

4 thoughts



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1

Laughing in Spanish



Mariana Alessandri

Growing up I had heard my father laugh, but in Chile I heard something new, something honest, guttural, joyful. At home in New York, my parents spoke to each other in Spanish and to us kids in English. I was jealous of my parents; I could detect in their exchanges a timbre that was absent from their English communication. But in Chile I realised this difference was more than linguistic: Spanish was simply the medium through which my parents' bodies could come home. For three weeks a year, their native tongues could enthusiastically spin and modulate pitch and volume as only Chileans can when they make song out of ordinary conversation. And they could laugh. In Chilean Spanish, my parents are visibly, audibly, and existentially different than they are in English: they

are more playful. Although technically visitors to their former homeland, they inhabit the space and language as residents. This is why I am raising my children in Spanish: to afford them residency in multiple worlds.

In *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* Maria Lugones writes about inhabiting multiple "worlds", and she explains the concept using the example of herself being described as "playful" in certain worlds, but as "serious" in others: "I remain convinced that I both have and do not have this attribute... I am sure that I am a playful person. On the other hand, I can say, painfully, that I am not a playful person." My parents, like Lugones and other multilinguals, belong to multiple worlds, sometimes geographical but more often existential. Like Lugones my parents are also

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aptly described as playful and serious in different worlds, and in their case the difference is largely cultural and linguistic. Perhaps if they were surrounded by Chilean friends in the US, I would be lucky enough to hear my father’s full-bodied laugh more often. In Spanish I am playful too, more than in English, because my playfulness has to do with the language itself. My humour is light in Spanish compared to my sharp and agile native tongue. In Spanish, I am glad to be denied access to the kinds of quick and dexterous backhands that I use in English. I want to share my clumsy, pun-ridden world with my children to show them another way to be, another way to laugh. Charlemagne, King of the Franks, wrote that “to know two languages is to possess a second soul”, and I like to believe that my children, in whom I have planted and am nurturing the seed of a second language, are growing up in two souls.

The South Texas-born Mexican American philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa wrote about the inseparability of her language and identity, which resonates with Charlemagne’s connection of language to soul. As a Chicana who spoke several dialects of Spanish, English and Spanglish in addition to standard English and standard Spanish, she possessed multiple souls. Her brown body reflected indigenous Mexico, but she was also a bologna-on-white-bread American.



‘It’s just pathetic – no wifi.’

Growing up in the borderlands between countries between cultures and even between genders, her thoughts reflect bordered existence: she always inhabited at least two worlds at once. She was what Lugones would call a “world traveller”, but she also lived full-time in what her own later writings called “Nepantla”, from the Aztec concept of the ‘in-between’ space. Much of Anzaldúa’s writing addresses the difficulty of translating herself to monolinguals – we might also say mono-mundiales – but she also valued her linguistic and residential dexterity that made her both serious and playful.

Anzaldúa, Lugones, and other multi-souled world-travellers have paved the way for those of us for whom bilingualism or even multilingualism is not just a linguistic or cognitive advantage, a ‘leg-up’ in the economic world. In giving my sons another language I hope to bypass certain kinds of cultural tourism. To visit – as I do in Chile – is to meet, to spend a few moments, to exchange finite things. To inhabit – as my parents do in Chile – is to embody, to settle in, to dwell. As my children embody their two souls in their two languages they are learning to be residents of two worlds in one geographic space. In Nepantla, they laugh bilingually. ▣