

BILINGUAL BLUES

Soy un ajiaco de contradicciones.
I have mixed feelings about everything.
Name your tema, I'll hedge;
name your cerca, I'll straddle it
like a cubano.

I have mixed feelings about everything.
Soy un ajiaco de contradicciones.
Vexed, hexed, complexed,
hyphenated, oxygenated, illegally alienated,
psycho soy, cantando voy:
You say tomato,
I say tu madre;
You say potato,
I say Pototo.
Let's call the hole
un hueco, the thing
a cosa, and if the cosa goes into the hueco,
consider yourself en casa,
consider yourself part of the family.

Soy un ajiaco de contradicciones,
un puré de impurezas:
a little square from Rubik's Cuba
que nadie nunca acoplará.
(Cha-cha-chá.)

MUMBLE KING

I am most me when I mumble.
A native mumblor of two languages,
I have mastered the art of imprecision
and of indecision, haltingly.

No me podrán quitar mi dolorido sentir,
this little pain in my corazoncito
that makes me stutter
barbarismos y barbaridades.

Por example:
el cubano-americano es un estar que no sabe dónde es.
Por example:
el cubano-americano se nutre de lo que le falta.

Cubano-americano: ¿dónde soy?
Soy la marca entre un no y un am:
filósofo del no
filósofo del ah, no
filósofo del anón
(que seguramente nunca habré probado).

Cubano-americano: ¿dónde soy?
son que se fue de Cuba
corazón que dejé enterrado
rinconcito de mi tierra
pedacito de cielo: ¿dónde soy?
Un extraviado
Un faccioso
Un inconforme
Un dividido
cuba: no
america: no
¿Dónde soy?
Sólo sé que nadar sé.
Sólo sé que tengo sed.

Dame un trago.
Dame un break.
Dame un besito en el—ah, no—
y hazme olvidar mis penas.

NOBODY KNOWS MY NAME

I'm tired
dead anonymous tired
of getting mail addressed
to all those people I never was:

Gustazo	Peres
Gustavio	Penley
Gary	Porris
Gus	Perry
Gustaf	Pirey.

Nobody here knows my name.
This would never have happened in Havana.

Es una lección que no quisiera olvidar, por si las moscas (por si oscú). Estar sin saber es un consuelo. Saber no estar es una lección.

Eléctica del estar:

— Tesis, bien-estar.

— Antítesis, mal-estar.

— Síntesis, contestar (bien o mal).

Las lecciones son mi modesta contesta cumpleañosera.

En Cuba. Y contra Cuba.

II

Escribir «mi país.» La frase me causa resquemor porque me pregunto si tengo derecho a usar el posesivo. Me preocupa que alguien me desdiga, o que me desdiga yo mismo, inadvertidamente. Decir «mi país» es insertarme de golpe en la historia tras de vivir media vida intentando esquivar el impacto. Afirma Heberto Padilla que «la historia es el golpe que debemos aprender a resistir.» El exilio, o por lo menos este exilio, ha sido un *feint*, un *clinch*, un gesto defensivo para eludir el gancho de la política y el *uppercut* de la nacionalidad. (Acudir al inglés, como acabo de hacer, forma parte de esa táctica de defensa.)

En mis libros y mis poemas nombro a Cuba obsesivamente, y sin embargo me cuesta trabajo, me da miedo, escribir «mi país.» Cuba se ha convertido en otra cosa: un espacio sin dimensiones, un lugar sin lindes que pueblo con imágenes, obsesiones, fantasmas, mentiras. Los cubanos de verdad también mienten, pero sus falsedades se revisten de geografía —de calles y lomas y árboles y adoquines y fachadas y lentas tardes de sol. A mi Cuba la ilumino sólo yo solo, y con luz artificial. ¿Será ése el famoso «sol de los desterrados» que brilla en todos los cielos? Dijo alguien: «El viaje humano consiste en llegar al país que llevamos descrito en nuestro interior.»

Cuba, mi espacio. Cuba... mi país.

Spanglish, de momentos puede resultar divertida y hasta genial, y da a impide que un idioma recoja palabras o giros del otro. Pero la mezcla a partes iguales termina devastando los dos idiomas sin por o engendrar un tercero. En los poemas en *Spanglish* —en los míos, por ejemplo— los dos idiomas no se acompañan: se maltratan, se golpean, se agravian. No se juntan, se pegan, no se adhieren, se hieren. Establecen una lucha a muerte que acaba matando la poesía. (Es mi opinión.)

VIII

Vida en vilo

Entre las muchas razones que un individuo puede tener para desplazarse de la lengua materna a la lengua alterna, una de las más poderosas es el rencor. Escribir en inglés es o puede ser un acto de venganza —contra los padres, contra las patrias, contra uno mismo. Siempre me ha parecido que la afición a los juegos de palabras bilingües es un síntoma de ese rencor; el pun es una pulla, una pequeña detonación de terror y de tirria, una manera de blandir el *hyphen* como arma: que nos parta no el rayo sino la rayita.

El vilo avilanta. La ingravidez pesa. Desprovisto de ancla o sostén, el cubano con rayita, el cubano rayado, se torna agrio, *angry*. En inglés se dice que la mejor defensa es una buena ofensa; pues entonces ofendamos, afirma el cubano con rayita. La audacia del enunciado bilingüe —*You say tomato; I say tu madre*— es un tipo de insolencia; su ligereza —*An I for an ¡Ay!*— es una forma de pesadez. Vil en el vilo, mordaz en el remordimiento, el cubano-americano se lanza a triturar el español en la *osterizer* del inglés y a despedazar el inglés en la batidora del español. Todo por rayar, todo por rayarse.

GUSTAVO PÉREZ-FIRMAT

Six Mambos

from LIFE ON THE HYPHEN:
THE CUBAN-AMERICAN WAY

MAMBO NO. 1

Lost in Translation

Take the phrase literally. Turn the commonplace into a place. Try to imagine where one ends up if one gets lost in translation. When I try to visualize such a place, I see myself, on a given Saturday afternoon, in the summer, somewhere in Miami. Since I'm thirsty, I go into a store called Love Juices, which specializes in nothing more salacious or salubrious than milk shakes made from papayas and other tropical fruits. Having quenched my thirst, I head for a boutique called Mr. Trapus, whose name—trapo—is actually the Spanish word for an old rag. Undaunted by the consumerist frenzy that has possessed me, I enter another store called Cachi Bachi—a name that, in spite of its chichi sound, is a slang word for a piece of junk, cachivache. And then for dinner I go to the Versailles of Eighth Street, a restaurant where I feast on something called Tropical Soup, the American name for the traditional Cuban stew, ajiaco. My dessert is

also tropical, Tropical Snow, which is Miamian for arroz con leche; and to finish off the meal, of course, I sip some Cuban-American espresso (don't go home without it). In this way I spend my entire afternoon lost in translation—and loving every minute. Translation takes you to a place where cultures divide to conga. My effort in this book is to show you the way to such a place. Step lightly, and enter at your own risk. Who knows, you might just end up becoming the missing link in the Desi Chain.

MAMBO NO. 2

Spic'n Spanish

Miami Spanish includes a term that, so far as I know, is unique to the city of sun and solecisms: nilingüe. Just as a bilingual is someone who speaks two languages (say, Spanish and English), a nilingüe is someone who doesn't speak either: "ni español, ni inglés." Such a person is a no-lingual, a nulli-glot. My example of nilingualism is Ricky Ricardo. Ricky's occasional Spanish utterances are shot through with anglicisms: falta for culpa, introducir for presentar, parientes for padres, and so on. Sometimes the anglicisms seem deliberate (so that the monolingual viewers understand what he is saying), but at other times they're plain mistakes.

A curious thing: as Ricky got older, his English didn't get any better, but his Spanish kept getting worse. Equally curious: the same thing happened to Desi Arnaz. In 1983 Arnaz was picked "king" of the Cuban carnival in Miami, Open House Eight. By then, his Spanish was as frail as his health. He now had an accent in two languages.

In Spanish to know a language well is to "dominate" it. But my mother tongue has it backward: people don't dominate languages, languages dominate people. By reversing the power relation, English comes closer to the truth. When someone speaks English better than Spanish, we say that he or she is "English-dominant," an expression in which the language, and not the speaker, has the upper hand. But in Ricky no language achieved dominance; English and Spanish battled each other to a tie (a tongue-tie). A nilingüe treats his mother tongue like a foreign language and treats the foreign language like his other tongue. T. W. Adorno once said: "Only he who is not truly at home inside a language can use it as an instrument." Ricky Ricardo is a multi-instrumentalist. He is homeless in two languages.

MAMBO NO. 3

Desi Does It

Going through her father's house after his death, Lucie Arnaz found a box of papers and memorabilia that she donated to the Love Library at San Diego State University, where Desi had lectured several times. The Desi Arnaz Collection contains a few home movies, an old film short entitled Jitterhumba, several drafts of A Book, and assorted notes that Arnaz took when he was working on his autobiography. Originally intending to write either a sequel to A Book (to be called Another Book) or a novel (probably to be called A Novel), Arnaz marked some of these jottings "Other Book" or "Novel." The notes contain not only many self-revealing moments and juicy gossip (like a list of Lucille Ball's alleged lovers), but also some of Desi's best quips.

Seeing Gary Morton, Lucy's second husband, on a TV talk show, he writes: "About Gary on TV with Lucy: Seems to be suffering from a massive inferiority complex to which he is fully entitled." To his children, Lucie and Desi, Jr., he once remarked: "The only reason you are here is because I woke up one night and couldn't think of anything else to do." About his famous quarrels with Lucy, he says: "Lucy and I had some great battles but at times when someone asked me why we fought, I had to answer, 'I don't know. She wouldn't tell me.'" Most pertinent, perhaps, are his thoughts on being a writer: "Writing a book is, I discovered, not an easy

thing to do. It also proves that the brain is a wonderful thing. It starts up when you are born and stops when you sit down at the typewriter."

But my favorite is the simple aphorism "History is made at night." It seems appropriate that the box ended up at a place called the Love Library.

MAMBO NO. 4

The Barber of Little Havana

When I first became interested in the mambo some years ago, I was puzzled to find that a well-respected British reference work, The Faber Companion to 20th-Century Popular Music, gave Pérez Prado's first name as Pantaleón rather than Dámaso. More puzzling still, after describing Pérez Prado's career in accurate detail, the entry concluded, "His elder brother Damos [sic] was also a band-leader and composer who specialized in the mambo." Later I discovered that Pérez Prado actually had a brother named Pantaleón, who was also a musician. Still later, while going through some music magazines from the 1950s, I found that Pantaleón had actually toured Europe claiming to be the Mambo King, an imposture that ended only when Dámaso threatened to take legal, rather than musical, steps.

For many years there has been a barbershop on Eighth Street in Miami called Barbéria Pérez

Prado. Its elderly owner bears a striking resemblance to Dámaso; some say he is Pérez Prado's brother, Pantaleón. But when questioned by visitors, the barber of Little Havana disclaims any connection. Will the real mambo king please stand up and grunt?

MAMBO NO. 5

Mirror, Mirror

One of the landmarks of Cuban Miami is a restaurant called Versailles, which has been located on Eighth Street and Thirty-fifth Avenue for many years. About the only thing this Versailles shares with its French namesake is that it has lots of mirrors on its walls. One goes to the Versailles not only to be seen, but to be multiplied. This quaint, kitschy, noisy restaurant that serves basic Cuban food is a paradise for the self-absorbed: the Nirvana of Little Havana. Because of the bright lights, even the windows reflect. The Versailles is a Cuban pantopticon: you can lunch, but you can't hide. Who goes there wants to be the stuff of visions. Who goes there wants to make a spectacle of himself (or herself). All the ajiaco you can eat and all the jewelry you can wear multiplied by the number of reflecting planes—and to top it off, a waitress who calls you mi vida.

Across the street at La Carreta, another popu-

lar restaurant, the food is the same (both establishments are owned by the same man) but the feel is different. Instead of mirrors La Carreta has booths. There you can ensconce yourself in a booth and not be faced with multiple images of yourself. But at the Versailles there is no choice but to bask in self-reflective glory.

For years I have harbored the fantasy that those mirrors retain the blurred image of everyone who has paraded before them. I think the mirrors have a memory, as when one turns off the TV and the shadowy figures remain on the screen. Every Cuban who has lived or set foot in Miami over the last three decades has, at one time or another, seen himself or herself reflected on those shiny surfaces. It's no coincidence that the Versailles sits only two blocks away from the Woodlawn Cemetery, which contains the remains of many Cuban notables, including Desi Arnaz's father, whose remains occupy a niche right above Gerardo Machado's. Has anybody ever counted the number of Cubans who have died in Miami? Miami is a Cuban city not only because of the number of Cubans who live there but also because of the number who have died there.

The Versailles is a glistening mausoleum. The history of Little Havana—tragic, comic, tragicomic—is written on those spectacular specular walls. This may have been why, when the mirrors came down in 1991, there was such an uproar that some of them had to be put back. The hall of mirrors is also a house of spirits. When the time comes for me to pay for my last ajiaco, I intend to disappear into one of the mirrors (I would prefer the one

on the right, just above the espresso machine). My idea of immortality is to become a mirror image at the Versailles.

MAMBO NO. 6

English Is Broken Here

Some years ago a Cuban radio station in Miami aired an advertisement promoting an airline's reduced fares: "Piedmont Airlines quiere limpiar el aire sobre sus bajas tarifas." "Limpiar el aire?" "Clean the air?" This phrase is ungrammatical in two languages. First mistake: perhaps influenced by the Spanish *poner en limpio* (to clean up), the author of the ad must have thought that the English idiom was "clean the air" rather than "clear the air." Second mistake: he then decided that "clean the air" could be translated word for word into Spanish. Third mistake: he rendered "about" as "sobre," which in context sounds too much like "over" or "above." Hence: "Piedmont Airlines wants to clean the air above its low fares." But this sentence does have a certain flighty logic, especially considering that it went out over the airwaves. Piedmont's clean-air act is an interlingual utterance that remains up in the air, that cannot make up its mind whether to land in the domain of Spanish or English.

Another comedy of grammatical errors will bring

us back to earth: there is a Cuban-owned pizza chain in Miami called Casino's Pizza. When Casino's was launched (or lunched) a few years ago, its publicity campaign included a bilingual brochure. I quote the first sentence of the Spanish text: "Su primera mirada, su primer olor, su primer gusto le dirá que usted descubrió La Pizza Ultima." Since "La Pizza Ultima" (the last pizza) doesn't make much sense in Spanish (it should have been "la última pizza" anyway), upon first reading this anglicized sentence, I had the impression that the final phrase was an incompletely digested translation of "the ultimate pizza." In order to check out my hunch, I went to the English text: "Your first sight, your first smell, your first taste will tell you that you've discovered La Pizza Ultima."

So what happened to my hypothetical Ultimate Pizza? It seems to have been eaten in translation. The same phrase that sounds like an anglicism in Spanish is offered as a hispanicism in English! Food for thought: the English phrase presupposes a Spanish phrase that presupposes an English phrase that doesn't exist. This is paradox-lover's pizza, one that consumes itself in the cracks between languages. Like the Piedmont ad, "La Pizza Ultima" refuses to be English but cannot be Spanish. If Beny Moré is the "bárbaro del ritmo," the authors of these ads must be bárbaros of barbarism. Sometimes the American dream is written in Spanglish.

SEVERO SARDUY

from FROM CUBA WITH A SONG

DOLORES RONDÓN

Since it's such a hot day, it won't do us any harm to take a walk in the cemetery: marble is cooling, almost like lemonade. There are no café tables or one-armed bandits in this garden of stone, but we'll come to that. In this part of Camagüey, in the center of Cuba, there's no end of oil portraits, of dead black men looking rosier and healthier than they ever did alive, or of two-story chapels, or reading material. Here at this crossroads, for example, you can read Dolores Rondón's poem:

*Dolores Rondón did here
reach the end of her career,
come mortal, and ponder
on where lies true grandeur.
Pride and arrogance,
power and prominence,
all is bound to perish.
And you only immortalize
the evil you economize
and the good you may cherish.*

A Hard Profession, Dolores's. Courtesan and poet. Courtesan all her life. Poet for a day. But time dissolves it all, like the sea into