

## Cuban Americans and Miami English

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To prepare for this presentation, I went back over the works of some of the Cuban-American writers whose books I'm happy are on my shelf—Oscar Hijuelos, Achy Obejas, Chantel Acevedo, Cristina García, Jeanine Capó Crucet, Pablo Medina, and Roberto Fernández, to name just a few.

It struck me that in most of our published works, and here I'll include my own books, Spanish is there to give a sense of the ghostly language lurking behind our English constructions. From 1½ generation writers like Pablo to young new writers like Jeanine, almost every Cuban-American writer has included *el loco* or *la loca* in a book. *Viejos sinvergüenzas* lurk about. People offer *ofrendas*, talk about *La Zafra*, eat *picadillo*, and say *carajo*.

But then we get to the curious case of Roberto Fernández with his Shrimp at the Little Garlic and Saw at the Oven and Chern at the Iron—a surrealist menu to anyone not Cuban—and it gets interesting. Because we're getting into language as code now, as insider humor written by a tribal elder for other members of the group.

When I'm with 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 so what follows is a thought experiment in this vein. An essay about a particular linguistic time in Miami. It is, in a way, an essay for insiders, written in what the FIU Linguist Phillip Carter calls "Miami English." And I think those of us who grew up here in the 1970s and 1980s will find a cozy belonging.

If exile, as Joseph Brodsky famously observed, is a linguistic event, then those of us who are sons and daughters of exile are living in the linguistic aftermath.

Recently I spoke to a group of graduate students, many of them like me, Americans born of Cubans, and the conversation turned to language—or rather the beautiful, sometimes mad *ajiacó* we've made of it. They 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 recounted, 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.

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.

The whole thing took me 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 *pulobers* 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 would 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 80s 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.