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### Frustration, Unity, Nostalgia

“Coño! The arroz con gandules is burnt”, my mother would shout as she would prepare dinner for me and my sister. *Coño* is a Puerto Rican slang equivalent to the English term "damn it," commonly used when something goes wrong or when feeling annoyed or angry. The slang term is used more often than its literal translation, which is the female genitalia. The term *coño* transcends Puerto Rican usage, extending to Dominicans, Cubans, and Venezuelans. It is also present in the Tagalog language used in the Philippines. Despite it being the same word, it has a very different meaning. In Tagalog, it refers to someone who grew up in monetary wealth. "That coño just drove past me in the most expensive car I've ever seen," is an example of its varied usage. For me, *coño* is more than just a term expressing frustration; it is a light-hearted and fun slang, that encapsulates memories of my childhood, connecting cultures within my community.

*Coño* was a constant presence in my household, either boldly shouted or muttered under my mother's breath. Although I cannot recall my first time hearing it, I vividly remember my first time saying it at the age of four. While my mother was driving with me in the backseat of the car, she accidentally passed a red light. There was a bright flash of light and a moment of silence. “Coño! I just got a ticket”, she complained. Like most children who repeat what they

hear, I yelled just like her, “Coño!” My mother looked at me from the rearview mirror, her furrowed eyebrows raised in shock. “Ay, Dios mío”, she laughed. For weeks I would hear her on the phone with friends and family telling the story. Knowing my mother found it funny, I would repeat it all the time. My first Spanish curse word became a running joke.

I grew up in Staten Island, New York, where there were not many Puerto Rican people. Most of my friends in elementary school came from Italian or Irish families. They had never heard of the word *coño*. The first time I said this to my friends, they had no idea what it meant. They quickly caught on and would repeat it with me. We would pass each other in the hallways and shout “Coño!” If one of them got in trouble with a teacher, they would sigh and look at me and say “Coño.” Looking back on those elementary school days, I can't help but wonder if those brief friendships continued to use the word. I hope that when they hear someone utter *coño*, they repeat it back and can laugh about it like we once did.

One of my most recent encounters with the word was during a train ride in Brooklyn, New York. As the train doors slid open, an older woman entered the cart with tightly packed paper grocery bags. I could hear a faint tearing sound as she settled into her seat, accompanied by her muttered expression, "Coño." Our eyes met in a brief moment of unspoken recognition. There was a shared understanding, a connection made through the familiarity of the word. This ordinary encounter made me think of my mother at that moment. If she were there with me, she would probably respond to the lady with, “Ay, Dios mío,” and laugh in an understanding way.

Extending beyond my childhood experiences with the word, its frequency in my life decreased after my mother's passing when I was eighteen. She no longer filled the house with the echoes of *coño* or reminisced about the first time I shouted it. While the term expresses

frustration, it has taken on a deeper significance for me. The feeling of nostalgia best captures the emotions that come to me when I hear or think about the word. *Coño*, I wish I could hear my mother say it one more time.

Despite its origin as a Spanish word, I believe anyone who understands the meaning of it and can use it appropriately, can incorporate it into their everyday vocabulary. *Coño* expresses frustration, a feeling that everyone has felt at some point in their life. Within my community of Spanish and non-Spanish speakers, I have found this phrase to be the bridge between the two. It is a shared language that goes beyond words, connecting us through the common ground of emotions. Whether you are Spanish or not, the use of *coño* becomes a relatable expression that unites individuals from diverse backgrounds, emphasizing the unifying power of language.

From my mother shouting *coño* all the time, to sharing the phrase with my friends, and the unspoken understanding shared with the lady on the train, this term has been a constant in my life. This word has taken multiple meanings for me. It's more than just a slang expression; it is a bridge for shared experiences and emotions. Despite the Spanish origins of the word, *coño* became a uniting phrase for me and my friends who come from different cultural backgrounds. It unites people who may not even know each other, but have a mutual understanding of frustration. For me, the nostalgia that accompanies the word is by far the most significant of all its meanings.