

The Many Lives of Mirta Ojito

by A. Francesca Jenkins

We are often challenged to see the complexities of a life behind a façade. All too often, we see what we wish to see and avoid seeing what we don't want to experience. By her own account, journalist Mirta Ojito has always been curious, always wanted to probe behind the obvious *and* the mysterious. In her acclaimed book, *Finding Mañana: A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus*, a personal and historical account of the Mariel exodus in which 125,000 people were boatlifted from Cuba, Ojito searches out the truth and in the process lays bare her own life. That takes a double courage.

Ojito, 44, a wife and mother of three sons, Pulitzer-prizewinning journalist, successful author and teacher, appears to juggle her life's priorities with the deftness of an acrobat. In two conversations, one in person with her in Florida and one by phone, *The Hispanic Outlook* explored Ojito's various successes and challenges as a woman and professional, and found, not surprisingly, that her life choices interweave, comprising a unique and vast landscape that includes Cuba and a past to which she will always somehow belong.

A writer belongs to her words, her recreations, which reflect both experience and imagination. But how can one know certainly that what one recalls is exactly what transpired? Years ago, playwright Lillian Hellman wrote a book called *Maybe: A Story* in which she explored the idea that life turns to fiction both in telling and recollecting.

Finding others who shared the same story helped Ojito uncover the dimensions of her truth. Referring to the enterprise of her book, Ojito said, "There are many instances where I re-create situations regarding newspaper accounts, but I wasn't there. But I don't believe that memory is that infallible. I didn't want to fall into that trap. My memory collaborated."

The most critical collaborators were, of course, members of Ojito's immediate family. "My sister, mother and father were the most intimate witnesses because they lived my life with me. Everything else was the product of intense hours of reporting." Up to the last minute, Ojito said, she was "confirming things," letting people read the narrative who had been there – to make sure that what she was saying was true.

Ojito calls *Finding Mañana* her story "but also a story of a generation that grew up in the early years of the Cuban revolution when the driving force of the regime was really ideology. My contention is that it hasn't been an ideological regime in many years. To



solidify that huge ideological and political change in Cuba, the government used the pliable character of children.

"From the time I was born until I was 15, I was very isolated there. All that began to change in 1978 with the so-called dialogue between the government and Cuban exiles. It was an eye-opening experience. That's when we understood we had been lied to."

Ojito described *Finding Mañana* as "my story and the story of a deceived generation ruthlessly used for political and ideological purposes, and the story of U.S./Cuba relations" in the 10 to 15 years before the 1980 boatlift.

The Backbone of Family

Ojito's father, who died last February, lived to see the success of his daughter's book and played a pivotal role in evolving her conscience, she said. "Many people have told me the book is a love song to my dad. He was a towering presence in my life. Because of the anxiety with which they conducted their lives in Cuba, my dad really wanted to leave Cuba. It must have been huge for him to have a daughter who didn't want to leave Cuba. He let me reach my own conclusions."

Ojito remains very close to her sister, four years

younger, and her mother.

"My mother always expected us to do well and to do the best we could. She never promised rewards for good behavior. It was an expectation."

Both Ojito's parents had no more than a sixth-grade education. Her mother was a seamstress; her father, a truck driver in Cuba.

Asked what qualities she gleaned from them, Ojito said, "my mother's curiosity and my father's good listening and huge empathy and understanding for others."

She inherited important values too: "Integrity. A moral compass was hugely important – and being good and self-respect. The profession I chose didn't matter.

"The expectations my parents had were so high. I was never told because you're an immigrant or because you came here when you were 16 that there is something I could not do."

Gender was no inhibitor either. "Neither my mother nor my father felt that because I was a woman there was something I couldn't do. My mother wasn't the kind of mother who said you can be an astronaut, but there were no barriers either. My parents gave me the freedom to define myself. The main way that you do that in Cuba is

politically.”

Asked what her thoughts are about Cuba today, under a different Castro, Ojito said: “The Cuban people are so focused on getting food on the table, anyone who can improve their lot would be better. Will Raúl be better able to do that? Perhaps. Will it translate to other freedoms? I doubt it. It’s not so much about what Raúl is going to do, but what the Cubans are going to do.”

The Journalist

Writing is a means to stay connected to the past. It also opened avenues to Ojito’s careers as journalist and teacher. Ojito has worked at *The Miami Herald*, *El Nuevo Herald* and *The New York Times*.

“I don’t view writing as an ordeal. I enjoy the process. What drives me is an enormous curiosity. I’m not the kind of person who gets energized by what’s impossible – I become energized when I see something is possible.”

She said she first decided to become a journalist when “I was not quite a teenager. I was so curious. A neighbor explained what being a journalist meant. A journalist was described as someone who likes everything and is not passionate about anything.

“If I were to interview a scientist for three days, then a ballet dancer for three days, it would never occur to me to become a scientist or a ballerina. I was interested in everything journalism allows me – you become an expert in eight hours or less. What I like about journalism is the ability to learn about everything without dedicating to anything but the craft of journalism.”

After so many stories as a reporter, does she have a favorite?

“A little story I wrote as a reporter in 1997 about 70 deaf and mute enslaved Mexicans found in Queens. The story that they gave to a police station broke early one morning, and I wrote a note about the bosses that abused them and how they were kept in enslaved conditions in the subway.”

Due to the timing of the story, there was virtually no time to write it. “I composed the story as I dictated the story on the phone from my notes. They told me it was perfect.” It made the front page, running as a companion piece to a larger story.

“I was new to *The New York Times*. I had only been there one year. This was the side bar.”

Reporting and Writing

The idea for *Finding Mañana* came to Ojito in 1999, she said, although she did not start working on it full time until 2002. It was published in April 2005. During the six years she was immersed in the book project, she was a working mother and student.

“I took a writing seminar from someone I admired – Sam Friedman.” Her book became her final project. She said she signed the contract for it in August 2001.

“I turned in my proposal in May, the day after

graduating Columbia University.” Getting a master’s was not a professional goal, but a personal one, she said – a “feather in my cap” – she was already a successful journalist.

“My idea was I’d work part time, but after 9-11, you couldn’t do that. It was better to leave the paper.”

She left *The New York Times* with a contract to do “seven to 10 stories a year,” which allowed her to remain connected to the paper. In fall 2003, she moved to Miami to work on her book at the University of Miami via journalism courses.

“I had maps on the wall. I’m proud of the reporting that went into the book. I went to libraries. There was a lot of interviewing and piecing of things together. A lot of things I uncovered had never been said before regarding the boatlift. It was historic. There were new facts. I took the time to do it – I would do it well or not do it at all.

“I found people who had amazing memories. People always remember who had amazing memories and people who had an exaggerated sense of self or who were aware that what they’d done was extraordinary. So they kept a lot of records – like Benes, who kept receipts of dinners.” Bernardo Benes, a Cuban-born Miami businessman whose many talks with Fidel Castro helped facilitate exchanges between the U.S. and Cuba, is featured in her book.

Asked how she would prioritize her responsibilities and duties, Ojito replied, “I have so many hats. My children without a doubt matter most, then my writing, my profession.” Her sons are 13, 8 and 5.

“I am more of a reporter than a writer. I am driven by curiosity more than having to tell you what I’ve learned. Some writers like the process of writing. I like the process of reporting, of going out and finding out stuff, and then, because of that, teaching has been a nice transition – instantly learning from my students.”

The Teacher’s Life

After the publication of *Finding Mañana*, Ojito said she was asked to join the graduate school at Columbia University (N.Y.) as an assistant professor. “The dean called and asked if I would teach in a tenure-track position. I love it. I knew I would be teaching.”

Ojito said she had worked as an adjunct at Columbia in fall 2001. Before that, in spring 2000, when she was pregnant with her second child, she had taken a course called “Latinos and the Media” at New York University (NYU).

“Here, the students are very sophisticated and to give that to them, I have to prepare well.”

Each fall and spring at Columbia, Ojito teaches a course on immigrant America. “I teach students how to be immigration reporters. The immigration beat requires a lot of skills, including understanding history and law. It is multilayered. I find it fascinating.”

The issue that Ojito finds “closest to my heart” is that of undocumented students. “They have a hard time going to college.”

She said the level of gratification she has gotten out of teaching has surprised her. At Columbia University, the graduate students she teaches are, on average, in their late 20s. The students are well traveled and highly motivated. Although there are not many Hispanics in her classes, she said she would like to see the numbers grow.

“We have international students, but we don’t have Latinos who grew up in the Bronx – not enough who came from there or Miami.” Ojito said she sees that as one of her “roles at the university.”

“I want to get better at this, and to be the best teacher. I want to learn from my colleagues.”

She said having a master’s helps her know her students better. “A master’s degree puts you in a different level. It helps me understand what my students go through.”

Two students, she said, Latinos from Los Angeles and from Chicago, “came because I was there. Having your name and face on a Web site, I am very visible in many circles.”

The Working Mother and Role Model

“Like many working women, I spend more time at work than I do at home. There are days when something is going on when I have to be with the children. There is a juggling act, and you won’t know how well you did until they grow up and turn out OK.

“All my friends are obsessive compulsives. A friend who owns a café is equally torn between her work and home obligations. If I owned a company, I would only hire working moms. The saying is true: ‘The more you do, the more you do.’”

As a teacher, Ojito has found herself to be a model in more ways than one.

“I don’t do it intentionally. Female students come to me in part because they want to know, ‘how do you do it?’ – young women who know they want to be mothers who are also ambitious reporters, gathering tips.”

Ojito said she tells them that she went about her life “by instincts.” One-half of her brain she said is occupied by her children and family life; and the other, by her professional life.

“Everything I do informs me who I am as a reporter and as a teacher. One feeds off the other.” She drives home to her students that they must be “ethical – that’s what I teach here. Journalism is a profession that is looked at with a magnifying glass.”

Successes are easier to gauge as a professional. How does she gauge success as a mother? “If years from now my kids look up to me and tell me, ‘you were present all the time,’ then I will know that I succeeded.”

