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Narrative

Of Lizards and Language

BERNADETTE GONGORA

If you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language.

-Gloria Anzaldua

When I think back to my formative years in school, I often remember the language issues, the looks of intolerance, the dramatic sense of alienation, of being present but not necessarily wanted. I was a Cuban-American, recently moved from The Bronx to Miami, and as I surveyed the playground on yet another ninety degree day, the last admonition from my teacher about speaking English—and only English—was still reverberating through my mind, making the screaming sound of the swings and the monkey bars seem almost inaudible. Much of my new world was confusing to me but I was sure of one thing: I didn't want to return to the classroom. I didn't belong there.

Teachers think that they do minority students a favor by teaching Standard White English to their students, but what they fail to recognize is that we come to the classroom treasuring our ways of speaking. It is our essence, our family, our culture. And when the teacher stood in front of the class, demanding that we stop speaking Spanish and become "true Americans," I knew that I had a decision to make. Would I learn the language of the school, turning my back on my mom, on my aunts and uncles, on the stories and endearing, family-drenched talk of my home or would I simply refuse to be converted. It's a decision no student should have to make.

First Day

"Loretta, what did she say... something about speaking Spanish?" It was my very first day at Flagami Elementary, and it was a hot muggy day in south Miami. The stuffy classrooms had no air conditioning. I could see many of the boys shirts stick to their bodies as sweat clung to them, rendering their shirts transparent. The girls of my fourth grade classroom

faired a lot better, being able to wear light cotton dresses and skirts. Where had my dad taken us? This place was reminiscent of those Saturday mornings Tarzan movies that I used to watch in the only home I ever knew, nestled away on Matilda Avenue, in the Bronx. My heart was back there, along with my classmates, neighbors and family.

Nearby classmates were discussing the page numbers of the reading assignment.

"Quiet!" the teacher bellowed. You're to speak English while in my class."

"I don't understand. Why did she say that?" This was a precursor of what yet was to come, and I was frazzled by the scowl that followed. Loretta and I exchanged looks. Quickly, I gazed down at my book, but felt the teacher's glaring stare roast my neck.

11:30 LUNCH

Great I thought, I heard my stomach gurgle and knew it was time to eat. Loretta was my "ambassador"—an ambassador is another student who is assigned to new kids, and it's their responsibility to show them the rules and familiarize them with the school. So off we went to the cafeteria. She led me through these dimly lit hallways, and all I could remember was the buildings' musty odor of clothes being left in the washer too long and how it lingered on my new outfit. As we made our way to the lunchroom, I stopped for a drink of water, and I'll never forget the mélange of chlorinated, warm water with a tad of rust chips that I quickly gulped down. "Ugh!!!" I thought I was going to puke! As we filed into and out of the lunch line, Loretta picked out a corner where she and her friends were already eating.

After a brief introduction, I persisted with my interrogation, "Why does the teacher not want us to speak Spanish?"

"Don't you know? Loretta ironically asked with a snarl."

"No, I don't know. Did we do something wrong?" I felt the anxiety slowly creep up like a snake and slowly constrict my dry throat. I felt as if she was about to reveal a dark family secret. She put her hand over her mouth and murmured, "She's prejudice."

“What’s that?” I naively asked.

Lorreta softly whispered, “She’s a Gringa and HATES Cubans and everyone who speaks Spanish.” I felt defective, branded, embarrassed. How come nobody ever told me about this? Did my parents know? All I knew at that moment, was I just wanted to go home, click my heels three times like Dorothy, and all would be back to normal; I’d be safe. MY REAL HOME was in the Bronx, where my classmates and I would go to our families and speak all sorts of colorful languages. We were Italians, Germans, Poles, Irish and Spanish, and not to speak our home language would be to negate our identity--it seemed unfathomable. I yearned to hear the mellifluous sounds of each neighbor’s language dance in my ears—and Ahhh, the aroma of our mothers’ kitchens that would lead us in straight to the dinner table from playing hide and seek. Like clockwork, I’d hear my mom’s long haunting whistle to navigate me home.

A “peculiar possession of the Negro. . .” (33). That’s the way Carter Woodson described the way teachers saw his language in writing his book *The Miseducation of the Negro*. The word “peculiar” stands most conspicuous when I ruminate on that phrase. Peculiar.

Different.

Dare I say wrong?

That’s how I felt. That’s how we felt. As Smitherman describes it, we were shamed into being “non-verbal.”

Spanish Class

“Our radical hope lives in the teacher who privileges the literate lives of students and does so with an open door”
(LeSage and Schindler 33).

After lunch, we zipped off to Spanish class. Yea! I was about to learn how to read and write in Spanish. Even though I spoke and understood Spanish perfectly, I was never formally instructed in my home language. As we were lining up at the door, I just simply followed my ambassador, but little did I know the events that were going to take place would be the second element that would catapult me into an identity crisis. I felt like a dummy, my classmates knew how to read and write, but I didn’t. Nobody had ever taught me. “Bernadette, could you step in this line, please,” the Spanish teacher said.

“Yes, Mrs. Alvarez.” I felt my heart beating faster and faster. Had they discovered my secret, I thought?

“Why am I in this line, Mrs. Alvarez?”

“Well, do you know how to read and write in Spanish?”

“No, but I can learn very fast,” I desperately responded.

My eyes began watering and Mrs. Alvarez sensed my despair and was trying to calmly explain that if I did well in the first several weeks, I would then be placed with the natives. It greatly consoled me that she told me that she was my mom’s high school friend, from Cuba. She said in Spanish, “You’re parents contacted me when they arrived in town, and I’m the one who suggested they move to this school district. My tears hadn’t betrayed me and peacefully disappeared without making a scene.

Playground

Wow! I so desperately needed some fresh air from our stagnant, oppressive place of a classroom and it was time to cast the mildew odor from our bodies. As Loretta accompanied me outside she grabbed my hand to pull me closer toward one the glorious shady banyan trees that peppered the playground. “Watch out, Steve, Patty, and Rose are the monitors.”

“Monitors?” I said. “For what?”

“They are the tattle-tales and they tell Mrs. Skull everything- if we say cuss words or if anyone speaks Spanish.” Suddenly, I felt my stomach making flip flops, pop, pop, and then a slow sonorous whistle squeaked out. “Loretta,! Oh, boy, I have to get to the bathroom, fast!” My nerves had gotten the best of me.

Homeward Bound

My mom greeted me at the door, my head hanging low. I kicked off my shoes put on shorts and stayed in my bedroom. I slowly emerged for some Kool-aid and a couple of Little Debbie chocolate ho hos, and I slipped out the backdoor. It was very soothing to feel the cool green grass peek back between my toes. I reveled in having my very own a backyard.

You see, back home I didn’t have a place to play, not really. I could only play in the yard when my landlady’s daughter asked me to come out. In fact, my dad was so empathetic when I couldn’t use her swing one day, he got so mad, he built me my very own swing inside of our two bedroom flat. He was a handy fellow, so he fastened some hooks to the frame between the living and bedroom, bought some chains, and a two by four for my seat, and voila a swing. Oh, if I could only be there now, I thought. The old maple tree would that welcomed me every morning would be telling that winter would be making its appearance soon along with the autumn brisk breeze.

But then school was hardly a sanctuary for me or any of the other children who failed to practice the official discourse of the powerful. It was a place where difference was stigmatized—where richness and beauty and perspicacity could somehow only be found in the English of white academic and those who studied hard enough to replicate it. A part of me was hurt but another part was angry. Why was correctness and beauty so limited? Why was the lense of what could be deemed appropriate so exclusive and seemingly unreachable? What would author Amy Tan say? When she reflected on her Japanese mother’s “broken” English she bristled at the term “broken.” How could her use of English—with all of its emotion and passion be broken or less than that of native users?

Lately, I’ve been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as “broken” or “fractured” English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than “broken,” as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I’ve heard other terms used, “limited English,” for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people’s perceptions of the limited English speaker.

As I returned to my reality, I spent the remainder of that long steamy day, exploring the verdantly rich surroundings, engaged in my latest hobby, catching lizards sunning themselves on the chain linked fence, and placing them in a large plastic white paint bucket. And after a few days I’d set them free, and then, begin again. Little by little capturing those adorable tiny creatures didn’t appeal to me anymore. Their place inside of the bucket was too confining, too much of a reflection of what I wanted rather than what was part of their natural world. I think, in the end, I knew how they felt.

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