Pura Bicultura

– COCO FUSCO –

Excerpted from *English Is Broken Here*

MY POOR GRANDMOTHER. By the time she arrived in New York from Havana via Madrid, American cartoons and daily trips to Washington Square Park had turned my brother and me into nasty little *yanquis*. We answered back–in English. We turned her Spanish admonitions into puns. We liked to shock adults with bad words. She made sure, however, that we called her *mamá*, instead of disrespectfully reminding her of her age by calling her grandma. But it wasn't long before she began to complain to her daughter. "*No puedo con estos niños*," she would say. "*Están demasiado americanizados*." (I can't deal with these kids. They're too Americanized.)

What could my mother say? Teachers were warning her that our learning abilities would be impaired by our being subjected to more than one language at home. She and my father were more worried about racial questions than linguistic ones. They were frantically looking for a decent school in New York where we wouldn't be bothered continually for being *mulatos*. They pumped our egos like crazy to give us a defense against the idiocies of a racist world. We became expert mimics, aping the melodiously accented English of our elders, on the one hand, and spoofing the attempts of Americans to pronounce Spanish words on the other. (*I Love Lucy* was of course, our favorite TV program.)

We also became great shape–shifters, turning on Latin politeness to impress our American friends' parents, and then reverting to little *yanqui* brats when we wanted to bewilder the latest nana. One of them, Rufina, fled the house after my parents refused to heed her pleas that we children be exorcised. "*Traen el diablo por dentro*," she cried. (They're possessed by the devil.)

Like most immigrant kids, we slid into the gap between languages and cultures with ease. The world around us was already communicating to us that we were better than our relatives because we had English under our belts. Then there were the other markers that distinguished us. *We* didn't live in a barrio, my mother fiercely reminded us, though she had hidden from the real estate agents so that we could get into the neighborhood. Just in case anyone passing by dared to get any wrong ideas, my mother regularly scrubbed the steps and sidewalk in front of the house. My father unrolled an American flag on the appropriate holidays. We went to church with the Irish on Sundays and prayed in English, and we kids went to a mostly Jewish school during the week. Thanks to my parents, I was fairly oblivious to the implications of the looks and comments that show people's prejudice, and, in any case, we somehow managed to believe that we weren't really in America, or that we got here by mistake. "I did apply for other visas...," my mother would say.

America, we believed, was somewhere else. It was in any direction going away from New York. There wasn't anything good to eat there. My mother had spent two years upstate before I was born and still complained that no one there ate garlic or onions and that the people didn't care about other places. They thought all foreign films were pornographic, the kids were ruder than we were, and they didn't even wash their sneakers. That was the North, but we could also forget about the South. One of the first news stories my mother heard when she arrived in the United States was about Emmett Till. We couldn't even think of traveling to a place where black boys got lynched for whistling at white ladies. If we went there, we'd end up in jail or something, I used to imagine.

Behind the walls of our home, walls that shielded us from that America, we made a world where people and things from all different kinds of places met. To us it seemed that someone was always just arriving from somewhere, which meant we had to celebrate. Maybe it was that immigrants and outsiders share certain experiences that

tend to make socializing among themselves easier. Maybe it was that recently arrived relatives and friends would descend on us for weeks at a time, providing us with playmates. Visiting could last a day or several weeks, during which time our friends and cousins became our English pupils while we absorbed their nostalgia for a place we'd never seen. As kids, we might have believed that we were better because of our command of English, but people and things from far away attracted us.

The taste we had for the foreign had been cultivated long before we became immigrants. Cuban exiles in Miami embraced American consumerism in their violent rejection of *el comunismo*, but there was an older tradition, maintained by many, of always looking outward for culture–to France, preferably, but most places on "the Continent" would do. We could go to school in America, if necessary, but to be truly worldly, we had to learn European ways. When, as a young adult, I returned from a semester's study in Paris, my aunt took out her finest china to serve me coffee and sweets. Eight months away and suddenly I was a specially honored guest. My newly acquired French impressed everyone much more than my English ever had. I didn't realize at the time that in their minds I had fulfilled an entirely criollo dream.

COCO FUSCO (Havana, Cuba; 1960-) is an accomplished author and performance artist whose avant-garde and postmodern works have been exhibited for audiences at museums, galleries, and streetfront theaters internationally. Her books include *English Is Broken Here* and *The Bodies That Were Not Ours, and Other Writings*. She was the editor of *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas* and now serves as associate professor at Columbia University's School of the Arts.