spanish *en los estados unidos*

All the readings in this group deal with Spanish, the second most widely spoken language in the United States and at least in the Southwest, one spoken here since the sixteenth century. Texts by Marjorie Agosín, Myriam Marquez, and Sandra Cisneros comment on what it means to be bilingual and to use both Spanish and English in daily life. Interestingly, the two languages connote different things for each of these writers (or, more accurately, for Agosín, Marquez, and the protagonist in one of Cisneros's stories). The sociolinguist Ana Celia Zentella examines Spanglish, the Spanish-English codeswitching of the sort many bilinguals engage in. (The title of this group of readings, "Spanish *en los Estados Unidos*," is an example of codeswitching, the use of two or more languages in a single speech exchange.) As Zentella demonstrates, such switching is systematic in terms of its structure and function—a claim that may well shock those who see it as a bastardization of the languages involved. Cartoons by Greg Evans, creator of *Luann*, and Hector Cantú and Carlos Castellanos, creators of *Baldo*, illustrate how speakers of English and Spanish use codeswitching strategically, sometimes to communicate things that neither language alone can express. (Yes, things are sometimes lost in translation.) Finally, a news article by Diane Smith demonstrates that while immigrants come to the United States expecting to use English, they sometimes find that learning Spanish is useful or even necessary as they seek to survive and flourish in their new home. As you explore these readings, see what aspects of Spanish *en los Estados Unidos* affect the linguistic practices and communities that you know.

MARJORIE AGOSÍN

Always Living in Spanish

RECOVERING THE FAMILIAR, THROUGH LANGUAGE

IN THE EVENINGS in the northern hemisphere, I repeat the ancient ritual that I observed as a child in the southern hemisphere: going out while the night is still warm and trying to recognize the stars as it begins to grow dark silently. In the sky of my country, Chile, that long and wide stretch of land that the poets blessed and dictators abused, I could easily name the stars: the three Marias, the Southern Cross, and the three Lilies, names of beloved and courageous women.

But here in the United States, where I have lived since I was a young girl, the solitude of exile makes me feel that so little is mine, that not even the sky has the same constellations, the trees and the fauna the same names or sounds, or the rubbish the same smell. How does one recover the familiar? How does one name the unfamiliar? How can one be another or live in a foreign language? These are the dilemmas of one who writes in Spanish and lives in translation.

Since my earliest childhood in Chile I lived with the tempos and the melodies of a multiplicity of tongues: German, Yiddish,[1] Russian, Turkish, and many Latin songs. Because everyone was from somewhere else, my relatives laughed, sang, and fought in a Babylon of languages. Spanish was reserved for matters of extreme seriousness, for commercial transactions, or for illnesses,

1. **Yiddish** a Germanic language, much influenced by Hebrew and Aramaic and written in the Hebrew alphabet. Spoken by the Ashkenazi Jews, who lived in Central and Eastern Europe, and their descendants, including those who came to the Americas.

Marjorie Agosín is a professor of Spanish at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and an award-winning writer and human-rights activist. She grew up in Chile, where her grandparents moved early in the twentieth century when Jews faced increasing persecution in parts of Europe. Her family moved to the United States after General Augusto Pinochet took over the Chilean government in 1973. In **Always Living in Spanish**, *an essay which was translated by Celeste Kostopulos-Cooperman in* Poets & Writers *in 1999, Agosín explains why she, as a political exile, "writes only in Spanish and lives in translation." Her poem* **English**, *translated by Monica Bruno, appeared alongside the essay and explains why she ultimately finds English insufficient as a tool for communicating the things that matter most to her.*

but everyone's mother tongue was always associated with the memory of spaces inhabited in the past: the shtetl,[2] the flowering and vast Vienna avenues, the minarets of Turkey, and the Ladino[3] whispers of Toledo. When my paternal grandmother sang old songs in Turkish, her voice and body assumed the passion of one who was there in the city of Istanbul, gazing by turns toward the west and the east.

Destiny and the always ambiguous nature of history continued my family's enforced migration, and because of it I, too, became one who had to live and speak in translation. The disappearances, torture, and clandestine deaths in my country in the early seventies drove us to the United States, that other America that looked with suspicion at those who did not speak English and especially those who came from the supposedly uncivilized regions of Latin America. I had left a dangerous place that was my home, only to arrive in a dangerous place that was not: a high school in the small town of Athens, Georgia, where my poor English and my accent were the cause of ridicule and insult. The only way I could recover my usurped country and my Chilean childhood was by continuing to write in Spanish, the same way my grandparents had sung in their own tongues in diasporic[4] sites.

The new and learned English language did not fit with the visceral emotions and themes that my poetry contained, but by writing in Spanish I could recover fragrances, spoken rhythms, and the passion of my own identity. Daily I felt the need to translate myself for the strangers living all around me, to tell them why we were in Georgia, why we are different, why we had fled, why my accent was so thick, and why I did not look Hispanic. Only at night, writing poems in Spanish, could I return to my senses, and soothe my own sorrow over what I had left behind.

This is how I became a Chilean poet who wrote in Spanish and lived in the southern United States. And then, one day, a poem of mine was translated and published in the English language. Finally, for the first time since I had left Chile, I felt I didn't have to explain myself. My poem, expressed in another language, spoke for itself . . . and for me.

2. **shtetl** a small Jewish village or town in Eastern Europe, from the Yiddish word meaning "little town."

3. **Ladino** a nearly extinct Romance language, based on archaic Spanish and brought from Spain by Jews expelled during the Inquisition; spoken by Sephardic Jews, who ultimately settled in the Balkans, North Africa, and the Middle East.

4. **diasporic** relating to a diaspora, or dispersion of a group of people across a large geographic area.

Sometimes the austere sounds of English help me bear the solitude of knowing that I am foreign and so far away from those about whom I write. I must admit I would like more opportunities to read in Spanish to people whose language and culture is also mine, to join in our common heritage and in the feast of our sounds. I would also like readers of English to understand the beauty of the spoken word in Spanish, that constant flow of oxytonic and paraoxytonic syllables (*Vérde qué té quiéro vérde*),[5] the joy of writing—of dancing—in another language. I believe that many exiles share the unresolvable torment of not being able to live in the language of their childhood.

I miss that undulating and sensuous language of mine, those baroque descriptions, the sense of being and feeling that Spanish gives me. It is perhaps for this reason that I have chosen and will always choose to write in Spanish. Nothing else from my childhood world remains. My country seems to be frozen in gestures of silence and oblivion. My relatives have died, and I have grown up not knowing a young generation of cousins and nieces and nephews. Many of my friends were disappeared, others were tortured, and the most fortunate, like me, became guardians of memory. For us, to write in Spanish is to always be in active pursuit of memory. I seek to recapture a world lost to me on that sorrowful afternoon when the blue electric sky and the Andean cordillera[6] bade me farewell. On that, my last Chilean day, I carried under my arm my innocence recorded in a little blue notebook I kept even then. Gradually that diary filled with memoranda, poems written in free verse, descriptions of dreams and of the thresholds of my house surrounded by cherry trees and gardenias. To write in Spanish is for me a gesture of survival. And because of translation, my memory has now become a part of the memory of many others.

Translators are not traitors, as the proverb says, but rather splendid friends in this great human community of language.

5. **oxytonic** with main stress on the final or only syllable of a word. **paroxytonic** with main stress on the next-to-last syllable of a word. ***Vérde qué té quiéro vérde*** "Green. How I want you green," the opening line of a poem by Federico García Lorca, illustrating oxytonic and paroxytonic stress.

6. ***cordillera*** mountain ranges consisting of parallel chains of peaks.

English

I discovered that English
is too skinny,
functional,
precise,
too correct,
meaning
only one thing.
Too much wrath,
too many lawyers and sinister policemen,
too many deans at schools for small females,
in the Anglo-Saxon language.

II
In contrast Spanish
has so many words to say come with me friend,
make love to me on
the *césped*, the *grama*, the *pasto*.[1]
Let's go party,[2]
at dusk, at night, at sunset.
Spanish
loves
the unpredictable, it is
dementia,
all windmills[3] and velvet.

1. All three words mean *grass* in English [Translator's note].

2. The Spanish version of this poem uses two phrases which mean *to party: de juerga* and *de fiesta* [Translator's note].

3. **windmills** an allusion to Don Quijote, who tilted at windmills on his old nag, imagining them to be giants. Quijote is the hero of Miguel de Cervantes's comic and satiric seventeenth-century novel of the same name. In the book, Quijote (also spelled Quixote), having read too many courtly romances, goes off to find adventure. Quijote's name and the adjective "quixotic" are used for someone who, inspired by high (but often false) ideals, pursues an impossible project or task. See the reference to Quijote in line 33.

III
Spanish
is simple and baroque,
a palace of nobles and beggars,
it fills itself with silences and the breaths of dragonflies.
Neruda's[4] verses
saying "I could write the saddest verses
tonight,"
or Federico[5] swimming underwater through the greenest of greens.

IV
Spanish
is Don Quijote maneuvering,
Violeta Parra[6] grateful
spicy, tasty, fragrant
the rumba, the salsa, the cha-cha.
There are so many words
to say
naive dreamers
and impostors.
There are so many languages in our
language: Quechua, Aymará, Rosas chilensis, Spanglish.[7]

V
I love the imperfections of
Spanish,

4. **(Pablo) Neruda** pen name of the Nobel Prize–winning Chilean poet, politician, and diplomat (1904–1973), whom many consider the finest Latin American poet of the twentieth century.

5. **Federico García Lorca** Spanish poet and playwright (1898–1936); a sympathizer with leftist causes and a homosexual, Lorca was executed by a Nationalist firing squad early in the Spanish Civil War under mysterious circumstances.

6. **Violeta Parra** Chilean folksinger (1917–1967) most often associated with "La Nueva Canción," a style of Chilean and Latin American popular music influenced by folk traditions. Her best-known song is perhaps "Gracias à la Vida" ("Thanks to life").

7. **Quechua** the language of the former Inca Empire and the major indigenous language of the central Andes today. **Aymará** a major indigenous language of Bolivia. **Rosas chilensis** Latin species name for a rose indigenous to Chile. **Spanglish** popular label for the practice of switching between Spanish and English within conversation or sentences as many bilingual Hispanics do when they speak with other bilinguals.

the language takes shape in my hand: 45
the sound of drums and waves,
the Caribbean in the radiant foam of the sun,
are delirious upon my lips.
English has fallen short for me,
it signifies business, 50
law
and inhibition,
never the crazy, clandestine,
clairvoyance of
love.

about the texts

1. Why does Agosín write only in Spanish? How does she relate using Spanish to her Jewish ancestry?
2. What sort of experiences did Agosín have while trying to learn English? How did Spanish represent a source of strength and consolation to her when she was learning English? How typical do you think her experiences are?
3. How does Agosín use two very different genres, the essay and poetry, to express similar sentiments? What advantages and limitations does each genre have? Why?

on language use

4. What do Spanish and English each represent for Agosín? Why? Most people have attachments like those Agosín describes to some language, language variety (e.g., a regional, social, or ethnic dialect), or language practice (e.g., codeswitching, hearing prayers recited in a particular language). Describe one such attachment you have.
5. What does English represent for you? Do you think it should signify the same thing to all its users? Why or why not?
6. Agosín's family has a multilingual history. How far back do you have to go to find multilingualism in your family? What was its source? What led to its disappearance?

for writing

7. Part of the power of Agosín's texts comes from the ways she links language and her decision to write in Spanish to many histories: her own, her family's, and the exiled Jewish people's. How does each of her languages contribute to these histories? Consider how she uses English and Spanish in her life and write an essay analyzing what it means for her to "recover . . . the familiar, through language" (paragraph 2). As you prepare to write, it may be useful to consider what Agosín might feel if she were forced to use English to narrate her life, and that of her family.
8. Judaism has been linked to many languages, including Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino. Choose one of the world's major religions and research the languages with which it has been linked and why. Write an essay about what you discover.