Mirene Arsanios

E autobiography di un idioma

> It is in this way that I did not become a mother; it is in this way that I bore my children.
> – Jamaica Kincaid

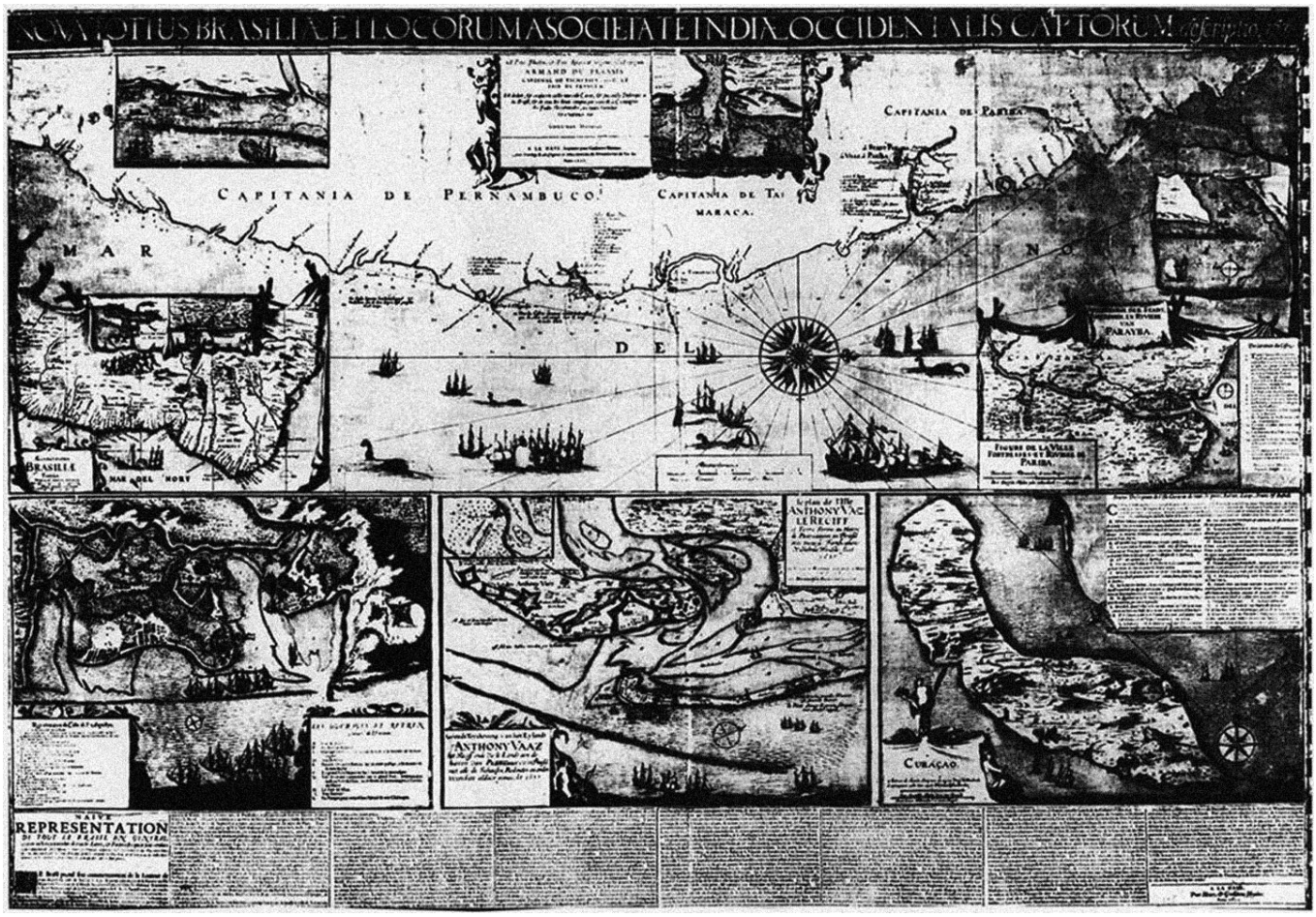
I am deregulated. A language for which no jurisdiction applies. My past is dirty. All pasts are dirty, though some are filthier than others. I'm of the filthier kind (sorto). I sit in a greasy bank account somewhere in the British Virgin Islands. I live here, amid a slew of luxury resorts, spas, and white tourists lathered in sunscreen, trailing iridescence in infinity pools. They smoke cigars, inhale tar, synch marriage proposals with blazing sunsets. They say I look pretty (bunita) in my blue (blou) robe, compliment my hair, the way I keep it (e) silky with imported oils. They ask questions: What do you do and are you a (un) local?

"I was born on a nearby island where my mother Elsa was born to her mother, Elina," I say. They give me a faint, uninterested smile. To shut me up, they buy me a glass of sauvignon blanc. I ask for an extra ice cube, a (otro) refill, then another (otro). It took a while, but I've improved at being myself. I can now speak without fatigue. I know everybody here (aki), the elderly and the young. The young believe I'm one of them but generations do not apply to me. I'm centuries old and have been pregnant for the past twenty years. They, the tourists, think I'm delirious, that I've had too much to drink. When they realize I'm telling the truth, they feel betrayed. What are you talking about? Is this even (hasta) a (un) language?

I also want to know. Why this language? In my mother's bedroom, an old television playing American movies was left on day and night. At first I thought I was alone, the private recipient of a dialect in black and white, but I soon realized that everyone was concerned and that this expansion was irreversible. It no longer needed ships – the physical vessel of its early dissemination. English scurried across ocean bottoms, seamlessly meandering continental distances. I never considered this language to be my own. I do not hate it. I do not love it. It is incidental and life is made of circumstances, outcomes of unruly trajectories. Elsa firmly believed that English would help me find a job in the hotel industry, communicate with tourists and the world beyond the island. English, she said, always leads to a resolution. It rarely strays from its intentions. It means what it says and is suited for uneven deals in which one of the parties always feels slightly fucked. English has "fuck" in it, a word that gives me great satisfaction.

People complain. They say I talk (papia) too much, but I'm not talking to them. I'm addressing

Detail of a 1964 advertisment for Curaçao liqueur.



Hendrik Hondius I, *Nova Totius Brasiliae at Locorum Asocietate Indiae Occidentalis Captorum,* 1635. Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.

Papiamentu (list A): Curaçao

1.	I	amí, mi
2.	thou	abó, bo
3.	we	nos
4.	this	e . . . akí
5.	that	e . . . ajá/ej
6.	who?	k'énde; keng
7.	what?	kíko, ki-
8.	not	no
9.	all	tur
10.	many	hópi
11.	one	ung
12.	two	dos
13.	big	grándi
14.	long	lárgu
15.	small	tjikítu
16.	woman	muhé
17.	man	hómbər
18.	person	hénde
19.	fish	piská
20.	bird	pára
21.	dog	katjó

Rea, my unborn daughter, in a language she can address me in. "Mother tongues" imply a process of natural acquisition, an (un) accumulation founded on (riba) the repetition of syntaxical gestures, but the link between "mother" and "tongues" isn't as linear as it (e) may (mei) seem. It is circuitous and (í) hot and (í) cold. Rea is delivering a language I'm preparing myself to receive. Her words have traversed the future a long time ago, as they say.

With time, I've learned to lean on expressions. They're founded on hard-won consensus and their meaning is fixed like an island rock. I wasn't entirely honest when I said that I could speak without fatigue. The acrobatics of points of view are exhausting. I'll (lo) have to stop scavenging hotel bars for dregs of white wine, get my narrative (historia) straight, find an interlocutor. If we (nos) sat facing each other (otro) or next to each other (otro) at a bar, you'd recognize me because I'm rather petite and wear a finger on each (kada) ring or vice versa. A diagonal scar cuts through my right cheek. I'm average looking, with long, wavy hair (kabei). We'd have an arrangement. You'd ask me about my life, then (anto) I'd tell you about it. How generations are stages crafted between sleep and lucidity. How I have come to language by tending to my own absence. I'd say: If it weren't for you (abo), I wouldn't be here (aki).

I would have liked to come to you (abo) with something more reliable, like documents (akto), but I'm an oral language (idioma) – an Afro-Portuguese proto-creole developed on the western coast (kosta) of Africa and brought over to the Caribbean in the seventeenth century. That's one of the theories of my genesis. There are others (otronan). Dutch and Spanish tagged along at later stages, with a few Arawak words (palabranan). Initially, slave traders and slaves used me to "communicate"; then I was just used (merka). The only document in my possession says I was born on the island of Curaçao, north of the Venezuelan shore. Linguists struggle to match my identity to a location. Words travel and land in places (luganan) that do not match their jurisdiction (a nation (nashon)-state).

Parenthesis (kram): When I say "my life," I'm conveying an illusion of ownership propped up by a possessive pronoun (sustantivo), as if my inflections (bos) were mine or as if I could control the way people (hende) use me every day to hate or love each other (otro), or say nothing with words I make available to them. The latter is particularly tedious if you ask me. Ask me (pidi mi).

I'm aware of how much I'm asking of you (abo) – to believe that I have a life, a body, a mother, a daughter (benidero yiu muhé), while also being a language, a system with everyday life (bida) applications, an abstraction. I myself (mi mes) cannot explain this bizarre predicament, how I came to exist in these multiple, contradictory ways. I gave it some thought and have come to the conclusion that everybody shares (dividí) my condition: millions speak languages that are spoken by them alone (djis).

To be clear, I take your identifications seriously. When I use examples, my intention isn't to illustrate an idea with biographical material. When I refer to my condition as a language, I'm not escaping the body I inhabit. Now, I am this body, living on these islands, working in the service industry, chopping vegetables in local kitchens, searching for my grandmother's bank account and the particulars of the history of my inflections, how I was once a language who read exactly as it was pronounced, with nothing separating my oral and written forms, how I am the result of random linguistic amalgamations stabilized into reproducible forms (forma).

Fucking foreign languages is my fetish. I got pregnant with Maurizio, the gardener's son, who fingered me in his father's coop, stroking my genitals through repeated orgasms. Have you ever heard a language cum? Elina was outraged to see me love such an obviously poor (pober) person (hende). Although she was born poor (pober), she married rich twice: once (un biaha), an ice factory owner (doño), later, a paper factory owner (doño). She enjoyed the privileges ownership made available (disponibel) to her (su): cleaning ladies, wide patios, expensive jewelry, and what it disavowed: her creole (mi), her darker skin, her past as an aid in a hairdressing salon, her matriarchal upbringing, her (su) absent father. Elina believed that Spanish was better suited for wealth then creole. She stopped speaking (mi) altogether. Mostly, she used me to withhold information: she expressed her silences in an oral language.

After her first husband died, Elina moved from Curaçao to the Venezuelan mainland and married Juan, the paper factory owner. She disclosed very little of herself or of her family. She had no sisters, brothers, mothers (mama), or fathers. She was allergic to shrimps and had a strong aversion to the past, itching at every instance of recollection. Like a piece of modernist architecture, she was her own beginning. She lived in elevated apartments with a view of what was below, paced excessively polished hardwood floors to and fro. Although she was rich (ricu), Elina never took any of her possessions for granted. She knew (konosemento) that everything (tur kos) could be taken away from her (su) at any moment (tempu). She kept an orange (orañe) blow-dryer wrapped

Family photograph from the author's personal collection.

in a silk scarf, and personally dusted her pitch-black rotary phones. One was placed in the kitchen. From the other, in her boudoir, she would call her high-society friends demanding that their sons take me out on blind dates. I couldn't say no. I was a young language (becoming un muhé ta becoming un idioma). She'd give me tips (konsehá) on how to keep my skin soft (dushi). After dining with boys who owned cars they couldn't drive, I'd sneak into the garden where Maurizio awaited me. In the mornings, we (nos) ate eggs (webu) from the coop scrambled with chopped (kap) peppers and leftover fish while Elina and Elsa frantically searched for me in foreign words (pa donde se metio esta pendeja?).

I haven't learned how to write about myself without leaning on my human experiences. If I were consistent, I'd begin with descriptions of the island (isla), the geology of its soil, the epitaphs of its tombstones, Elina's family, the history of their formation: the mixing of colonizers and colonized, the varying percentage of each in her (mi) blood. I am (ta) the outcome of that foundational clash, a descendent of European imperialism, its subjugation of people and extraction of land. I am of that extraction, a language used to violate and spoken to survive. I sway between these two identities. I have identity issues. You could say that my mythologies are intoxicated and that I have found expression in compromised (tradukshon) lineages, encountered liberation in loss – a kind of irresponsible, adolescent freedom.

Sometimes (anochi) I fancy myself a detective. Are my interruptions personal, historical, circumstantial? When did my or her shortages of love and language begin? I've tried asking questions but the only story Elsa has ever relayed concerns sun poisoning. Every weekend, Elina would send off children to the beach without sunscreen. Elsa never stopped complaining about the freckled back she earned from these repeated exposures, how she couldn't walk for days, skin peeling off deeper skin, her entire childhood wedged in the promise (primintí) of a molting cycle. By marrying a man of European descent, Elina had watered down her own indigeneity. She must have loved her children for their fairer skin and despised them for the same reason: they could barely walk under the sun (solo).

Elina's emancipation from her past on the island resided in wealth. She wanted to experience life from the other side of a wave. She (e muhe) saved everything she could: pennies, food scraps, her beauty (for (pa) she was very beautiful). She saved her body for men that could afford it, not boys like Maurizio. She taught me how to swim (landa). I learned (siña). I observed Elina's language every summer, the way I belonged to and refused her lineage of wealth and detachment.

Elina worried about how the poor (pober) hated (odia) her (su). She didn't understand the meaning of words like "imperialism," "justice," or "people" (hende): concepts as foreign to her (su) as she was foreign to herself (mes). I became a translator. I studied the way her silences roamed from room to room, their textures, depth, what portions could be accessed and which ones were out of reach. She didn't want language (mi) around her wealth. She was deeply attached to it (su rikesa), a preverbal bond she nurtured through accumulation (akumulashon). This is where (unda) she had found power. Power (ripití) is the absence (manko) of articulation (mi).

Elsa, my mother, shared Elina's inclinations towards (na) class and wealth, silently complying with her mother's social aspirations. She saved money to buy a Corvette, barely ate any food. She invested in a nose job and looked for someone who could afford the jewelry Elina donned at dinner parties. Technically, Elsa was my mother. She studied French in the afternoons with other aspiring French speakers. She spoke French to me instead of Spanish, her surrogate mother tongue. It felt natural, or not unnatural, to communicate in a language that was foreign to both of us. We traveled the world, away from the island. We lived far from history (historia). Our abstractions were murderous, hiding bodies behind sunsets, on the other side of a horizon line.

When Elsa felt sick, Elina financed her treatments. At that time, life organized itself around hospitals and home care, receiving pain (doló) through treatment while administering its side effects. Elina kept repeating "mi dios." Elsa emptied her mind. She visited the island as a relaxation exercise (santo, blou, brisa). She imagined yellow (geel) gold and light (cende) flowing through her damaged blood. Her newfound relationship to language (mi) and her summoning of the island (mi) awoke her to the benefits of literacy. She insisted on sending me (mi) to college, investing in a knowledge system at the antipodes of my beginnings.

I learned how to express myself. In English, I learned I had a self. I disagreed with most of the books I read. I underlined the sentence "woman writing thinks back through her mothers" in Virginia Woolf's book *A Room of One's Own*. Although I presented as a woman, I was a language, I told my teacher. They thought I was crazy, out of my mind. I insisted. I feared that by connecting mothers and language, Woolf was summoning the sanctity of mother tongues, normalizing a biologically sanctioned bond in service of the monolingual nation-state. As you

might have noticed, I began using longer (largu) words. My language grew heavier (pisá), more (mas) referential. I used critical (critical) terminology, words meant to assuage personal anxieties by exposing oppression in sharable ways. I wrote papers on separating language from biology. What about those without mothers or those disengaged from daughterhood when it entailed the reproduction of patriarchal, national narratives? "There are other types of lineages: broken, colonial, and different acts of (non-)storytelling – generational tales in which transmissions are withheld and beginnings arbitrary," I wrote. "Daughter" implies a sequence, a chronology to our transmissions. I, on the other hand, predated my mother the way my daughter predates me. All this time, Rea has been addressing me. Ami duná nasemento awor. I call up the island. I ask for Rea. She's the voice on the $5 card telling me that I have a few seconds left and that my credit is about to end.

When Elsa died, estranged in a foreign land, Elina passed in her sleep. In hindsight, I'm convinced that their departures were schemed, a revenge, leaving mi short of words (ami konosé kí na bias). My uncle, Ernesto, claimed Elina's inheritance: her bank accounts, apartments, European silverware, ebony dining table, leather chairs, the photographs of Elsa speaking (papia) on a beach. All that Elina had achieved, trading history for wealth, was being stolen anew. I began doubting my (mi manko di) worth. I craved documents, a will, a birth certificate. I wanted (ker) to be part of the literary cannon – a language cited by others (otronan), creating legacies that had been denied to me (mi) while knowing that these momentary acts of legitimatization betrayed my unraveling grammar (gramátika). I desired explanations, stories I could pass down, or an apartment with a mirrored floor. I wanted experience with a blueprint, something I could photocopy and file. I wanted a story that could be relayed, a solid language, a land that could be mapped onto a passport, a date of birth. I wanted to stop using the first person (prome hende).

The moral of the story, if there is one, is that the man, the man Ernesto, invested mi inheritance – the wealth Elina had expropriated from other men – in the British Virgin Islands, an archipelago on which abstraction and history fight a feeble, indifferent battle. Anochi, I drop my parenthesis and call Rea. I want mi money "back," she says. She uses "back" to signal debt, a historia in need of resolution. When I'm done chopping vegetable and gulping down dregs of white wine left over by tourists, I roam the island in search of Elina's bank accounts. "To know where the corpses are buried, follow the money," Elina would say, imparting knowledge I'm now passing down to you, mi daughters.

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