

Marjorie Agosin, "Always Living in Spanish"

MULTIPLE CHOICE

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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, 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, but everyone's mother tongue was always associated with the memory of spaces inhabited in the past: the shtetl¹, the flowering and vast Vienna avenues, the minarets of Turkey, and the Ladino 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 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 ate differently, 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.

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 paroxytonic² syllables (*Verde que te qui-*

ero verdo), 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.

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¹Yiddish: little town, specifically in Eastern Europe. — Eds.

²Oxytonic words stress the last syllable, while paroxytonics stress the next-to-last syllable. — Eds.

1. What is the primary function of the rhetorical questions in lines 10–11?
 - a. to make an implied statement
 - b. to set up the central topic of the essay
 - c. to challenge conventional wisdom
 - d. to set up a straightforward answer
 - e. none of the above

2. Which of the following best describes the speaker’s attitude toward her home country of Chile?
 - a. idealized reverence
 - b. cold objectivity
 - c. reluctant affection
 - d. lyrical nostalgia
 - e. harsh judgment

3. What do the sentences beginning “Since my earliest childhood in Chile” (lines 13–14) and “Spanish was reserved” (lines 16–20) have in common?
 - I. auditory description
 - II. categorical statements illustrated by specific examples
 - III. colloquial diction
 - a. I only
 - b. II only
 - c. III only
 - d. I and II only
 - e. I, II, and III

4. In context, the word “translate” (line 37) is best interpreted to mean
 - a. change
 - b. convert from one language into another
 - c. make comprehensible
 - d. become fluent in several languages
 - e. write in English

5. The speaker describes her relatives’ language backgrounds in order to
 - I. emphasize the linguistic differences between her relatives’ native tongues and her own native Spanish
 - II. provide evidence of the relationship between language, place, and identity
 - III. contextualize her own language experiences as part of a larger family history
 - a. I only
 - b. II only
 - c. III only
 - d. I and II only
 - e. II and III only

6. The excerpt as a whole can best be described as
- an unbiased account of the immigrant experience
 - a linguistic analysis of the differences between English and Spanish
 - a family history
 - a reflection on the power of native language
 - an argument for the superiority of Spanish over English as a language of passion and poetry
7. The primary contrast presented in the first and second paragraphs (lines 1-12) is between
- the north and the south
 - the familiar and the foreign
 - dictatorship and democracy
 - Spanish and English
 - questions and answers
8. In line 46, English is described as “austere.” By contrast, the speaker characterizes Spanish as
- lush and passionate
 - precise and impersonal
 - suited only to business and law
 - formal and ceremonial
 - easy to learn and understand
9. The sentence beginning “Because everyone was from somewhere else” (lines 15–16) makes use of which of the following devices?
- ethos
 - allusion
 - alliteration
 - understatement
 - paradox
10. The final sentence of the excerpt (lines 52–54) implies which of the following?
- It is not possible to translate every nuance of one language into another.
 - It is impossible to connect with speakers of other languages.
 - Childhood language shapes a person’s identity.
- I, II, and III
 - I and II only
 - II and III only
 - I and III only
 - I only