt about my daughter's reluctance towards Spanish, came another profound insight. I had lived my adult life feeling foreign. The first

memory of difference stems back to age seven at St. Michael's Catholic School. A few weeks after our arrival as refugees in New York City, *mami* walked my sister and me to our first American school. We did not know what to expect when we followed her through the double black metal door of St. Michael's Catholic School to a classroom where a young nun ushered us to our desks. Clad in a black ankle-length habit the sister, our *monjita*, seemed to glide from desk to desk, hovering over each child's work. Like an angel she uttered a few words of Spanish over me. Relieved, I looked up at her face encircled in the white wimple, barely smiling as the *Santa Teresa of mami*'s devotion. She happened to be Puerto Rican and God-sent. Unfortunately, she was not at the remedial after school program when a few weeks later a boy snatched my workbook. I understood the teenage volunteer insinuating my irresponsibility with a sugary tone. I wanted to respond, "No, darn, I had not forgotten my workbook at home, and I had not lost it." While inside I was screaming "*me quitaron el cuaderno,*" all I could say was "no, no, a boy." The tutor dismissed me with a smile.

My first English words came from a reader. "Look at Spot run. Run, Spot, run. Dick runs after Spot. Run, Dick, run. Look Jane. See Dick run." From all the admonitions *mami* had passed on since our arrival "look" and "run" were good words for refugee kids to know in Manhattan. Except for the *americanitos* not crossing their number sevens, math answers looked the same in the new country. But the rest of our world forever split in two. At St. Michael's *los compañeros* turned into classmates, *pupitres* into desks, *libros* into books, *pizarra* into blackboard, *tiza* into chalk, *merienda* into snack, and *tarea* into homework. We spoke Spanish at home, and until we learned some English, we were mostly mute at school. Language multiplied, yet some American cultural staples had no easy translation. *Mami* shrugged at our description of the lunchroom egg salad and peanut butter sandwiches that turned our stomachs. Beyond our unacculturated palate,

the split also touched treasured aspects of childhood. We had landed at Kennedy Airport on a cold November day and weeks later an unexpected Santa left us girls a few gifts at our apartment. But in January the much anticipated *Reyes Magos*, Three Wise Men, that clandestinely had visited even communist Cuba forgot to pay us a visit in the land of the free. Eventually, the split began to heal, slowly the gap closed. I did become bilingual and bicultural, but something like an omelet where in certain areas the yolk and white would always remain visibly separate.

After a few years in Manhattan our family moved across the Hudson River to Union City, a small New Jersey town north of Hoboken, the birth place of Frank Sinatra and Buddy Valastro of Cake Boss. Since St. Augustine Catholic School did not have openings in the third grade class at the time of our relocation, we were to apply the following year. That's how my sister and I ended up across the street at Washington Elementary Public School. By the time registration for the new school year rolled around, we girls didn't want to switch schools. We pleaded that we had made new friends and liked our teachers. Our parents relented. Why did *mami* and *papi* let us forfeit a Catholic education so easily? Was it complacency, an attempt to give us some stability or the savings on tuition? With English no longer a hurdle, we both delivered on the exemplary good behavior and excellent report cards expected at home. Little did I suspect that public school would become a thorn in my memory.

On the last official day of sixth grade at Washington School, our principal called an assembly. Microphone in hand, the distinguished grey-haired Mr. Gregory reminded the sixth graders that from then on we were Jefferson Middle School students. "When the bell rings, at three o'clock, leave the premises and don't come back to visit. I don't want to see any of you around Washington School again." The blanket dismissal swoops down over the auditorium, and

summarily rubs out all of my hard-earned grades inked on the many assignments, tests, projects and report cards. We were all banished and branded misfits that memorable afternoon. Ironically, the assembly ended with everyone reciting: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, for liberty and justice for all." Justice for all?

Growing up happy in that sleepy Union City we called home, I was unaware of the many long-time residents, mostly of German and Italian descent, marching out of town as more people like us settled in. A trickle of Cuban immigrants was gaining the strength of a tsunami. Enterprising store owners tried to tap the consumer needs of the newcomers by displaying *"Se habla español"* signs in their windows. Within a decade the wave of refugees revitalized the town beyond recognition. At Washington School, our principal may have felt trapped in his job. Probably fed up with the invasion of immigrant children, some, no doubt, as troublesome as the *americanitos* that already complicated his life, that one afternoon Mr. Gregory dumped all his frustrations on a bunch of sixth graders. Today with the explosion of Hispanic populations in many states across this country, I wonder what blanket statements will smother minority children's pride in their accomplishments and heritage because teachers are overwhelmed and school resources stretched. Regardless of individual merit, all too often bilingual and bicultural people, even those born in the United States, are perceived as foreign. Perhaps here lies the crux of my daughter's reluctance to become bilingual.

It has taken years of mothering, obsessing, and reflection for me to understand that I had managed admirably in the adopted land, but only on the surface, something like snorkeling. Diving in did not feel safe. With an American-born daughter, I do not want to continue skimming the surface of Anglo society, coasting on the margins. I recognize yet another

balancing act, not the daily tug of war between home and profession, but between nurturing my ethnic identity and letting my daughter attain her American authenticity.

Only after playing by the rules of academe and publishing the expected scholarly book do I realize that the theme of marginality I spent years researching was all about me. Obvious was the book's connection between dictatorship in Latin America and my family's experience in Cuba, but what did the poor, the insane, the disappeared, the incarcerated and the homeless that I analyzed in that text have to do with me? Ah . . . the homeless –there's the key. I understand now that the passion I feel for the Cuba and the people of my early childhood shaped me and my relationship to every place I lived in and every person with whom I have associated. For Cubans of my generation, the triumph of Fidel Castro's Revolution was the equivalent of the 9/11 catastrophe that shattered Americans' national peace and ushered in the age of fear. After which, life events would be split into pre- and post-tragedy.

For my daughter, or because of her, I must find a sense of true belonging in her country of birth. Now that the United States has experienced terror on its soil, its citizens understand the ruthlessness of ideologies practiced abroad. Ironically, it took an unfathomable catastrophe to make me realize the depth of my acculturation. I felt as much an American when grieving for the victims of September 11, 2001 and their families as I felt Cuban when watching the Elian González case unfold in Miami in 2000. Elian's mother wanted freedom for him so badly that she risked a clandestine sea crossing from Cuba to the U.S.A. that took her life and left the six year-old boy clinging to a piece of raft. My sympathies lie at the hyphen of my biculturalism. Just as Elian's mother escaped Cuba for her child's sake, I want to feel at home in the United States because birthing my daughter literally has anchored me forever to this land. Only through memory and writing could I revive the Cuba that formed me into the *cubanita* at the heart of who

I am, an exile who grew up to unwittingly form part of the multi-lingual, cultural, political, religious, ethnic society that defines the uniqueness of the United States within the Americas. Only by resuscitating a past deeply rooted *en español*, did I discover the Cuban-American that I've become— bicultural and quirky, a misfit on the mend.