

Big House in La Sagüesera

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Recently I spoke to a group of graduate students in Miami, many of them like me, Americans born of Cubans, and the conversation turned to language—or rather the beautiful, sometimes mad *ajíaco* we’ve made of it. The students were too young to appreciate my generation’s innovations. And I was a little sad to learn that no one said anymore, when they didn’t want to be stood up, “Don’t embarcate me.”

But one young woman told a story, in an inimitable dead-pan style that had all of us laughing for a long time. She didn’t speak Spanish well, but she had absorbed Miami’s creole vocabulary. She was, she recounted, in her first year of undergraduate school somewhere up north, for the first time exclusively among “Americans.”

She’d been lounging in her dorm, wasting time, when she received an invitation to attend a party, which she accepted. When she arrived, the others asked what she’d been doing.

“Nothing much,” she replied. “Just sitting in my room, eating shit.”

The gathering, she remembered, went suddenly, deathly quiet. People didn’t know where to look. Finally someone whispered, “You were doing what?”

That’s when this young woman realized that when trying to convey a sense of stupid inattention no one else in America says “eating shit”. Only in Miami.

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I talk and write about language now, what it can and cannot do. The pleasure of knowing more than one. The way it speaks to our deepest selves. But I had somehow missed that crucial moment when *comiendo mierda* leapt the linguistic divide.

But the story also made me reflect on how we Cuban-American writers use Spanish. It struck me that in most of our published works, and here I'll include my own, Spanish is there to give a sense of the ghostly language lurking behind our English constructions. We Cuban-Americans are always writing about some *loco* or some *viejo sinvergüenza*. Our characters offer *ofrendas*, talk about *La Zafra*, eat *picadillo* and say *coño* and *carajo*. A lot.

There is a reflective quality to our writing —a kind of selfie self-awareness. We are using Spanish with the understanding that someone not Cuban is listening. To read Cuban-American Spanish the way Cubans in the United States speak it, you need to turn to Roberto Fernandez with his Shrimp at the Little Garlic and Saw at the Oven and Chern at the Iron —a surrealist menu to anyone not Cuban. Because with Roberto, we're getting into language as code now, as insider humor written by a tribal elder for the exclusive delight of other members of the group.

When I'm with other Cuban-Americans we use language in this way, as initiates, to signal that we grew up together at a particular time in a particular place. And the stories we tell each other in this strange language —“Miami English” to use the term of FIU linguist Phillip Carter— are unlike the stories we tell others.

They are more intimate, more private, less exhibitionist perhaps. So what follows is a thought experiment in this vein. An essay about a particular linguistic time in Miami that mattered to no one else but ourselves.

I'm going to take you back more than 30 years, to a time when our language —which went beyond the words we spoke— was being forged in the collision of the two worlds we had inherited. I'm going to take you back to 1983, because it's only in retrospect that you see your childhood in context and realize how singular it really was.

I was 13, part of the first generation born in the United States following Castro's revolution, hatched into a land of waiting. We were Cubans who were temporarily —we thought— forced to live inside another culture, part and not part of America, that odd land that we both admired and reviled. A country of loose women and feral children and freedom and Ronald *Reeeegan*. Years before, our parents had packed their middle-class, midcentury values in Havana. And though these threads emerged wrinkled and irreparably damaged in exile, our parents insisted on dressing us in them.

1983. These were *viparu* scented days of *lechones* and *encuentros en los parques*, of *pulóbers* and *beisbol* and *te llamo pa' tra* and *sorry con excuse me*. Of going to *el ten-cen* and drinking *siete u.p.* and figuring out if you had to light candles to this new *San Gibin*. Of boys who sweated Drakkar Noir and wore gold chains and drove their Camaros too fast, but not so fast as to spoil their new rims. Of going to parties that always ended with couples tightly swaying to “Europa”. Parties, we pause now to note, that a respectful girl could only attend in the company of her *chaperona*.

Chaperonas—the original mothers of invention. Without them, would we have perfected the skills of slipping out of bedroom windows in the middle of the night? Would we have come up with the exquisite past time of making out next to the Volvo in the garage after everyone else had gone to sleep? Without *chaperonas* how would we have learned that lust is 1 part hormones and 3 parts illicit thrill? Without these stern *tías*, would we have even noticed the roomful of bliss that lay just beyond their glare?

My eldest cousin, we'll call her Sarah to protect the innocence of the past, was 16. My other cousin, who had just arrived from Cuba was 15. Let's call her Marisol. She was profane, exotic, fearless. Everything that I, at 13, was not. Sarah had one of those Drakkar boyfriends with a Camaro, and every Friday and Saturday night they went on dates.

For some mysterious reason, unknown to us children at the time, our family had abruptly abandoned the idea of adult chaperones. Instead, beginning that summer, Marisol and I were deputized to serve as Sarah's chaperones.

So there we were alone after dark: a homely 13-year-old in plaid and denim and a vivacious non-English-speaking 15-year-old *émigré* in charge of two horny 16 year olds. We ended up at Bird Road Park, where Sarah promptly told us to get lost. She handed over the car keys to Marisol and vanished into the moody tropical pineland with her boyfriend.

Back then, the streets around the park were nearly deserted at night and very dark. Marisol, who had no training as a driver, much less a license, took me on the wildest, most heart stopping adventure of my life thus far. She wheeled around the corners, tires screeching and swerved into the oncoming lanes while I screamed and laughed like a terrified hysteric, which I was.

The agreement was that we would give Sarah an hour and then return, tooting the horn twice. And Marisol was determined to keep up our end of the bargain. So there we were, a bunch of teenagers on the loose, eating shit. So much could have gone wrong. A cop could have stopped us and driven us home, or even arrested us. And then the world would have ended. But not in the way you think because it would have ended

in Spanish. And *el mundo se acabó* can also describe a heavy rainfall. So it would have stormed for days at home, but it wouldn't have been an actual English-language style apocalypse.

If this were fiction, something would have happened to us on Marisol's wild ride. Something bad and irreparable that we would continue to look back on all these years later. And maybe someday I'll write that story too. But in this story nothing at all happens. We drove around. We met only a few cars. We didn't crash. No one turned us in. It was the 1980s and Miami had bigger problems than a couple of teenage scofflaws in suburbia.

Marisol somehow got us back to the park. We gave our signal. The lovers returned. And the lot of us headed home before curfew.

It was the last summer of the kind of carefree childhood that, though it took place in Miami, in memory I always associate with Cuba, the flawed paradise where all good things came to pass. We didn't know it then, of course, but Sarah's mother, 41 years old at the time, would die within the year. And only now, writing this, do I realize that my aunt's illness was the reason the family abandoned the use of adult chaperones to a sorrow more powerful than tradition. In time, not only the word itself, but the very concept of a *chaperona*, would also be abandoned, and we would be left to our American selves.

Walking into the big house en La sagüesera that evening, we were children for the last time. It would take us a few more years to formulate the phrase, but we already had the sense that we were where we were supposed to be. Our parents' waiting had become home. And some day, long in the future, one of us would write up the whole thing in English.

(Based on a talk delivered at the Cuban Research Institute at FIU)

The Unknown Refugee

To the mother, grandmother, aunt, sister
 Who sheltered
 A family.
 To the one unafraid
 To run.
 The one who learned a new language
 New streets
 New ways

To be.

To the one who sang

As bombs fell.

The one who

Brushed away debris

To cook a meal.

Brushed away tears,

To set the table.

Lied.

Said everything will be

Good

In that place

Where we are going.

To the one who told happy

Stories

So the children could sleep.

The one who kissed a brow, offered

Her soft body

As pillow.

And then

Hid the men

Took up the rifle

Smuggled the food

Did the unknowable, unsayable.

Bought the ticket

Paid the bribe.

To the one who

Shoved and pushed her way

Onto the boat.

The plane.

The train.

A courage beyond

Understanding.

To a woman
Named Hannah
And her mother
Who set out in 1908
Across the sea
Alone
So their daughters could live
And their daughter's daughter
And me.