My Stepmother Tongue

– PATRICIA DE SANTANA PINHO –

EACH LANGUAGE IS SPECIAL in its own way, but I must confess how fortunate I feel to have been born into the inventive Brazilian Portuguese, and how delicious it is to navigate in a language full of Bantu and Iorubá and Tupi-Guarani expressions that place the words in insubordinately arranged phrases. As a postcolonial language, Brazilian Portuguese is hybrid, daring, and resourceful, and full of secrets shared only by the postcolonized and by those who venture to slowly embark into this world.

But if Portuguese is the language of my thoughts, my feelings, and my dreams, it hasn't been so for my entire life. In fact, for three years of my childhood, English was actually my first language. And if today I can't think of it as a mother tongue, it was certainly a very good stepmother for me. I was almost eight years old when my parents moved to England in 1978 with their four children. After a few weeks, my younger sister Mari and I were basically "just speaking English" as if we had been doing so forever. At least that's how I remember it today. Until recently, I used to say that I did not remember how I learned English, but reflecting on this more carefully I realize that it was indeed a process, and not an instantaneous event. This is the fragmented and incomplete story of how I learned English.

My two older brothers had taken English classes before we left Brazil, but my little sister and I arrived in England without knowing a single word of the language. Yet, thanks to the freshness and flexibility of the almost wholesome minds of children, we learned

English immediately, or at least that's what our memory tells us. A few episodes, though, remind me that even children make infantile mistakes when learning a second language. When the teacher asked me which were my favorite shows on TV, I answered "Long Legs" and "Fat and Skinny," proud of my accurate translation of *Perna Longa* (Bugs Bunny), and *O Gordo e o Magro* (Laurel and Hardy).

While children's mistakes are acceptable, there is a lot less tolerance for the errors of adults, which is of course what makes it so difficult for them to learn a second language. Most grown-ups become embarrassed and feel that they look "child-like" when expressing wrong pronunciations, incorrect intonations, or unintended puns. My siblings and I would make so much fun of our parents and their "broken" English. But I also benefited from my Dad's clumsiness with the language. Helping me to pick an extracurricular activity at school, he looked at the list and said: "You can choose among cooking, sewing, chess, and this other thing here which seems great: recorder. I think you will learn how to use a tape recorder." I immediately chose that, unaware at the time that I would turn out to be a researcher and that the tape recorder would become an important tool in my life. Needless to say that I was very confused when I arrived for my first "recorder" meeting and found out that it was in fact a music class. Because of my Dad's mix-up, I learned to play this instrument and was in love with it for a long time.

If speaking could be tricky, learning to write in English was even more challenging. I remember the first dictation at school: in my attempt to not miss one single word read aloud by the teacher, I wrote down absolutely everything she said, including the commas which I literally spelled on the paper, wondering what the heck that word meant, and why it was so excessively repeated throughout the teacher's story. Today, 28 years later, I have learned what *comma* means, though the proper way to employ it in the English language still remains a mystery to me.

Our pronunciation, on the other hand, was flawless: identical to that of our neighbors and classmates where we lived in the working-class area of Reading, about 50 miles west of London. Even the erasure of the "t" in words such as "thir-een," "four-een," and "wha-ever" made our intonation indistinguishable from the other kids. However, although our quick mastering of the language made it seem like we had been born there, we were constantly reminded that we had not. We were definitely not British. Someone must have taught the Brit kids to see us as "different." Boys yelled, "Brown girl, brown girl!" at me like a curse, then sped away from me, as if I would ever run after them.

What could possibly be wrong with being brown? I was, at the most, surprised with how much my brownness had any effect on them. In Brazil I was never considered *that* brown. Maybe it was the pinkness of *their* skin that emphasized the brownness of mine. My sister's kinky hair was the factor they elected to pick on. She was almost as light-skinned as they were, but with a very bushy hair that would defy the hairpins put in by my mom every morning with the hope that they would last all day. By midday the pins would have literally exploded from my sister's hair, flying away over the school's playground. This would drive her to tears on a bad day. And I would run to help her find an elastic band that would hold her hair at least until we arrived home in the afternoon.

Another "national" epithet used by my schoolmates to molest us was "Brazil Nut," probably the only reference to Brazil available to those little-informed inhabitants of the First World. Two years later, when we had moved 25 miles north to Oxford and were enrolled in another school, we came to understand that "nut" was a pejorative term for someone deemed crazy or wild. Maybe that idea went along with the other fantastic notions they had of Brazil since I was asked, every now and then, if my family and I lived in the jungle, if we had monkeys for pets, and if our means of transportation was swinging from creepers like Tarzan and Jane. Some children also

dared to ask what adults could only wonder: "Do people in Brazil pee in the garden, or do you have loos?" Funny that they asked us if we had toilets when it seemed to us that they were the ones unaccustomed to showers.

It would be unfair if I left out the fond memories my family and I share of the three years we spent in England. They were incredibly special for our lives, and we often evoke our collective remembrances of that period. We laugh at the anecdotes that, for having been told and retold so many times, have acquired a life of their own. And we mourn in memory of some wonderful souls we had the fortune to make friends with while we were there, but which have already left this world. Ms. Randall is one of them, and I would like to record her name here as homage to this remarkable feminist who would make inflammatory speeches against British imperialism and drag us to protests against fox hunting, and who, like many other English folks we met, revealed an openness to getting to know us as regular human beings and did not see us as exotic creatures.

Today I actually regret the fact that I have lost a lot of my British accent. I can imagine how this may sound strange to my Caribbean friends who would probably, and with reason, associate a British accent with colonialism and domination. However, as for all languages, there are many British accents, and I miss not knowing anymore how to speak the working-class one I learned. Yet, watching a British movie, or talking with British friends for a few minutes is enough to resuscitate my childhood accent, or at least some invented version of it.

Living in the United States now, as a grown-up, I am aware of how learning a language is always an unfinished business. I am constantly and continuously learning how to speak, write, and read in English. While this brings me some uneasiness—especially in a context marked by a widespread lack of cosmopolitanism—there is always this pleasure of discovering new words and terms. For instance, the expression "to go there," meaning to figuratively revisit a memory

or a feeling as if it were a place, is one that I learned only recently, and one which can describe what I am attempting in this essay. I find it not only very useful but also deeply poetic and beautiful. On the other hand, expressions such as "good for you" and the emphasis on words such as "winner" and "loser" bother me deep down in my soul as if they were screaming individualism and egocentrism. And there are accents, too, that can really drive me crazy, like that nasal way in which, "like," some high school and college American girls, "like," lethargically speak, probably believing it sounds sexy and trendy. Language is certainly a means through which gender operates to shape our beings.

It is quite revealing to look back at how I learned English and realize how much language is connected to feelings of nationality and to the predictable racial representations that are repetitively connected to nations. Then again, I must recognize that the way we articulate our memories reveals as much about our present as it does about our past. And the fact that I have been living for the last four years in a country that is possibly the most racialized in the world certainly shapes my past childhood recollections of living abroad.

None of us really remembers how we learned to speak the language we were born into. This tinges our relationship with our mother tongue not only with a lot of intimacy but also with a feeling that is almost magical, as if our language were innate to our beings. Defined as female, the mother tongue is imagined to breastfeed us our "native language," preparing us to actively inhabit our "fatherland." While rejecting all kinds of naturalizations, especially for the burden they impose on women and men and for the fixed gender roles they expect us to play, I believe there is a lot to be read, heard, and undone in these metaphors that bring together language, land, gender, and parenting.

The mother tongue is in fact like a parent: we do not choose it, yet we are, to a great extent, shaped by its expression and understanding of the world. As suggested by the dual meaning of the

Portuguese verb *criar*, we are both *created* and *raised* by our language. We may even, at times, reject our mother tongue, like silly adolescents who feel embarrassed by the presence of their caregivers, and seek the refuge or fanciness of other tongues, mothers of others, parents of the cool friends we look up to when we're still too immature to value what life has chosen to give us. Stepmother tongues are, thus, disruptive and rebellious since they break automatic associations and overturn unquestioned expectations.

Having learned English at such an early age has significantly favored my siblings and me in both professional and practical terms. Each one of us today still harvests the fruits of our past experience abroad. But it has above all enhanced our ability to look at the world in a much broader and interconnected manner. If languages have been appropriated by national projects, they can also disobey physical and symbolic frontiers and express the shared feelings of our common human condition.

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