

Found in Translation

By Ana Lilia Soto

I've been a translator all my life. From the time I realized that I held an intimate connection to two languages, two cultures, and an understanding of time coupled with an old soul, I've been building a bridge of communication. I remember a time when my world was split into two tangled pieces of self and all I wanted was to fit the pieces of my existence into one. My Mother, being an immigrant from Mexico, came to this country for a slice of warm and flaky American apple pie. She wanted access to a dream that was supposed to be filled with countless opportunities made possible without having to sacrifice her life, culture or language. When she started having children, her goal became for her children to have access to education as she never had experienced the opportunity of learning, reading books and writing her own story. She learned to read by listening to old Mexican ballads, utilizing lyric sheets and following the rhythm and tone on the radio. She still boasts that she learned 150 songs by memory. In her earnest attempt at communicating with the outside world, she would enlist my support, whether I was ready or not, in order to translate this dream that was filled with impatience and judgment.

As a young child my daily tasks included filling out emergency cards for school in hesitant script and large printed letters as if I were writing in wide rule notebooks. I soon became my brothers' keeper, as I allowed them to attend field trips, signed parent notes and met with their teachers when my Mother's presence was requested. I translated doctor's visits behind lime green curtains, and was introduced into the world of feminine health and pap smears before any girl should be privy to such knowledge. I had become the family oral historian, intimately knowing family connections, important dates, social security numbers, past lives, present experiences which have all been captured and catalogued and ready to recite with a moment's notice.

As I grew older and became an adolescent, translation became different; it grew from merely translating everything verbatim and transformed into communicating between intergenerational worlds utilizing cultural nuances that illustrate the complexity of being bicultural and being born into two very distinct worlds. I was now a cultural ambassador, able to illustrate cultural intricacies, generational differences and immigrant perspective to my Mother and to my Brothers. For my Mother, I would learn to explain the reasons why hip hop spoke to us, why we mixed English and Spanish with ease, why it was important to wear your pants in a certain way, why we yelled instead of spoke trying to be heard through the chaos of urban systems of self-oppression. With translation, I was able to offer my Mother a glimpse of the very private worlds of adolescence where parents are bystanders to growth and are no longer the most important voice that their children hear. She was permitted into this world of adolescent experience, where most parents saw teenage angst; she was able to see the internalized battle for self in school institutions bent on encasing us in stereotypical chains and handcuffs, of peers and static definitions of self, and for ourselves trying to decide who we were to be. To my Brothers, I was able to translate my Mother and her values, her morals and the importance of *familia*, *cultura*, and respect. For them, I was able to make tangible the importance of acknowledgement

and support their need for connection while redefining her old worldviews and making them relevant to their mainstream sense of self.

I had learned the power of language, a power of comprehension and understanding, of being able to build a bridge of communication between soul and experience and its integral connection to the complex understanding of culture. Through the use of language I was able to interpret myself to my Mother, and she was able to learn the way I communicated. “Ama, your son is hella shady,” I would announce exasperated at my brother’s sense of entitlement. “Y qué es eso de shady,” her accent thick and the words foreign on her tongue as she repeated back slowly, savoring each syllable, each phonetic breath.

She wanted to connect, not simply to understand my slang but had an earnest attempt to get to know me; my worries, my dreams and the expectations that I had for my life. These conversations grew to become moments where learning became a dual practice of vulnerability. My Mother had now learned a third language; she had learned slang and when she utilized my kind of speech, she was letting me know she was open to me, my thoughts and the person I was growing to become. With the utilization of slang she was allowing me to simply be. I was impressed with her wanting to know. She could have been like my father, who would always remind us of lingual law that existed in our home. As soon as we crossed that door, we left part of ourselves outside hidden from view. Ironically, that is what mainstream America also wanted, only the part that it could understand, a shade lighter than my accent tinged English. We were only allowed to speak to him in Spanish and if this was ever crossed, we could be punished with corporal law for speaking another people’s language in our home.

“Ama, shady es una persona you cannot trust, una persona que no uno no le puede dar confianza because they are a person who has no palabra.” I would respond in my bicultural Spanglish I had developed as a child, using and mixing both English and Spanish. In college, I would learn that the term for utilizing both English and Spanish while speaking was called code switching, it defined how I saw the word, in both languages. “Oh, okay mija, ya lo entiendo” was her simple reply as I would walk away doubting whether she heard me or even understood.

Another moment had us in the kitchen listening to the pattern the rain left on the roof, and in this intimate setting provided by a warm glow of the kitchen I shared with her my newest worry, an argument with my brother who was hella tripping over nothing. She stopped me mid sentence and asked, “Ay mija, y qué es eso de hella tripping?” “Ay Ama,” I responded, annoyed that she stopped my story as I was getting to the good part. I quickly provided the definition, as I wanted to get back to sharing my frustration regarding my brother. “Hella tripping, es cuando una persona is making un gran mitote de nada, es cuando someone is trying to create drama from something that can easily be solved.” “Ay mija,” she would say, laughing at our use of language and the way we had learned to manipulate it for the most minuscule of emotions.

Life continued easily, movements of transition and growth passed, here and there my Mother asked about different terms I had shared with her, “bomb, bling bling, Tu Pac and Biggie and why were they always fighting, hella, all good, tight, sick, dope, fresh.” One day I was in high school and the next, I was making bi-monthly trips home on the weekends while I attended UC Davis. On one of my visits home, I saw my older brother, outside burning a trail on the front yard as he furiously smoked a cigarette and anxiously kept glancing at the front door. As I

approached him with two weeks' worth of laundry in my forest green laundry bag bursting at the seams, I asked, "What's the matter with you?" He shared with me a fight that had just occurred with his girlfriend, and ended it with, "and now she's talking with Ama." I laughed immediately and expressed with a younger sister's exasperation, "Stop tripping, what's Ama gonna tell her, to dump your butt in Spanish, it's all good," as I proceeded to walk inside slowly. By the time I was in college, my Mother had learned English. It was broken, with the cutest accent anyone's ever heard, adding e's before s's, elongating vowels that did not need the enunciation and for a while she would always add, "and you know, the peoples" when she wanted to say "them." She sometimes still has trouble finding the right words to say at the precise moment. When I was younger I would hurry things along by asking her vehemently to just tell me what she needed to say in Spanish. As I grew older I learned to give her time, as she had done for me, and I would savor these moments and would sit there transfixed listening to her and hearing the inflections in her speech as she shared what she needed to say. In that afternoon, as I walked inside with my laundry trying to make my way slowly burdened with a heavy load as well as not wanting to interrupt, or even better, not wanting to have to translate my Mother's therapy to my brother's American girl friend. I saw my Mother out of the corner of my eye. It was beautiful.

"Ay Marie," she sighed, as Marie whimpered softly while sitting at the kitchen table, getting ready for a family dinner and trying to contain her tears and frustration. As my Mother made her famous Mexican rice, she walked over, laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and said, "You don't worry, Daniel is hella shady, he just tripping, it's going to be all good." It was beautiful. She heard me, she not only learned the words, but she knew what they meant, she understood when to use them and she used them correctly. Even now, I can hear her provide insight into my Brother, I don't remember the *consejos*, but I remember how she started her advice. To me, it proved that my Mother heard every single word I taught her, and not only did she hear them; she made them her own in an attempt to communicate with my brothers and me. I had originally introduced my Mother to slang in order to have her be hip and so that she would know what I meant when I would tell her something was "tight," or "dope" but she had decided to utilize this medium to connect to us. Translation had succeeded again; it had illuminated the connection and illustrated the power of communication, it had made both of us cultural ambassadors to each other and it had succeed in connecting a Mexican immigrant mother to her US born Chicana daughter.