Back to Galicia

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My given name, my birth name, is Concha Maria Castro Pardo. I was going to be named Maria, after my father’s mother who had died before he was able to remember her, but my grandmother’s upstairs neighbor, Elvira, intervened. She thought that Maria was much too plain and provincial. Instead she offered a compromise: I would be called Concha Maria. Concha after the heroine of a radio soap opera popular at that time, and Maria to satisfy my father.

For the longest time, my surviving grandmother, Amparo, had my birth announcement hanging on the wall in her living room. It showed a blonde, long-haired angel in a white robe blowing into a long wind instrument, while floating over the countryside. Below, shepherds looked up at the angel and listened to the announcement of my birth, this first of June of 1957. In the shape of a diploma and framed in gold, it proclaimed that I had graduated to life. I eventually took ownership of that announcement when I lived in England. Over all my moves in all those years, it got lost. I miss it.

I remember being called Conchita, a diminutive of Concha, all of my childhood; or, rather, those few full years I spent in Spain before being spirited to Switzerland at age five. There too I was called Conchita by my parents, but that was only at home and only on good days. At school I was known as Concha, Concha Castro to be precise. The brevity of my name in Switzerland illustrated the doing away with a part of me that I would not recover for many years.

At first, the transplant did not take. The “climate” did not agree with me. So after a year full of illness and fear, at the recommendation of doctors, I was taken back to Spain. Back to Galicia. There my grandmother called me “Conchita” and curled my hair with sugared water and put ribbons at the ends of my twin ponytails. She used to iron those ribbons.

One afternoon shortly after our arrival, my parents took me to the park downtown so I could ride on the merry-go-round. I was sitting on a white horse, holding an ice cream cone when I saw my parents blow me kisses and leave. Bewildered, I looked around and only saw my grandmother. She wiped my tears, took me home, and kept me for a year. Later, I was told that it was better to leave me in that way; I was too young to understand at the time: “How do you explain these things to a child of six?”

Once I was returned to Lausanne, Switzerland, Conchita became Concha (with the French stress on the last syllable) on a permanent basis. With my new name came a new identity. No more ribbons in my hair. Instead I braided my own hair and donned warmer clothes, never warm enough it seemed, to go to school. This was not my first encounter with learning, though. I had been to school in A Coruña. When I was three, my grandmother sent me to a neighborhood school run by two sadistic sisters who fancied themselves secular nuns. The sisters were almost identical with red nails and black robes. The only difference was that one had bright red hair while the other’s hair was raven black. I don’t even need to close my eyes to see them. They are with me to this day.

The school accepted pupils aged three to eighteen although it only had one large room with long tables and benches. I remember vividly sitting on those benches and feeling that something was biting me. The sisters’ devotion to the church was evident in the donation box “for the poor” strategically located by their twin desks. The older students, savvy to the ways of the classroom world, came to class armed with a handful of coins. During the individual daily recitation, which varied depending on the pupil, these older students filled the blanks of their memories with the tinkling of coins hitting the bottom of the donation box. The alternative was the ruler. Because of my age and low supply of coins, more often than not my hands bore the brunt of my faulty memory.

Swiss school was very different. In first grade we were all seven or eight years old. My classmates, a few of them with fair hair and blue eyes, made foreign sounds that I could not understand. For the first few months, the only sound I could accurately recognize was my new name: “Conchaaa.” I became a silent child. This silence did not last, however. Soon I began mimicking the other children and often enough, I was able to communicate my needs if not my thoughts. From the time I was eight until I turned eighteen, once a year, we would take the train and go back to Galicia. I remember sleeping on blankets on the floor, my parents standing like flesh and blood caryatids holding the ceiling of the train’s hallway in place, bracing their legs around my sister and me. The tchakatcha-tchakatcha sound of the train lollled me to sleep. Periodically the talk of grownups and their drunken laughter would wake me up and I would catch snippets of conversation from of a Galician man on his way home to the family he
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It felt wonderful to enter my grandmother's house. The smell was that of home and always, the first thing I saw was the "paraguero." Although the name suggests that it was only an umbrella stand, in fact, this piece of furniture was quite large. It took up most of the hallway wall facing the front door and incorporated an old and foggy mirror surrounded by wrought iron coat hooks. It also contained a round brass umbrella stand. The sight of the paraguero, much like the sight of my grandmother's earrings, made my heart relax and sigh with the comfort of being home. Nothing ever changed. That was the one constant in my life then: No matter what happened in my world, my grandmother was always there when we arrived. No need to worry about calling ahead or writing: she was always there, in one of her ubiquitous flowery aprons that covered her dark house dresses, always protesting that she was not "arreglada" when we arrived. Her joy at seeing us was unmistakable. She would cry and laugh and cry out our names in an ecstasy of emotion.

We always arrived unexpectedly. I think my mother enjoyed my grandmother's surprise and delight. After many kisses, hugs and tears, my grandmother would send me three doors down to buy food from "la Señora María," a mom and pop neighborhood store consisting of one big room divided by a tall counter lined with bags and boxes of groceries, and beyond which you could see small crates of fruit and tins of tomatoes, large jars of olives, bottles of olive oil and hanging cured hams and hard salami, and of course chorizo. There were also salted "bacalao," which I loved. My grandmother found me more than once hiding in the pantry where the fish hung almost as tall as me, eating the salty, flavorful flesh in the sea-like atmosphere of salt and darkness. One of my favorite dishes was my grandmother's "raje," which she cooked with potatoes and her "refrito" made, as far as I could tell, by frying up olive oil with garlic and her magic spice: "azafrán." It came in a small white folded paper, not much bigger than a stamp. I can still taste and feel the exquisite cartilaginous bones of the fish in my mouth, as I write these words.

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But even that life wasn't real. We floated around A Coruña like gorged balloons that slowly deflate over time and inevitably run out of air and plop to the ground. Summers existed as oases of light and laughter. In Galicia I was Conchita again. I could stay out and play in the street late into the night while my grandmother, leaning on the unscreened windowsill conversed with the neighbors and my parents were out with their friends. My braids would again be adorned with ribbons and my dresses starched. But summers always ended.

The trip back to Lausanne was gloomy. The Galician man was silent. Mostly, immigrants braced themselves for the return to the unwelcoming host country that exploited them. But once in a while something would happen to enliven the trip. I remember a time when Swiss customs discovered "chorizos," cured hams and other Spanish delicacies in our train. Normally, we all wore this contraband around our waists and passed through customs undetected. However, this time they were on to us. But instead of letting the custom officials confiscate the food, our train load of Galicians sat around the train station and ate all of it while the Swiss officials looked on. The news spread like wildfire around the immigrant community. We were heroes!

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By the time I was nineteen, I was ready to move on. Switzerland had no hold on me. The only thing of value it offered me, I had to turn down. When I was sixteen, in view of my long residency in the country and my youth, the Swiss authorities offered me a Swiss passport. The problem was that to accept it, I had to renounce my Spanish citizenship. I couldn't do that. My nationality was the only real connection to my homeland, the only identity that I could hold on to. So I said no. Instead, I decided to leave the country that gave me both a good education and an inferiority complex. On the recommendation of my American English teacher, I took a job as an "au pair" girl with a Swiss family living in Boston. Leaving was easy. I was escaping a difficult family situation as well as a life as a second class citizen. Thus began my American life. Little did I know when I left Switzerland that years later, after many detours, America would help me reconnect with Galicia.

* * * *

There are small events in our lives that seem insignificant at first, but which prove to be major turning points that send us in unexpected directions.

Almost ten years ago, one such event took place in my life. At the time, I was doing research for my thesis on Samuel Beckett. It was an ordinary day of research for me. As with most days, I had taken over a long, isolated table at the university library, where I had sprawled all of my notes and reference books. On this particular day, I was browsing through a book about Beckett's exile, when a loud thump startled me. Annoyed at the interruption, I turned around ready to stare down the culprit. But there was no one there. All I saw was a book splayed on the floor. Intrigued, still holding my book on Beckett, I got up and walked over to have a look. Unbelievably, it was the biography of a Galician woman named Carmen. It recounted her life in Galicia and the tribulations of many of her family members who had had to emigrate because of the terrible economic circumstances there.

I was stunned.

What are the odds of a book about a woman from one of the most remote regions of Spain practically falling at the feet of another Galician woman in a university library in Southern Illinois?

I can honestly say that until then I had not given my immigrant status much thought. As a matter of fact, it was balled up with all the unpleasant memories I had left behind when leaving Switzerland and my family in 1976. The library incident changed all that.

A few days later, a member of a local Irish folk band was a guest speaker in one of my Irish Studies classes. He was to be part two of my back-to-Galicia odyssey.

I was enjoying his lecture, and thinking about how familiar the Irish music sounded, when I thought I heard him mention Galicia. Confused, I strained to hear him better. It was true: He had mentioned Galicia. By now he was explaining that the northwestern part of Spain was also of Celtic origin and that the Irish band "The Chieftains" had cut an album with a Galician band, "Milladoiro." Shaken, I raised my hand and stuttered that I was from Galicia. He gave me a broad smile and boomed: "You're a Spanish Celt!"

Growing up, my native Galician culture was foreign to me because my parents had been taught to devalue it, not just in Spain where the Castilian language and culture were dominant, but also in Switzerland where economic immigrants were necessary but unwelcome. Located on the Lac Léman, better known internationally as the Lake of Geneva, Lausanne was the home of many Spaniards and Italians in the late sixties. Most of the Spaniards there were Galicians, as much like the Irish, many Galicians' lives are built around emigration. Switzerland had invited Spaniards, Portuguese and Italians to come and build her highways and dams, but with the express condition that they stay in their place and not mingle with the Swiss. Too many exotic smells in hallways or too much laughter outdoors might taint the decorous Swiss atmosphere.

Although my father would occasionally take me to the Galician Center in Lausanne, these outings were rare as my mother disapproved of the "peasants" who frequented it and ended by the time I was nine. However, those few visits have left an indelible mark upon me.

Walking through the doors of the Galician Center felt like stepping into a new world. Past the threshold, smells and sounds that were at the same time familiar and foreign enveloped me. Everyone there spoke in a strange Spanish that I had difficulty understanding. To my amazement, my father communicated easily with these people. Not only that, but his usual angry self also softened in the sunlight of this camaraderie. He laughed and joked with these other Galician immigrants, who, with their dignity and their smiles restored, could pretend for the space of a few hours that they...
were back home. In this little Galicia, my father would sometimes stroke my head in between sentences and call me Conchiña.” This new name sounded warm and nostalgic as if he were referring to someone he had already lost.

I began to treasure these outings. Mainly, I relished the food: I watched as the cook lifted the steaming “pulpo” from a monstrous pot and chopped it up into bite-size morsels. My mouth salivated as I watched her first drizzle pure olive oil on the octopus, and then sprinkle it with red pepper. At the Center, I could also order chorizo, boiled red crabs, and my favorites: “minchas.” I still don’t know what to call these tiny sea snails in English. I used to spend hours digging into the wet, dark spirals with a pin and inevitably emerge surprised at my reward: a curlicue of flesh that looked much like a cooked worm. These little shells were delicious and salty like the sea, and such a meager reward for my efforts that I was driven to attack the next shell with redoubled energy. I didn’t know then that what I liked the sea, and such a meager reward for my efforts that I was driven to rediscover it and make it mine again.

Years later, when I was about thirteen and had already established my lifelong friendship with a Swiss girl named Danielle, I had another encounter with Galicia. We were still living in Switzerland, but by then my parents had divorced and my mother was working in a department store much like Bloomingdales. She had befriended a janitor who was also from Galicia. I don’t remember his name, but I can see him in my mind: short, with a little potbelly, black hair that was beginning to recede although he must have been in his mid-twenties, and light blue eyes that bulged out like a frog’s. He insisted on giving me books of Galician poetry.

Unfortunately, as a teenager I was not interested in questions of identity or culture. I was too busy trying to blend in and avoided anything that would make me stand out; particularly anything that identified me as a foreigner. So I did not profit much from this unexpected mentor. His image is still with me, though, so I guess he did reach me after all.

The year that library book fell into my life and gave it a new direction was 1998. Since then, I have felt driven to write about Galicia in order to understand myself. The rediscovery of my people, language, and culture has been a miracle of sorts. By researching the history of my people, I have found myself.

Raffaele Furno


Researching the archives to build a grounded historical framework on the discourse of blackness in Italy, I came across very few critical studies in Italian that covered the presence of African immigrants in the country prior to the 1970s. The absence of any extended analysis of the topic speaks to what Linda Hutcheon calls historiography’s primary characteristics - its gaps, lacunae, and missing traces - making the writing of history dangerously similar to fiction. This article aims to address the genealogy of inter-ethnic relations in contemporary Italy, recovering those geopolitical and performative elements that have brought blacks and whites to face one another. Supplementing the reading of history with a closer look at popular cultural forms - songs, jokes, advertisements - I hope to demonstrate that Italians deal with African migrants within a framework of “historical forgetfulness.” The lack of a serious conversation on the colonial past, the erasure of a long history of cross-Mediterranean exchanges, a pervasive self-representation of Italy as a land of emigrants rather than immigrants, and the internalization of a racial discourse that depicts linguistic, religious and cultural differences as insurmountable barriers, all contribute to the idea that immigration in Italy is a recent phenomenon, a fast-paced multi-directional invasion, and a national emergency.

Before dwelling into the specifics of my argumentation, allow me to address the archival and ethnographic methodology of research that led me to the current state of my work. In the discussion below, I will engage a tradition of performance activism, one that connects de Certeau’s notion of the difference between “the presence and circulation of a representation” and “its manipulation by users who are not its makers” and Dwight Conquergood’s groundbreaking study of “street youth suffer[ing] from both too little visibility, and too much visibility. Either they are willed to disappear or they are rendered hypervisible within the scopic regimes of power.” Notwithstanding the fact that we function within a cultural system that emphasizes hierarchical relations among people and their commodification through a division of labor, performance as activism reclaims the innovative ways in which “the ordinary man” a-la-de Certeau roots & routes