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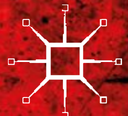
Mapping South American Latina/o Literature in the United States

Interviews with Contemporary Writers

JUANITA HEREDIA



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Juanita Heredia

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Interviews with Contemporary Writers

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Flagstaff, AZ, USA

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First, I would like to begin with the writers interviewed, Daniel Alarcón, Marie Arana, Kathleen De Azevedo, Carolina De Robertis, Patricia Engel, Carmen Giménez Smith, Daisy Hernández, Jaime Manrique, Farid Matuk, Julie Sophia Paegle, Mariana Romo-Carmona and Sergio Waisman. Without your pioneer works and precious words, this project could never have been born. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

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I extend my gratitude to Springer/Palgrave Macmillan for allowing me to republish "The Task of the Translator: An Interview with Daniel Alarcón" which appeared originally in *Latino Studies* 10.3 (Autumn 2012): 395–409.

As with every publication of this kind, I take this moment to show my appreciation to Tomás Rene, Vicky Bates and other editors at Palgrave Macmillan who have guided me every step of the way in this process. I am especially grateful to scholar, author, and editor Norma Cantú, for

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Finally, I pay homage to my family and friends who have not only supported this project but have encouraged me in every endeavor I have undertaken over the years. While I traveled to complete parts of this book, I was fortunate to stay with my longtime high school friend Sally Hui in New York City where she took me all over NYC to try various international cuisines. Reminiscent of the "old days" in San Francisco. I also treasure my friends in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and beyond, including Bonnie Lai, William Chang and family, Dexter Porter, Stacey and Alex Quintanilla, and my brother Zevedeo who has made trips to Lima to bring me books and other mementos to help my research. This project could not have happened without my parents, the first South Americans in the U.S. I knew who traveled from Lima to San Francisco via Hartford and New York City in the early 1960s. Dad, you are with me in spirit, especially when I listen to a Peruvian waltz, an Argentine tango, a Colombian bolero, and more. Mom, your example in perseverance, faith, community building, and generosity to humankind are incomparable. I love you, both!

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Introduction: Mapping South American Latinidad in the United States

Mapping South American Latina/o Literature in the United States: Interviews with Contemporary Writers is the first edited book of interviews with U.S. authors of South American origins that demonstrates how they have contributed pioneer work to trans-American literature and culture in the twenty-first century. Conversing with the authors in this volume, they have much to say about literature in global contexts, their experiences as writers in at least two cultures, two languages, and two nations, and their specific roles as transnational cultural ambassadors between South America and the United States as I have argued in my previous work, *Transnational Latina Narratives* (2009). Through their transnational experiences the authors have developed communities throughout different regions and cities across the United States. However, the texts by the authors in this collection also exemplify a return to their heritage in South America through memory and travels, often showing that they maintain strong cultural and literary ties across national borders, and thus, have created a new chapter in trans-American letters as critics like Bieger, Saldívar, and Voelz have also observed in rethinking the national parameters of the American literary canon in *The Imaginary and its World* (2013).

While scholars of multi-ethnic American literature have been concerned with expanding the literary canon to include a plurality of voices from different cultures in the United States, few critics of U.S. Latina/o literature

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have examined how migrations from South America to the United States have affected the representation of Latinas/os in literature and cultural studies in a transnational context in the twenty-first century. By South America, I refer to the geographical region south of Panama/Central America, particularly Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Uruguay, nations that are heritages or homelands to the writers in this collection. At a moment in time when Latinas/os have become the largest growing cultural ethnic group in the United States, it is necessary to look at the diversity within this population, because each group brings its own history, cultural practices, and literary contributions which make the Latina/o community very dynamic and versatile in the United States.

Mapping South American Latina/o Literature consists of interviews with twelve authors who trace their descent from South American countries mentioned above. They discuss their education, literary influences, intellectual formation, and journeys between South America and the United States to demonstrate the historical events that have affected their lives. This original scholarship points to a new direction in trans-American literary studies within a broader context of world literature in the twenty-first century because it examines the global dimensions of authors who move between nations in the contemporary period, not just a one-sided terminal migration from South America to the United States. As these interviews show, the writers answer questions to probe a multi-faceted identity affected by gender, class, languages, race, migrations, urbanization, and social justice.

For this edited collection, I conducted interviews with these twelve authors as a methodology that allowed me to produce new knowledge with respect to a trans-American literary movement. This kind of study can serve as a foundation for critical articles and monographs in research as well as a useful resource for students in undergraduate and graduate courses on U.S. Latina/o literature and culture. I interviewed most of the authors in person in 2013–2015 close to their homes in Los Angeles, Miami, New York City, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Washington D.C. I also had the privilege of meeting a few of them in their heritage cities such as Lima and Montevideo which also helped me better comprehend the author in his/her South American environs. Each segment consists of a brief biography and the interview, offering further understanding of the historical context of South American–U.S. relations. Each interview also emphasizes a different period of migration from the twentieth century to the contemporary period that has affected each author.

The significance of this volume is quite timely because in the post-2000 period, these authors are publishing literary works within a global context that departs from the nationalist approach of the past and thereby, broadening the trans-American literary canon but also conversing with a Latin American literary tradition. The geographical parameters of their stories, for example, are not limited solely to spaces within the U.S., but instead cover a broad range in South America and at times, Europe. Almost all the authors in this project are first generation Latinos in the United States whose families are direct products of South American migrations and, at times, their families in South America are products of other migrations from Africa, Europe, or the Middle East as a consequence of slavery, the Holocaust, and refugee immigration. Furthermore, these writers form part of a diaspora in the U.S. that has been affected by political and/or economic displacement from the 1960s to the 1990s period such as civil wars (i.e. Peru's Shining Path, Colombia's drug war) and dictatorships (i.e. Argentina's Dirty War, Chilean Pinochet's military government) forcing many to leave as emigrants or exiles to countries such as the U.S. Much of this historical context can also be found in books in the Duke Latin American Readers Series I include in the bibliography.

Historically, people of South American background have arrived in the United States since the late seventeenth century, some of whom were trying to escape the wars of independence that their South American homelands were fighting against Spain. Some of the first Chilean and Peruvian immigrants came to work as miners in San Francisco in 1849 during the Gold Rush period. During the Second World War South Americans from privileged backgrounds had opportunities to travel to study at universities in the U.S. according to Oboler in "South Americans" (2005). In another important period in the 1980s the largest waves of South Americans migrated and settled in different regions of the United States as a consequence of economic and/or political displacement from their home countries. In spite of these historical events, South American descent authors are the least known of the Latina/o groups in the United States because they are a small group compared to the more established Latina/o ones like Chicanos/Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans in the U.S., and Cuban Americans whose governments have also had a longer and complicated history with the United States (i.e. Treaty of Guadalupe of 1848, Spanish American War of 1898, and the Cuban Revolution of 1959) according to Bost and Aparicio. Furthermore, it is important to underscore how South America has been at the center of global history before

its ties to the U.S. Before these nations became independent politically in the nineteenth century, they were colonies of Spain and Portugal and, thus, began the process of modernization in the colonial period of the fifteenth century. Cities in South America like Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Lima, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago have become cultural centers of globalization and urbanization due to the transnational migration of their people discussed in collections such as *The Lima Reader* and *The Rio de Janeiro Reader*. Each nation in South America has not only experienced internal migrations with people moving from the provinces to cities for work and education but these nations have also endured colonial legacies such as African slavery, European, Middle Eastern and Asian immigrations to construct exploding multi-ethnic metropolitan centers. The authors interviewed are aware of these historical disruptions that have affected their lives, their families and ancestors and through the writers' words, they hold onto the memory of these powerful stories.

Many writers in this collection constitute fairly new voices within Latina/o literary studies, some have gained prominence in both, Latina/o literary circles and in venues such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. However, scholars in academia have paid minimal critical attention to the importance of their literary texts in the trans-American literary canon. Ironically, some authors in this collection have received much attention from wider world literature because they address global issues in their texts that reach a readership beyond U.S. borders.

In many respects, this original scholarship advances the critical dialogue initiated by José Luis Falconi and José Antonio Mazzotti's edited *The "Other" Latinos: Central and South Americans in the United States* (2008), a special issue dedicated to South American Latinos in the U.S. in *Latino Studies* (2005) edited by Suzanne Oboler, and scholarship by Marilyn Espitia concerning South American migrations to the United States (2004). These aforementioned works began the critical conversation within the context of historical and migration patterns. On the other hand, *Mapping South American Latina/o Literature* represents an important contribution to the literary and cultural contexts by positioning South American descent authors as creators of new epistemologies between the U.S./Global North and South America/Global South. These Latina/o authors do so by discussing the personal context of migrations to and from their South American nation under specific historical circumstances, be it in the narrative form, poetry, essay, or journalism, an endeavor that has never been done before. Their words serve as testimonies to a kind of oral

history that will record how descendants of South American immigrants have made their cultural and literary marks in the U.S. which are as important as previous generations of U.S. Latina/o authors (Kevane and Heredia 1–18).

Before presenting the chapters which include the interviews with the specific authors, it is important to note some common themes that derived from my conversations with these writers despite the differences in generation, gender, and historical migrations. Unlike the more established Latina/o groups like Chicanas/os concentrated primarily in the Southwest, Latino Caribbeans living in the East Coast, and Cuban Americans settled in Florida, many South American communities are dispersed all over the U.S. forming archipelagos or enclaves in metropolitan U.S. cities in places like Los Angeles, New York, and Miami, where one finds neighborhoods named Little Colombia, Little Peru, and Little Brazil according to Guarnizo, Margolis, and Paerregaard. Even though the authors in this collection may not necessarily come from these communities, they maintain their South American cultural practices through their family ties. It is no surprise, then, that the authors welcomed questions regarding their families and genealogies to show how these histories affected their mixed hybrid identities as transnational writers of today. In many respects, the authors served as translators for family members linguistically and culturally traversing national lines. One also discovers a rich treasure of stories about resilience, hard work, and the dual elements of success and sacrifice as Latinas/os living in the United States. The authors share certain cultural practices related to musical tastes, culinary foods, sports, spiritual practices, and more to maintain their South American cultures alive in the U.S. Past, present and future meet.

Along with family histories, the authors in this collection discussed their education revealing the circumstances that led them to become authors and educators. Although their areas of specialization in college varied from Comparative Literature, English, French, Journalism, Russian, Spanish, and Theatre to Anthropology, Biology, and Environmental Sciences, all ended up as writers. Their professions range from professors of literature, creative writing, and journalism to an editor in publishing. Some, such as Daniel Alarcón, Carolina De Robertis, Farid Matuk, Mariana Romo-Carmona, and Sergio Waisman, are literary translators working with various languages, and many are professors at institutions of higher learning in the U.S. Even though many authors in this collection may publish primarily in English, they do not forget the value

of Spanish or Portuguese and reaching a wider reading audience, be it in the original language or through translations. This attitude shows that the authors are concerned with their respective South American heritage and conscientious of including some of these elements in their writing. By incorporating the references to South American cultural or historical elements in their writings, these authors are changing the literary landscape of trans-American literature and in particular, U.S. Latina/o literature.

By representing iconic figures from history, politics, and popular culture in South America, the U.S. Latina/o authors interviewed are providing a unique vision by broadening the trans-American literary canon in a transnational context. It should come as no surprise that some authors are concerned with exploring historical figures who fought in the independence movements in the nineteenth century such as Venezuelan Simón Bolívar, Argentine José de San Martín, and Ecuadorian Manuela Sáenz. One also finds a revindication of icons in politics and popular culture such as the legendary Brazilian/Portuguese entertainer Carmen Miranda, Argentine female politician Eva Perón, and Argentine tango singer Carlos Gardel. Yet, it is important to remember that these South American descent authors in the U.S. are writing from the Global North to the Global South and, thus, opening a new literary dialogue with South Americans by publishing in English. Essentially, these authors are bringing a new vision of the way they view South American cultures, histories and literatures because they have been formed and affected by North American influences for most of their lives.

As for intellectual formation, many authors shared the significance of reading across global borders. Since many were primarily educated in the U.S. they noted the value of English and American novelists from Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, and Virginia Woolf to poets/essayists John Ashbery, James Baldwin, and Camille Paglia. At the same time, many expressed the literary influences from Irish, Polish, Russian, and Francophone literary traditions due to common experiences of exile or writing from the margins. But one group many of the interviewed authors returned to was a South American literary tradition, especially the renowned authors of the Latin American literary boom who emerged in the 1960s such as Argentine Julio Cortázar, Nobel Prize winners Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, and Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, and their precursors Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and Uruguayan Juan Carlos Onetti, and vanguard Latin American poets such as Chilean Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral, Peruvian César Vallejo, and Uruguayan Juana de Ibarbourou.

Some of the authors interviewed (i.e. Daniel Alarcón, Marie Arana, Patricia Engel, Jaime Manrique) have also formed personal relationships, friendships, and professional alliances with South American authors because they have been invited to book festivals at international venues over the years, for example the annual HAY Festival in Cartagena, Colombia, an event that I had the pleasure of attending in 2016. These collaborations between South American and South American descent authors in the U.S. also exemplify a new chapter in U.S. Latina/o literary studies that wishes to build literary and cultural bridges across transnational lines. Moreover, it is significant to underline that these South American descent authors are in general working with authors of various nationalities in projects such as edited collections or translations. In fact, the authors interviewed have had their own works of fiction translated into numerous languages across the globe. One can easily visit the authors' websites and learn of the languages into which their works have been translated or won international awards. This endeavor and effort by publishers has made their works more accessible to a wider world readership that is further expanding U.S. Latina/o literature.

The authors interviewed also shared a strong concern with social justice, especially with respect to gender and racial equality, immigration, and resistance against political or sexual violence, in their texts and in their realities. Some have been social activists who defended the rights of LGBTQ communities of color in the U.S.; others had experience in social work or nonprofit organizations that also influenced their lives or creative productivity in one way or another. For example, Daisy Hernández, Jaime Manrique, Carolina De Robertis, and Mariana Romo-Carmona commented on how revindicating the voices of marginalized communities in history and society was significant in their works. All the authors in this collection recognized the social injustices in their respective South American nations as much as in the U.S. Kathleen De Azevedo, Carmen Giménez Smith and Julie Sophia Paegle pay particular attention to the mythology of female figures in history and popular culture. Over time the authors interviewed have developed the ability to see behind institutional racism and classism that affects a multitude of people across the Americas. Perhaps the U.S. experience of diversity and inclusion enables them to perceive these social injustices across global contexts and makes them aware as transnational cultural ambassadors.

The interviews with the authors in this collection are listed alphabetically. I selected titles that reflected critical elements of where the author was from, had lived or traveled, to inform something about their

identities and places that mattered to them, be they neighborhoods, cities, or states in the U.S. and South America. As a group, these authors represent different generations, but all hold a strong affinity with South America where they maintain strong connections to family members and/or cultural institutes. Many of these South American descent authors are not only of mixed heritages, but they are also multilingual, which opens many possibilities beyond the U.S. and the English-speaking world. These experiences also form part of this critical paradigm in mapping a South American Latina/o literature in the U.S. that is increasingly changing the literary and cultural landscape of the U.S. Some are known in the areas of U.S. Latina/o studies, others in the areas of American and Latin American studies. I also included a sample of their literary awards and honors to show the importance of these authors in contemporary times and their impact in the U.S. and abroad.

In "The Task of the Translator," Daniel Alarcón tracks his experiences from Peru to Birmingham, Alabama, New York City, Iowa City, and the Bay Area in California. He was born in Lima and raised in the United States since the age of three. As an author, editor, journalist, podcast producer and translator, he has received critical acclaim and international awards for his fiction, journalism, and podcast *Radio Ambulante*. He is not only an active contributor to literary magazines in the United States but he has also played a significant role in Peruvian/Latin American literary circles. He discusses how his experiences as much in Peru as in the United States have made him the writer he is today as a translator of cultures, languages, and worlds that would not reach an English-speaking audience otherwise.

In "Bridges Across Lima and Washington D.C.," author, editor and journalist Marie Arana traces her journey from her childhood in Peru to her formidable career in book publishing in New York City, journalism at *The Washington Post*, and authoring award-winning books in the U.S. She was born in Lima and raised in the United States since the age of nine. She discusses how learning various languages, living and traveling in different parts of the world have affected her vision of domestic and global cultures. She also notes the importance of recovering history in her works which has taken her research to libraries and archives in South America as well as in the United States. As an advocate of writers and artists, she also organizes events at the National Books Festival in Washington D.C.

In "Dreaming in Brazilian," Kathleen De Azevedo shares insightful experiences of what it means to reconnect with Portuguese and her

Brazilian roots after returning to visit relatives in Brazil as an adult. She discovered much about Brazilian culture, history, and politics. Born in Rio de Janeiro to a Brazilian mother and Jewish American father, she came of age during a time when few Latina/o representations existed in film and popular culture in the United States. This motivated her to explore the iconic figure of Carmen Miranda and incorporate the Jewish side of her heritage in the first novel written in English about the Brazilian diasporic experience in the United States. As an educator, essayist, and novelist, De Azevedo contributes much to the representation of Brazil and its diaspora through her writings.

In "It Takes Two to Tango Across Montevideo and California," Carolina De Robertis discusses how she immersed herself in literature at a young age by reading in English while also having a familiarity with other languages. Born to Uruguayan parents and raised in England and Switzerland, she spent her formative years in Los Angeles, California, since she was ten. She explains the importance of returning to her cultural roots in Montevideo, Uruguay, through memory, talking to people on return journeys, and acknowledging the human rights of victims who survived the dictatorship, all of which have made their marks in her critically acclaimed and award-winning novels. As an author, editor, educator, and translator, De Robertis is conscientious of doing justice to the representation of gender, race, and immigration in her literary works and in her social advocacy.

In "Traveling the Caribbean, Colombia, and the U.S.," Patricia Engel discusses how she developed an interest in writing and the arts when she was a youngster. She was born to Colombian parents and raised in New Jersey to become a fiction writer and essayist. Having lived and studied in New York City, Miami, and Paris, she also informs how her trips to Colombia at various stages of her life have been crucial in her formation as a writer. Her much praised and award-winning short fiction and novels represent the displacement of immigrants and their children in many global contexts, including Colombia, Cuba, France, and the United States. Her narratives not only capture the effects of a civil war and migration but they are also invested in understanding the intimacy in relationships that result from crossing cultural and national boundaries.

In "My Poetic Feminism between Peru and the U.S.," Carmen Giménez Smith reveals the significance of developing her feminist consciousness in her poetry and essays by paying tribute to Second-wave feminism and her mother. Born and raised in New York City until the age of

ten to a Peruvian mother and Argentine father, she spent her formative years in San José, California. Although she was educated and trained as a poet in the U.S., she explains the importance of returning to Lima, as an adult and becoming immersed in contemporary Peruvian culture and literature. In addition to earning awards and honors for her poetry and memoir, Giménez Smith comments on the current status of poetry in the United States, Latina/o poets in particular, international poets and her engagement with popular culture.

In "Gender and Spirituality in Colombia, Cuba, and New Jersey," Daisy Hernández discusses her evolution from her time at *The New York Times* and *Ms.* magazine to her experiences at *Colorlines* in the San Francisco Bay Area. During this time, she developed her vision of social justice regarding race, immigration, LGBTQ communities and global health issues. Hernández was born and raised in Union City, New Jersey, to a Colombian mother and a Cuban father. Attentive to the multiple heritages and languages in her formation as a journalist and author, she also became aware of the role of media in disseminating local and global news, realizing that reportage on violence against queer youth of color was rarely told. This affected the stories she selected for her critically acclaimed memoir for which she has earned national and international honors and awards.

In "The Colombiano of Greenwich Village," we meet author, critic, and journalist Jaime Manrique who has lived most of his life in New York City. He was born and raised in Baranquilla and Bogotá, Colombia, until he was a teenager. While he is a worldwide traveler, having visited countries as diverse as Algeria, Peru, and Spain for his research, he maintains close cultural and literary ties with Colombia. He discusses his literary evolution and transition from Spanish to English since he began publishing his works in the 1970s. He has earned numerous awards and honors in the U.S. and abroad for his works that range from poetry, essays, novels, and autobiography to literary and film criticism. Manrique considers the importance of rethinking canonical authors and recovering marginal figures in Spanish, Latin American, and U.S. Latina/o literary traditions.

In "A Meditation on Parenting from Syria to Peru to the U.S.," Farid Matuk reflects on how his multiple heritages, languages, and travels to South America have influenced him in becoming a poet, essayist, and translator. Born in Lima, Peru, Farid Matuk left with his Syrian descent family in Peru for the U.S. at the age of six and spent his formative years in Anaheim, California. Having earned honors and awards for his poetry,

Matuk engages both contemporary and historical matters. In particular, he pays attention to how gender roles, historical memory, immigration, and race have affected his outlook on the representation of parenting in his work. As a poetry translator, he is also responsible for introducing a younger generation of poets from Spanish-speaking countries to an English readership in the U.S. and on a global scale.

In "From Dirty Wars in Argentina and Latvia to Listening to Music," Julie Sophia Paegle discusses the impact of music, folk culture, and literature on her formation as an essayist and poet during her vacations as a youngster in Catamarca and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Born in Utah City to an Argentine mother and a Latvian father, she came of age in Los Angeles, California, and Utah. Having earned honors and awards for her poetry, in her work she pays homage to the ancestors on both sides of her heritages for sharing their stories of survival under severe political and historical events in both Argentina and Latvia. While Paegle has traveled with her family to various cities around the world, she regards nature and the environment as fundamental to our modern civilization by connecting poetic with spatial justice.

In "Writing the Chilena NuYorker Experience," Mariana Romo-Carmona chronicles important life trajectories from early motherhood and social justice advocacy to her roles as editor, author, archivist, and translator of pioneer Latina lesbian literature. She played an active role in bringing attention to the rights of LGBTQ communities of color in the U.S. with her involvement in small presses, alternative journals, edited collections, and translations. Her participation in these endeavors have been crucial in the advancement of literary and activist voices of LGBTQ communities. In addition to her honors and awards, she has published a novel, poetry, short fiction, and essays in both English and Spanish. Born in Santiago, Chile, Romo-Carmona emigrated as a teenager with her family to Hartford, Connecticut, and eventually made her permanent home in New York City.

In "Returning to the Fervor of Buenos Aires from the U.S.," Sergio Waisman discusses his transnational genealogy from his grandparents who left Poland to Argentina before the Holocaust to his parents and himself who left Argentina at the onset of the dictatorship, and eventually settled in San Diego, California, when he was ten. He was born in New York City to Argentine parents. As Waisman continued to move within the U.S. as an adult, he began to trace his family migrations that resulted in the writing of his first novel and then its translation from English to

Spanish. All of these experiences have culminated in his career as a literary critic, novelist, and translator of various Latin America writers into English which have brought a wider readership and earned him awards and academic accolades in the U.S. and Argentina.

Even though I have collected a good literary sample of South American descent authors in the U.S., it is worth noting that this segment of U.S. Latina/o literature continues to grow as we go to press. For example, Chilean American poet and essayist Daniel Borzutzky had the distinction of winning the National Book Award for Poetry in 2016 for his collection *The Performance of Being Human* (2016). Colombian American author and actress Diane Guerrero has also gained critical praise for her memoir *In the Country We Love: My Family Divided* (2016). This only attests to the fact that this field is no longer relegated to the margins but is now center stage and will continue to expand.

In closing, I wish to share a moment from my life that opened my eyes to cultures of South American diasporas in the U.S. In the summer of 1986, my father, mother, brother and I made the journey to visit family in a Queens borough in New York City all the way from San Francisco, California. It was bicoastal travel from two important symbolic cities that welcome multicultural immigrant communities from the Golden Gate to Ellis Island. As mentioned earlier, the 1980s was a historical period when an influx of South American immigrants were arriving in the U.S. The neighborhood of Jackson Heights, Queens, in particular was (and continues to be) home to many people of South American backgrounds. One can still find Argentine steakhouses, Colombian *arepa* eateries, and Peruvian *pollo a la brasa* restaurants to name a few. Born and raised in San Francisco, I had grown up in a Peruvian home speaking Spanish and becoming familiar with many cultural practices such as Argentine and Peruvian music, food, literature, and South American fútbol (soccer) cheering for Brazil and Argentina every four years during La Copa Mundial (World Cup Soccer). However, I had never seen such fervor and pride from a multitude of South American fans as on that fateful day of June 22, 1986, when Argentina won the World Cup. The moment Diego Maradona of the Argentine national team made those goals to beat England, he not only won for Argentina but he did it for all the South American nations and their descendants, U.S. Latinas/os. I had never seen so many people waving South American flags on Roosevelt Avenue and literally, stopping traffic. That day became one of many ways that I began mapping South American Latina/o culture, history, and eventually, literature in the United States.

The Task of the Translator: Daniel Alarcón

Born in Lima, Peru, in 1977, Daniel Alarcón emigrated at the age of three with his parents and two siblings to the United States and was raised in Birmingham, Alabama. He received a Bachelor's degree in Anthropology at Columbia University, and a Masters of Fine Arts degree at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. In 2001, he became a Fulbright scholar to conduct research in Lima, Peru. Noted for his refreshing and masterful ability in storytelling in his literary works, he published his first short fiction in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, which ignited immediate critical recognition. He also garnered positive critical reviews for his first collection of short fiction, *War by Candlelight* (2005), which was a finalist for the 2006 PEN/Hemingway Foundation Award, and for his debut novel, *Lost City Radio* (2007), whose German translation earned him an International Literature Award by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Institute in Germany in 2009. He has also been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Lannan Fellowship, and nominated as "One of 21 Young American Novelists under 35" by *Granta* magazine. He further published a collection of short fiction, *El rey está por encima del pueblo* (2009), in Spanish translation in Mexico City and a graphic novel, *Ciudad de Payasos* (2010), in collaboration with graphic artist, Sheila Alvarado. Alarcón's fiction brings a fresh voice to the literary landscape with regards to questions of migrations, urbanization and negotiating constantly changing identities in the twenty-first century.

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Essentially, he engages in an endeavor made famous in a classic essay by philosopher Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator."

Just as significant has been Alarcón's role as editor in Peru and the United States. He was invited to join the award-winning Peruvian literary magazine, *Etiqueta Negra*, for which he co-edited a special issue in collaboration with the *Virginia Quarterly Review* called *South America in the Twenty-first Century* (2007) which includes fiction, journalism, and photography from an array of contemporary writers, artists and translators from South America and the United States. In 2009, he began to write his "Autobiographical Pieces" online, a collection of personal essays in Spanish, sharing his experiences of traveling abroad, and as a bilingual and bicultural writer. He has also conducted interviews with an international cast of writers in the collection *The Secret Miracle* (2010).

In 2006, Daniel Alarcón participated in the famous Litquake Literary Festival in San Francisco featuring over three hundred Bay Area authors. Before giving a reading at one of the few Spanish bookstores in the city, La Casa del Libro, we met at a lively café in the Mission district (the Latino district of San Francisco) to begin to discuss his works. With jazz and blues flooding the cultural atmosphere, Alarcón shared some thoughts on writing, living and teaching in various parts of the United States, travels abroad and much more. We connected again in 2009 and 2010 to resume the unfinished interview. When I attended the premiere of his graphic novel, *Ciudad de Payasos*, at the International Book Fair in Lima, Peru, in 2010, I witnessed how much Alarcón captivated a diverse audience, including journalists, and readers of varied ages and backgrounds.

Currently, Alarcón is an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism at Columbia University. He has been the Distinguished Visiting Writer at Mills College and a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Alarcón reflects on how he became interested in writing fiction and non-fiction.

JH: When I met you in 2006, you mentioned that storytelling was very important to you as a fiction writer, especially considering the role your father played in telling you stories growing up. Could you expand on how this aspect has influenced your writing, be it fiction or journalism?

DA: Most writers are consciously or unconsciously filtering other people's stories into their fictional work. In my case, I've been interested in non-fiction and journalism for a long time. I've found this

form to be exciting, interesting, a compelling way to force oneself to ask questions. I enjoy that moment when reporting a piece—whether it be a piece of political journalism or an investigation into some subculture—when you become invisible. It doesn't always happen, but when it does it's very rewarding. The rewards extend beyond the end of a given piece of non-fiction: the practice of paying close attention, observing human relationships in settings that are perhaps outside your comfort zone—all of this is useful when it comes to writing fiction too.

JH: In terms of literary influences, you have stated the importance of Russian and Polish novelists. How have they affected your literary formation?

DA: The Russians were the first writers who really moved me. Dostoyevsky is as responsible as any author for motivating me to write. I was seventeen or eighteen when I read *Notes from Underground*, and the experience was shattering. Later, yes, the Polish—writers like Tadeusz Konwicki, Bruno Schulz, Ryszard Kapuscinski, among others—became very important. They synthesized a kind of madness that I recognized. I guess I'd thought this was Latin American madness, but it turns out it's more universal than that.

JH: What about Latin American or Peruvian authors who affected you?

DA: I'd start with Mexican author Juan Rulfo, not because my style is necessarily similar to his, but because it was through his work that I discovered the importance of reading in Spanish. I read an English translation of *El llano en llamas*, and found it a little boring. I remember thinking *what's the big deal?* A few years later my Spanish had improved somewhat, and I read it in the original. It was just mesmerizing. There was something inherently valuable in the original that was untranslatable. If I really wanted to be a Latin American writer in any sort of regard, I had to be able to read in Spanish. This is a personal choice, naturally, and I wouldn't say that everyone feels this way, or has to arrive at this same conclusion, but it has been helpful for me to read some of the Latin American canon in Spanish. In truth, there are too many authors to mention, too many I've read and hoped at one time or another to emulate. Mario Vargas Llosa is an important writer; certainly, his early work was a great influence. *Conversation in the Cathedral* is a masterpiece. I'm sure close readers can find its influence all over *Lost City*

Radio. I certainly hope so. Roberto Bolaño is another, a writer whose work I admire immensely. I would be lucky to count him as an influence. There are other writers too, authors in my generation, whose work I look forward to reading in the years to come. Just to mention a few: Ronaldo Menéndez, Alejandro Zambra, Slavko Zupcic, Samanta Schweblin.

JH: Are the more current writers that you mention available in English translation?

DA: Some are. I co-edited a special issue of *Zoetrope: All Story*, a literary magazine, featuring new Latin American writers, many of whom had not been previously translated into English. This is one of the more exciting projects I've been a part of in the last few years. It gave me the opportunity to get at least a partial view of Latin American writers under the age of forty. What are they doing? What are they writing? It was a great project, and was finally released in March 2009.

JH: Are these interviews or translations?

DA: They are translations of stories. My co-editor was Diego Trelles Paz, a Peruvian novelist who also lives in the US. Together, he and I chose nine stories to be translated from Spanish to English, along with one in Portuguese from a Brazilian writer named Veronica Stigger. The selection process involved a whole lot of great reading, and we were, in the end, very excited to publish the pieces we did.

JH: When we met in 2006, you discussed some important experiences at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Could you elaborate more on your years there? What did you learn studying there?

DA: That's a hard question to answer. If I had to say one thing, it's the discipline of sitting down in front of the computer five or six hours at a time, learning how to focus. In some ways, I don't think I'm quite as good at this these days as I used to be. The internet destroys the brain. And I keep getting involved in projects that are interesting, but that pull me away from my own creative work. But from Iowa I retain, at the very least, some kind of muscle memory of what it feels like to sit at a laptop for four or five hours and type. That was a wonderful lesson. In terms of how to tell stories, how to write a scene, I don't think those are things that you can teach, but it was exciting to be surrounded by people who also cared about these issues. You learn in conversation with your peers and your teachers, and most of all by reading, that there are no rules.

There are so many ways to approach a scene, a set of characters, or a dramatic situation and once you internalize this, then you have no choice but to trust yourself. Whatever sentence ends up being written, you just have to trust yourself that it's the right one and build upon that.

JH: Were some of your peers of international background or mainly American?

DA: The Workshop is mainly white American. A sprinkling of non-white writers, but just a sprinkling.

JH: I am wondering if the Workshop had changed much since the late 1970s when Sandra Cisneros (*Caramelo* 2002) attended and graduated. She described different aspects of the Iowa Writers Workshop, for example the mainstream but also, a more international crowd.

DA: Perhaps she was referring to the International Writing Program? The IWP has been around for forty years, but unfortunately they're only there for the first part of the first semester of each year. Still, the IWP was an important institution for me while I was at Iowa. They bring around thirty or forty writers from all over the world to Iowa City each year. They could be from the Czech Republic, South Africa, Japan, China, Palestine, Colombia, etc. You get a really wide range of people, at different stages in their careers, and they do readings and are mostly open to getting to know the students at the workshop. When I was there, the IWP office was just across the street from the Dey House where the main workshop is based. I took a translation workshop my first semester and worked with Guillermo Martínez from Argentina, and even translated a few chapters of the novel he'd just finished.

JH: Because you write about an "imaginary" Peru, not quite mentioning it specifically in your fiction, what Salman Rushdie has termed "An Imaginary Homeland" of India in his case, how would you position yourself in relationship to Peruvian novelists Mario Vargas Llosa and José María Arguedas? While Vargas Llosa writes many novels about characters in Lima migrating to the Andes and the Amazon, Arguedas focuses and begins in the Andes and then migrates his characters to Lima in his later works.

DA: I've always felt an affinity with Arguedas, specifically in regards to language. Arguedas uses Spanish to write about the Andean world when he had grown up speaking Quechua. Spanish became his literary language, but not the language of his heart in certain ways.

He always referred to Quechua as his first love. In some ways, I've been writing about Latin America in English and translating a Spanish-speaking world into another language, a parallel to what Arguedas was doing with Quechua and Spanish. I've learned more from Vargas Llosa, perhaps, at least technically. He's an incredibly sophisticated writer, with novels that are impressively structured. Very funny at times. You can't really say Arguedas is that funny. You read a novel like *Tía Julia y el escribidor*—incredibly funny, ingeniously structured, a compelling portrait of a time and a place. These are the qualities that allow a writer to transcend his nation, culture and language. I love Arguedas, but in certain ways, I think he is untranslatable, whereas Vargas Llosa can be enjoyed by a Briton, a Russian or a Japanese. He's more accessible.

JH: In terms of contemporary Peruvian writers and artists, whom do you admire?

DA: I've enjoyed Santiago Roncagliolo, best known for a novel called *Red April*, that was translated by Edith Grossman. Carlos Yushimito came out with a book called *Las Islas* a few years ago set in the imaginary favelas of Rio de Janeiro. These are basically stories about Lima, but set in a distant place. You can imagine the problems faced by any gigantic city in a struggling modern chaotic situation. That was one of the books a lot of us in Lima read and were really excited about. I also like Julio Durán, author of a novel called *Incendiar la ciudad*, about that moment in Lima when the punk scene in the 1980s and 90s came alive. You had many overlapping communities from ska punks to Maoists to lots of rock music and alternative people sharing the social spaces. It's quite a fascinating book.

JH: Do you admire any women writers or artists from Peru or Latin America?

DA: Sure, Inés Bortagaray from Uruguay, Samanta Schweblin, whom I mentioned earlier, from Argentina. Alejandra Costamagna from Chile, and Aura Estrada and Guadalupe Nettel from Mexico. From Peru, I'd mention two very important women: one is Claudia Llosa, who wrote and directed *Madeinusa* (2006), and whose film *La teta asustada* (*Milk of Sorrow*) won the Golden Bear Award at the 2009 Berlin Film Festival and was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 2010. Another is Gabriela Weiner, Barcelona correspondent for *Etiqueta Negra*. She writes a lot about sexuality

and changing cultural mores. Her impressive collection of essays, *Sexografías*, was published a few years ago in Spain, and her follow-up *Nueve Lunas* is even better. Even though these women don't write fiction, I would count them as very talented and very significant storytellers. In the case of Gabriela, however, I do know that writing a novel is part of her long-term plans.

JH: In *The Washington Post* you wrote an essay for the segment, "The Writing Life," back in 2006. You said, "Peru rarely cracks American headlines unless the DEA plane goes down in the Amazon or there is an election featuring an extreme candidate." Could you comment on the representation of Peruvian culture, history or society in the American or U.S. imaginary?

DA: I think that statement still holds true today. We hear about countries when there are problems or when people from that country move en masse to the United States. It's just a fact. In terms of Latin America and visibility in the United States, the countries that come to mind are Mexico, obviously, Venezuela because of Chávez and Bolivia because of Morales. There are local differences, too: in New York, for example, you're more likely to hear news from Puerto Rico, or have Dominican presidential candidates make campaign stops in Washington Heights. In Florida, you have the Cubans. In Los Angeles, you're more likely to get news from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, Central American countries with large local populations. The truth is Peru just does not fit into any of those rubrics. There is really only one place in the United States with a high concentration of Peruvians: Paterson, New Jersey, and that's it. There are a whole bunch of Peruvians in Queens, New York, but amid the Colombians and Ecuadorians, we don't really stand out that much. The same is true in Miami. So, we're not a visible population and I don't have any illusions about that. I don't think Peru is ever going to be front and center in the imaginary map Americans use to organize the world. I don't think much can change that, short of a huge discovery of oil or another war or something on that scale. It's just not where things are at this moment.

JH: In spite of this minimal visibility, do you think your work and that of fellow Peruvian American Marie Arana have contributed to bridging U.S.–Peruvian readership on some level, that is providing some awareness of Peruvian culture and people in the United States?

DA: I don't think I have enough readers yet for that to be the case. Marie Arana does. I would hope that people who read my books have a more nuanced and complicated vision of Peru and Latin America in general. The one thing I am often troubled by is the tendency that there is only one image of a country. In the case of Peru we have Machu Picchu. That's limiting, obviously. It's like saying that India is the Taj Mahal or Cambodia is Angkor Wat. No one says that France is just the Eiffel Tower. But to what extent am I able to undo some simplistic definitions? It can't be my goal. I have other concerns when writing, and they're much more personal, and have little to do with my real or imagined readers.

JH: Along those lines, I notice that you are drawn to the representation of the city in both your collection of short fiction, *War by Candlelight*, and your novel, *Lost City Radio*. Why do you find cities so fascinating and what do you see happening in them?

DA: Like a lot of people, I find cities to be fascinating places to live because there is so much going on simultaneously. You have people living side by side, in what amounts to different centuries. These places, for all their disconnects, tell us a great deal about what it means to be human and what it means to be alive right now. I do find a great deal of inspiration from seeing in these very cold, chaotic, difficult places, how people find ways to survive and thrive. But there's something else that I should note: cities like Lima change so quickly and so dramatically, that you can't help but want to write some of it down, if only to preserve the memory of something which will surely pass. I've been working on this current novel for three years, and Lima has changed so much in that time that the city that I'm describing does not exist anymore. The question then is, which city to describe—the one that existed three years ago or the present one?

JH: In fact, you mentioned to critic Daniel Olivas, "Lima is awash in stories, the combination of race, class, geography, etc. We learn so little about each other that is not so alarmist, divisive or designed to breed suspicion." Why do you think this is so?

DA: I think back to my first long trip to Lima in 2001, the first time I spent there as an adult, on my own. I started telling my family that I am going to live in a certain part of town that most of them had never visited. All of them were counseling me not to go there. Don't go there, much less live there.

I have been trying to find information on a project a sociologist did in Lima with different groups, different social classes. They asked fifteen-year-old kids to draw maps of Lima. I never actually found the project though somewhere in my notes I have the name of the person who told me this story. I have not seen it. What he described to me was that kids from different parts of Lima, depending on what world they moved in, described completely different visions of the whole city. For example, kids from Barrios Altos, whose maps included downtown Lima. For the kids from Surco, their Lima ended in Miraflores. Kids from north Lima, for them the boulevard in Los Olivos was the center. You could do this experiment in any big city, and I'm sure you'd get something similar, these geographic and imaginary dividing lines would show up in surprising ways.

JH: What did it mean for you to live in San Juan de Lurigancho when you received a Fulbright back in 2001 and that also influenced some stories in *War by Candlelight*?

DA: It was one of the great experiences of my life, thus far. I have such very vivid memories from that time, of the people I met, the things I was privileged to see. Every time I go back to Lima, I go back to the neighborhood to see how it's changed. It's dramatic, especially these last five or six years with such economic growth. It's astonishing.

JH: Lurigancho is a historically important neighborhood in Lima, where many migrants moved, leaving their hometowns in the Andes because they were affected by the Shining Path in the 1980s.

DA: It's a district of more than a million people. The particular neighborhood where I lived in was mostly people from Ayacucho (an Andean province in Peru). The kids would tell me that there were parts of the district where the Shining Path used to control and outsiders could not enter. All the residents had stories about the war and the time when this district was the edge of the city, when there were no buses, no water, no services, no schools. The list of things they did not have went on and on. And yet, moving there was preferable to living in the line of fire in Ayacucho. So yes, Lurigancho is a very historically significant part of Lima.

JH: By the same token, questions of migrations, be they external or internal, have played a significant role in your works and in your life. Can you elaborate on this phenomenon?

DA: Immigration has defined my life. The reason I write in English is because my parents left Peru in 1980. My upbringing was, at least spiritually, between two places. I am a son of the South in certain ways. I made good friends and have good memories of growing up in Birmingham, Alabama; but I was always aware, even from a young age, that I wasn't home. If we'd moved to a more international city, maybe I would have felt more identified with the place. But as it was, I remember growing up in Birmingham, and being very aware of the fact that I would leave, just go to college and I would never come back—which is basically what happened. That isn't a knock on Birmingham; it's just how I grew up. I knew I was going to keep shifting, keep moving, which made me interested in people who have similar stories. In almost every case, these stories are more dramatic than mine, of course.

JH: In the essay, "Crossing the Divide" (2007), published in *The Smithsonian*, Marie Arana comments on how you negotiate the local with the global in your fiction. Can you comment on this aspect of your work?

DA: I'm actually not at all convinced that my stories are Latin American, exactly. Not to be grandiose about it, but I do write with a certain ambition in mind: that is, I want to create something that has artistic value, something that is pleasurable to read, intellectually, emotionally, aurally. Readers, of course, will decide for themselves whether I've accomplished this, but the point is that I'm not sure a Latin American reader would be in a better position to judge my success or failure on this count. The very fact of writing in English fundamentally changes the calculus and the resulting text can no longer be called strictly Latin American. I am Latin American, Peruvian, in a very specific, perhaps accidental, and in any case, uniquely American way: I was raised in a Spanish-speaking, culturally Peruvian home in the Deep South, traveling to a big and chaotic Third World city many summers, a city that was on its surface dirty and dangerous, but simultaneously welcoming and beautiful, full of family and friends and loved ones. As an adult, I've spent a good deal of time in Lima, enough to feel at home there, to earn the right to call myself a *limeño*, and the continuing tragicomedy of Lima and her people is really my enduring obsession. Still, almost all of the reading I did up to age 22 or so was in English, and so my literary education, if I can be said to have one, owes as much to American or European authors in translation as to any other.

I don't believe in the segmenting of art along national or ethnic or racial lines. I would hope that my work offers to the reader what all literature does: that is, a kind of transparent insight into people and places that they might not otherwise know. In the end, this is the seductive aspect of writing and reading: the possibility of knowing someone from the inside, knowing them well, and imagining what their life and world view must be like. It so happens that many of the characters this work introduces the reader to are Peruvian or Latinos in the United States. This is as it should be. The fact is there are more places in the world like Lima than there are places like the Birmingham suburb where I grew up. In my lifetime, one third of humankind will live in a slum. This is rather dispiriting of course, but these are facts, and as a writer, I have to address them in one way or another. Of course, I am writing stories and not sociological monographs. Why? Because fiction allows you to see people as people, and, hopefully, recognize yourself in them. That's what fiction is, both for the writer and for the reader: the exercise of melding empathy to imagination.

When my first book, *War by Candlelight*, came out, a few readers wrote asking me to recommend a hostel in Cuzco. Seriously. This kind of thing lays bare the futility of trying to send a message in your work, or transmit any lessons about a place. You do what you do, but how people interpret it is out of your hands. I guarantee you that the message behind my book was *not* "visit Cuzco"—though I won't begrudge someone the right to draw that conclusion. If someone wants to visit Cuzco, by all means, go visit Cuzco. In the end, that is not my concern. The goals for each work are so personal, unique to a moment and a set of characters, to a specific dramatic vocabulary. What is it that I want to say or am trying to say?—sometimes I don't even know for sure.

JH: In your collection *War by Candlelight*, I found "City of Clowns" to be particularly personal and poignant. What influenced you in writing this piece?

DA: With that story, I began from a real anecdote: a friend of mine called me one day to ask for money. He was crying. His father had died, and there was no money to pay the bill. His mother, the grieving widow, was being made to mop floors. This *happened*. It was real. It melted into a family story about an uncle of my father's who shocked the family by divorcing his *mestiza* wife for a black woman, and then merged with my fascination with Lima's carnivalesque street theater and on and on. Somehow it all comes together, or doesn't, into a story.

Migration, urbanization… It's inevitable, of course, that whatever issues one is emotionally and intellectually engaged with—these are going to appear and reappear in fiction. Being that my family story is one of movement from the interior, to the city, to the Global North, these themes are going to show up. Also, a lot of my work, before I was making a living as a writer, was teaching in places where migration was a constant, where the world expanded outward in exciting ways. This was true in Peru, as well as in the U.S. There were many layers of living happening, meaning people were simultaneously operating in different geographical and cultural spheres: living say, in the South Bronx, but concerned primarily with the economics of Guatemala because this most directly affected loved ones.

I'm interested in people inhabiting in-between spaces: between nations and cultures and languages. These are territories still being fought over, where definitions are in flux, where many things are still malleable.

JH: How did you decide on the title for your collection, *War by Candlelight*?

DA: Once I wrote the story of that name, I knew it would be the title of the collection. Why? Because that piece was the hardest to write, and the most necessary. It was natural then, that it would become the title for the book itself.

JH: What motivated you to write your first novel *Lost City Radio*, for which you won an international prize in Berlin, Germany, in November 2009?

DA: There was a radio show when I was living in Lima called *Buscapersonas*, or "People-Finders." I believe it's still on. I used to listen every Sunday night. It was a remarkable couple of hours: every week, people would call in describing their loved ones, their childhood friends, their brothers and sisters and cousins, and give little snippets of information about them, where they were from, where they might be living. Then the radio would work its magic. From time to time there would be these amazing reunions, with tears and joy and shock. The drama of it was just overwhelming. For a long time, I didn't know what to do with this, but I knew it was important on some level, a symptom of what the country had lived through: the war, the growth, the internal displacement, the millions of lives created out of contingencies. Lima is not a welcoming place, and so it stands to reason that the thousands that

> migrated there to scrape out a living, would, in the process, become estranged from their families, their communities, their friends, their lovers. These are not easy transitions. When I started looking into this further, I found that shows like this exist in many countries. I came across reports from Africa, Asia, the former Soviet bloc, and this solidified for me that this was something worth writing about.

Peru is hardly unique, and if it were a country created for the purpose of fiction, I'm sure many people would recognize it as theirs. Our history, and our current situation, is shaped by the same forces that are compelling farmers to move off their land and into the slums of Lagos, Nigeria or Karachi, Pakistan. The details are different, but the narrative is essentially the same.

I renamed the show "Lost City Radio," and began the novel there.

JH: Could you discuss the impact of traveling? What have been favorite places to visit and the effect on your work?

DA: Travel is a constant distraction and obsession of mine. Lately, I've been trying to stay in one place long enough to finish a new novel, and I've discovered how nice this can be as well. Still, I'm sure I'll be back on the road again soon, and there are places I'm dying to see, or in some cases, see again. Ghana, for example, was an amazing experience, something that I am beginning to write about. It was a great experience because I felt so foreign there. There is something really great about that, very liberating. More recently, I thought Damascus was one of the most incredible cities that I have visited. A couple of years ago, I taught a workshop in Ramallah in the West Bank. That was also an incredible experience; intense, to describe it in a pop-psychic way. In that case, the travel was for teaching. I've done certain exercises with students at Berkeley High School or while teaching at Mills College or teaching in Iowa. When you teach in the West Bank, it is just entirely different. The answers that you get are surprising and disturbing and serves to underscore how unreliable your own expectations can be.

JH: Speaking of Ghana, that is where you have started to write some of your "False Autobiographical," personal essays in Spanish. Do you think you will ever translate them into English?

DA: I'm not sure. I'd like to get a bunch under my belt, then see how it starts coming together. My original idea was to write some of the stories for the rest of 2009, spend a few months editing it and making it into a short book in Spanish. I don't see it going on forever. It's a little too much. I do want these pieces to be about immigration, the oddness of it and the feeling of displacement that you can carry with you wherever you go. There is certainly more I need to write about the early years, but I was in a hurry to get to the stories about Ghana—I felt a sudden urgency to recall these experiences that I'd basically avoided in my own fiction. I felt very free and quite happy to explore those geographies in Spanish, which makes me wonder why I'd never attempted it in English.

JH: How did you become involved with *Etiqueta Negra*, the award-winning literary magazine based in Peru?

DA: When my first story came out in *The New Yorker*, Julio Villanueva Chang, the editor of *Etiqueta Negra*, contacted me. I guess Julio and most Peruvians were surprised to see a Peruvian in *The New Yorker*. We had a mutual friend who introduced us and I wrote a piece for them in 2003 about the Mall of America. They've always had a lot of people offering to help the magazine. Unfortunately, most of these people were all talk, but I felt that I could really be useful. Specifically, what I proposed was to serve as a bridge between American writers and the magazine. It was at a time when I was starting to meet all these people in the literary world here in the States, and many were asking me about the magazine. I felt that I could be a good spokesperson and editor from the United States. It's been many years now that I've been working as an associate editor. In that time, we have published a lot of cool stuff, really great writers from all over, and I'm proud that some of those pieces I've been able to get for the magazine.

JH: I thought the special issue *South America in the Twenty-first Century* was an extraordinary collaboration between *Etiqueta Negra* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review* in terms of covering major artistic, environmental, social, and political concerns.

DA: Thank you. Yes, that was a great project. Really exciting. Ted Genoways at the *Virginia Quarterly Review* contacted me. He'd heard of the magazine and of my work. He pitched me this idea to see if I was interested, and we were able to collaborate, doing an

issue that drew upon all the resources of *Etiqueta Negra*, but published in English. An incredible opportunity. I was proud of every single piece in that issue.

JH: I was very taken by the photography and art as well as journalism and fiction in that issue. Could you comment on the series, "Urban Virgins," in that special issue of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*? How did the idea for this piece come about?

DA: Odi González is one of Peru's great Quechua poets. I believe he teaches at NYU now. He collaborates with Ana de Obregoso, a Peruvian artist based in New York. Together they try to update the Cuzco School of Poetry and Cuzco School of Portraiture, incorporating paintings of saints typical in the colonial period—very well known, a kind of folk art that collectors like. But she wanted to do a digital montage of these photos in that style that were at the same time transforming that style. She had the great idea of collaborating with Odi González.

JH: The portraits remind me of modern representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe by Chicano/Mexican-American artists. One finds a parallel between these two artistic traditions as both schools of artists modernize these "traditional" portraits.

DA: I think that's accurate.

JH: How do you feel about your edited collection, *The Secret Miracle*, interviews with contemporary writers from around the world such as Edwidge Danticat, Haruki Murakami and Mario Vargas Llosa. Could you talk about this endeavor?

DA: Yes, it came out in spring 2010 by Holt. It's basically a conversation with novelists about their craft. We have about forty writers from a couple dozen different countries. The writers include Murakami, Vargas Llosa, Colin Toibin, Anne Enright, Alaa Al Aswany, Paul Auster—all discussing their technique, their work habits, their obsessions. It's a very revealing and intimate look at the creative process, a book for writers about writers.

JH: How did you select these writers?

DA: The series editor, Dave Eggers, and I got together and put together our dream list. This is from a series of books being published by *826 Valencia* in San Francisco. He and I put together the list over coffee one afternoon, adding and deleting names until we finally decided on what was realistic and what was not. In some cases, we

decided to shoot for the unrealistic ones; and to our surprise, they came through. I'm referring to writers like Vargas Llosa, Murakami or Paul Auster. Then, we asked ourselves who did we know and would really do it? Most people would say yes to Dave Eggers.

JH: If Mexico City, Chicago and San Antonio can have its Sandra Cisneros; Santo Domingo/New Jersey can have its Junot Díaz; Havana and Chicago can have its Achy Obejas, who can have Daniel Alarcón? Do you see yourself in company with what I am terming "transnational" Latina/o writers?

DA: You've mentioned a bunch of writers I like. I think the aesthetic sensibility that we share is probably more important to me than whether we can claim two cities. I am a huge Junot Díaz fan. My admiration for him goes beyond geography or the cultural landscape that he is describing. I am happy to be mentioned in the company of these writers because they are great writers. If I had to pick two cities that would be at either end of that axis, one would definitely be Lima. I am not sure what the other would be. I've been living in Oakland now for over five years, though for about half of that time, I've been on the road. But my life is here in the Bay Area, my books are here, my family, my records, my cat; so yes, it's fair to say that Oakland would be that city on the other end. There are other important places too: Birmingham, New York, even Accra, I'd say has played a significant role in my life.

JH: Do you have any thoughts on the other arts, photography, cinema or music as to how they influence your fiction writing? Have you seen any films by Peruvian director Francisco Lombardi, for example?

DA: Yes, I've seen his films. Some of them are pretty good. He was, for a long time, the main movie director working in Peru. I'm very excited though, about the new generation of film directors that are coming out of Peru now. I'm a big fan of Claudia Llosa, the director I mentioned earlier. Josué Mendez is another young director who I also admire. Film is important, but music is probably more important for me. I can spend an entire day listening to music, not even reading, just listening to music. Artists in all different genres, from Charles Mingus to Willie Colón to Wilco to J-Dilla to Abdullah Ibrahim—there's just so much in the world of music I find inspiring. I often do that to recharge. Thankfully, the arts don't exist in isolation from each other. If you are fortunate enough

to be able to seek and find inspiration from both, then your work will be the better for it.

JH: Heavy metal and alternative rock, for instance, are big in Lima.

DA: Yes, there is definitely a community of listeners, though they are not exactly my thing. Lima is so large that it's possible to find almost everything represented. Everything from Salsa and cumbia to punk, techno and hip hop are big in Lima. It's like any big city, like New York and Los Angeles. There is basically nothing you can't find.

JH: By the way, how was covering the Obama presidential election and inauguration in January 2009? How were you involved?

DA: I wrote a column for *Granta* and that sort of mushroomed into an assignment to write a retrospective about my experiences in the elections. This culminated with a trip to the inauguration in January.

JH: What does it mean that you have won the Lannan, Guggenheim and also this international award in Germany?

DA: Awards are cool. They feel great, and they might even help you pay the rent for a while, but what they certainly don't do is help you write the next book. That is a unique challenge, one that is stubbornly unalterable. It's a conversation you're having with the blank page, with your characters, none of whom care who you are or who likes your work.

JH: What are you working on now?

DA: A new novel. I've been immersed in this book for the last four years. I'm also finishing up an adaptation of "City of Clowns" into a graphic novel—this is a collaboration with the Peruvian artist Sheila Alvarado. That should be done soon, but as I've learned in the course of working on this, there are no guarantees. We are at least 18 months behind schedule on this graphic novel, but hopefully, once we finish, it will have been worth it.

JH: Thank you for your time. From San Francisco to Lima and back.

DA: Yes, thank you.

Bridges Across Lima and Washington D.C.: Marie Arana

Born in Lima in 1949, Marie Arana was raised the first ten years of her life in Peru and then settled with her family in Summit, New Jersey. She received a Bachelor's degree in Russian Language and Literature at Northwestern University, and a Master of Arts degree in linguistics at the British University of Hong Kong. She also studied Mandarin Chinese at the Yale-in-China Program in Hong Kong. Arana has published a memoir *American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood* (2001) which was a National Book Award finalist, two novels *Cellophane* (2006) and *Lima Nights* (2009), and the historical biography *Bolívar: American Liberator* (2013) for which she won *The Los Angeles Times* Best Biography award. She also edited the collection *The Writing Life: Writers on How They Think and Work* (2002) and wrote important introductions to *Through the Eyes of the Condor* (2007) by Robert Hass and *Stone Offerings: Machu Picchu's Terraces of Enlightenment* (2009) by Mike Torrey. In 2009, Arana was a Kluge Distinguished Scholar at the Library of Congress and appointed to the Board of Directors of the National Book Festival in Washington D.C. In 2015–2016, she was the Distinguished Chair of the Cultures of the Countries of the South at the Kluge Center of the Library of Congress.

Before Arana embarked on a career as a novelist and biographer, she dedicated more than a decade to the role of Editor-in-Chief of the Book World section of *The Washington Post* for which she is currently a Writer-at-Large. In this capacity, aside from overseeing the daily and weekly

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supplemental coverage of newly published books, she sought institutional alliances between *The Post*, the Library of Congress, and the National Book Festival. During this period Arana organized several conferences, bringing together writers of various cultural and international backgrounds. In 2015 Arana directed the Iberian Suite Festival Literary Series that showcased over twenty-five Latin American, Spanish, and Portuguese language writers from all over the world at the Kennedy Center in New York City.

Arana's fiction and non-fiction work engage her bicultural heritages from Peru and the United States with tremendous breadth and coverage. She brings to light a perspective that crosses national borders, generational divides, and gender expectations. While she may reflect on the ancient past of the Incas in Peru through its geography and recover the complex history of a nineteenth-century South American liberator, she is just as preoccupied with the contemporary situation of migrant women in a post-Shining Path period in Lima and the effects of education on young girls in Andean Peru in the documentary *Girl Rising* (2013). Arana claims that she can be as passionate an American in the U.S. as she can be a Peruvian in Peru. Thus, she embodies the spirit of the title of her memoir, *American Chica*.

Arana presently holds dual residences in two important world capitals, Lima and Washington D.C. I first met her at a book reading of *American Chica* at the independent bookstore "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" in San Francisco in 2003. Since then, our paths crossed accidentally in Washington D.C., Lima and back again in Washington D.C. on April 12, 2015, to conduct this interview in the Logan Circle neighborhood. She begins by talking about her reaction to winning *The Los Angeles Times* biography award for *Bolívar* in 2014.

JH: In your historical biography, *Bolívar: American Liberator*, which won the 2014 *Los Angeles Times* award for Best Biography, how did you feel in being recognized for this award, one which is quite an honor?

MA: It was phenomenal for me in the sense that Simón Bolívar is a huge personality in the Americas and more than that, he is a very controversial personality. In Peru, he is despised. In Bolivia, he is adored. In Colombia, he is adored. In Venezuela, he is adored. In Chile, he is despised. So, it's treading very dangerous and somewhat presumptuous ground to try to address his life and to analyze his historical importance. The reason I did it is because I was looking for

a subject that in one narrative line could tell people as much about the South American story as possible. And his life does exactly that because his ancestors go back to the 1500s just after first contact between Old World and New. So, one man's story tells the history of Latin America. But he also traveled so much in liberating the six republics of South America that you get a sense of the terrain, a sense of the difficulties, a sense of the colonial grip on Latin America. You not only get a bird's-eye view of the wars for independence, but of the period after the revolution. Basically, what happened was that the Spaniards left, but the whites (*criollos*) took their place in the social hierarchy. It really sums up Latin America and it is a story that is incredibly colorful as well. History to me is a living drama and it helps us understand the difficulties, dramas, passions, and chaos of the times. It was a real opportunity for me. I was surprised and delighted by the response, because there is always the danger that readers will suspect the novelist who takes on history. I mean straight history, complete with footnotes and scholarly references. So, it was wonderful to get recognition for all the work that went into it. It was an enormous research task, incredibly rewarding.

History has always fascinated me. I think we are molded by history. I think as human beings our family histories define us, more so when those histories include family secrets. I think sometimes we undervalue history as a subject in schools and, the way it is taught, it is made out to be very dry and stuck in time. When in fact it is a very dynamic force that shapes our lives. I am constantly struck by how public events play out in personal ways. Right now, Obama is meeting with Raúl Castro in Panama. A huge history is going on there and will affect human lives in very real ways.

JH: Could you take us through the process of writing and researching for *Bolívar: American Liberator*? I read that you consulted libraries and archives in South America as well as the U.S. Is that, right?

MA: Yes. That's absolutely right. I had the great, good fortune of being given two chairs at institutions with great resources. One was Brown University. The John Carter Brown Library gave me a fellowship to do research on their incredible collection on Bolívar. The library has a whole room dedicated to Bolívar and the documentation is really excellent. And then, I had a fellowship at the

Library of Congress at the John W. Kluge Center. I was there for almost a year and a half. There are close to 3000 books on Bolívar sitting at the Library of Congress. So, you can imagine being handed a license to swim in all of that, an incredibly comprehensive library, more complete than any library in Latin America. All the same, I went to the libraries in Latin America. I spent time in the Biblioteca Nacional in Lima and in many others throughout South America. To tell you the truth, the greatest thrill was to be able to sit in the Library of Congress which had amassed so much from all our countries. I could actually find court records from Caracas in the late 1700s when Simón Bolívar ran away from home as a little boy and ended up in the offices of the archbishop. There was a court record documenting his truancy. He did not want to go back home to his sister's house (his foster home) at that point so the family lawyers actually went to court. Those records from the 1790s are sitting in the Library of Congress and I was able to look at them.

JH: Do you know how the records got there?

MA: The reason the Library of Congress is so complete on Latin American letters is because there was a time during the presidency of James Polk, who was very interested in—shall we say—United States ambitions in Latin America, when these documents became important. When the U.S. had designs on land that belonged to Mexico. When wars were being fought all the way down to Central America. When the idea was to spread America's frontiers. The Library of Congress was very aggressive in purchasing a lot of data from different countries, because the U.S. government wanted to be up to snuff. And up to snuff meant having copies of publications and court records from throughout the Americas. In fact, Washington is better stocked in these documents than much of Latin America.

JH: Why do you sometimes use the term, "South American," in your novels and essays? How do you see it as important?

MA: As Hispanics in the United States, we tend to think that we are all the same. Certainly, if you are in Peru, you don't think you are anything like a Chilean who is your neighbor to the south. And you don't think that you are anything like an Ecuadorian who is your neighbor to the north. So, there are very distinct views of who you are depending on where you are in Latin America. But I

do think that the history of South America is very different from the history of Central America or the Caribbean. We are all related somehow. And yes, there is a greater Latin American story. We can talk about that. But there is definitely a South American perception in terms of terrain and history, and in terms of colonial identity. We are unified in that sense. I tend to look at it with that more cosmic view. But if I were sitting in Lima and had never left and never done research on the larger region, I might have the sense that Peruvians are Peruvians and nothing else. I think North Americans sometimes forget that South Americans are part of the greater America. You read the work of Eduardo Galeano, who is from Uruguay, and yet he refers to us as "We, Americans." I remember my grandfather saying to me, insisting!, that the United States stole the term, America, from us [Latin Americans] because we, too, are the Americas. We were the first Americans. I have always thought of it as the great identity theft of the Americas!

JH: How do you identify? When do you feel American, Peruvian, Latina, South American or all of the above?

MA: I worked so hard as a child, arriving in this country just before I turned ten, to become North American. For a time, I was not even factoring my Peruvianness. Any immigrant child does that. They just become. You look at your parents as being the immigrants, but you are not. You try hard to belong. For a long time, I was working so hard at being a North American that I lost that aspect of my Latin Americanness. It was not until I was almost forty, when I was being asked questions such as the following by *The Washington Post*, where I had just gone to work: You are from Peru? How do you feel about that? What does that mean? Those questions made me reflect about my origins and I tried to recover the child I was when I arrived in this country. It was during that process of reevaluating my identity that I decided to jump in completely, investigate my past, because I realized that the child I once was had been neglected for far too long. How important that child was! Since then, I have made every effort not only to learn as much as I can about our identity—about who we are—but also to convey and relay as much of that information as possible. I am on a mission to reveal who we are as Peruvians, as Latin Americans, as Hispanic Americans. Americans who are at once far from home, and yet very much at home.

JH: How did you become an editor and journalist for *The Washington Post*? How do you compare journalism writing with that of the writer of novels, memoir, and historical biographies?

MA: I am a book person. I came into journalism as a book person and I will always be a book person. I had been a book editor at two major trade publishers in New York and I was hired by the *Post* to be an editor in their literary section, Book World. So, I went from the creative side of books to the critical side. I jumped a fence. But it was at *The Washington Post* that I departed from my strict role as editor and began to do writing, reporting, feature stories, literary criticism. Editing had made me a book person, but journalism made me a writer. It had never occurred to me to write until the *Post*'s executive editors began to ask me to write more and to delve deeply into my experience as a Hispanic American. I owe the paper that.

JH: What were your literary influences in writing *American Chica*? I have read that it began more than anything as a historical excavation of a family member named Julio César Arana and then turned into a genealogical project, capturing two worlds, two ways of being.

MA: Back in the 1990s, in '96, Stanford gave me a fellowship to do some writing. I came up with the notion that I should write about the late nineteenth-century rubber baron Julio César Arana because he fascinated me. His story became a scandal, an extraordinary smear on Peru. In many ways, the smear was inflicted by the United States and Britain because they were the real masters of the rubber industry in Peru, and for decades they turned a blind eye to the enslavement of tribes of people in the jungle. They were more interested in satisfying the need for rubber to make airplanes, bicycles, and cars—a manufacturing industry that was booming in the United States and Britain. The circumstances of harvesting rubber were ignored and neglected, and when they came to light, the human rights abuses were terrible. Estimates say that tens of thousands of indigenous perished in the race for rubber. Eventually, when the scandal became too great, the British just took the rubber plants and transferred the whole business to Southeast Asia.

I thought I wanted to write about Julio César Arana, about this person whom everybody in my family said we had nothing to do with. But when

I actually went to the jungle and did research on the man, I could see that there was a direct line. My great great-grandfather was a cousin. All that effort to say that we were not related to a man the world had judged a monster had crippled us in a certain way. It had made us live in a mythological world where reality was ignored and we could never talk openly about certain things. My great-grandfather insisted that he had not been born of woman, that he sprang full-formed into the world. That's how crazy things got because he did not want to be connected to those Aranas. When I was sitting at Stanford and reading all of this stuff, I quickly realized what it had done to my family. Rather than wanting to write a history of Julio César, I found myself obsessed by my grandfather's persona, why he was the way he was. Why had he been sent off at the age of fifteen to Notre Dame? It was an incredibly long journey; it took him two months to arrive. It's clear that he was sent off to keep him away from the stain of the jungle Aranas. He had been isolated on purpose; and his isolation and introversion shaped the rest of us in very interesting ways. In the end, I was a product of that history. My grandfather, an enormously bright man and a wonderful professor, became more and more introverted. My father, who was the opposite of introverted, became attracted to my mother precisely because she was so different from anything he had ever known in Peru. So that's how *American Chica* came to life for me.

As far as influences go, many books shaped me, but a book that made me think that I could write my story was Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*. When I read it, I thought, my God! You can write about the phantoms of your imagination, the ghosts of your family past? You can write that way? It was a great influence on me even though I read it long before I actually sat down to write *American Chica*.

JH: Could you describe what it was like to transition from having lived in Peru the first nine years of your life and then live with your family permanently in the United States?

MA: It was a completely foreign experience. The only American I ever really knew in Peru was my mother. We all understood that she was a very strange animal in the Peruvian context. Of course, in the American context she was not. In Peru, she did things that were far out of the norm of acceptable behavior. Everybody in my Peruvian family pointed a finger at her and told me, "Don't do it like your mother." But, as I say, she was the only American I knew before landing—boom!—in Miami, and taking the Greyhound bus north.

And then began the unfurling, the witness of an America that was so strange, that was not promised. The America that was promised by my mother was always magical and perfect. Instead, landing in 1959, I was suddenly going through bus stations with signs that said: NO BLACKS ALLOWED. Colored people were meant to go here, white people there. I did not even know what "colored" meant. And of course, what went down afterwards. The assassination of Kennedy. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The hosing of blacks in the south. This turned out to be a very imperfect country. So, there was not only the sense of entering a foreign country; there was also the sense that the foreign country was not the paradise it was supposed to be. In fact, I had come from paradise. My Peru was a paradise—a warm family environment. As far as I could tell, nothing remotely as violent as what I was witnessing here was going down in Lima. It was harsh coming to terms as a child in the U.S. It was harsh for everybody in the U.S. I was not alone in the horror of it. There was something else. In Peru, I had an extended family. But I never did get to know my mother's family; they had done what American families do: gone into a diaspora, spread all over the United States. She was not interested in recovering them or introducing us to them. So, she became what my Peruvian great grandfather had once claimed, a person who had landed in this world fully formed, born of nobody.

JH: Speaking of foreign experiences, what made you major in Russian Language and Literature as an undergraduate at Northwestern University? I find that fascinating. What kind of career did you envision?

MA: I started studying Russian at the end of junior high school—I didn't want to study Spanish, I felt I already knew it, and I was studying French, too. But Russian was being offered as a critical language—a legacy of the Kennedy administration. I found myself in a tiny class of three people and in love with the culture: the poetry, the literature, the music. I remember my tenth grade Russian teacher taking me to see *Dr. Zhivago*. She invited me to her house and made me Russian food. She told me I looked like Anna Pavlova. I was hooked. I took the language all the way through high school and decided to major in it at Northwestern. My professors at Northwestern were extraordinary. They sent me to study for a semester at the University of Leningrad—at the

height of the Cold War. When I graduated from Northwestern, I found that I had only two choices: the CIA was interested in Russian majors, and then there was graduate school. I applied to Princeton's graduate school in the very year that they decided to fold their Russian graduate program. That's when I decided to study Chinese and dedicate myself to the broader study of Linguistics.

JH: At the end of your memoir, you mention that you return to Summit, New Jersey, as an adult and find many changes to the place, for example more Spanish-surnames. What about now in 2015?

MA: As we all know now, there are many parts of New Jersey that are almost totally Hispanic. Of course, the largest population is Dominican. Around Paterson, New Jersey, it's Peruvian. When I was growing up, Summit used to be an almost all-white community. As far as I could tell, my brother, sister, and I were the only Hispanics. But I had been well-schooled in the business of being an outsider by my mother's experience in Peru. I simply put my head down, worked hard, and decided to be an American. Today—wouldn't you know?—there are other Aranas in my old high school. And plenty of Hispanics.

JH: In *American Chica*, I am struck by all the references to historical places in Lima. At one point, you compare the *Bridge of Sighs* in the historical neighborhood of Barranco to the one in Venice, Italy. You relate this to romance and love as well. Could you expand on this idea?

MA: Of course, the bridge is the central metaphor in *American Chica*. My parents created a bridge between two cultures; I've lived on a bridge ever since. As it happens, my father's specialty when he was finishing his master's in the U.S. was bridge building, specifically the tension of bridges. He actually invented a device that registered the tension of a bridge to measure how solid it was or whether it was ready to fall. It was a very simple device. I have pictures of it. So, the tension of bridges is a huge subject in my father's career as an engineer. When I was writing *American Chica*, he talked about that. I thought, "My God! Amazing!" It was not only a metaphor; it was a real part of his work. You walk through Lima today and you see so much history. Every block is full of history. Going way back to pre-Columbian times.

JH: Your novel *Cellophane* has been hailed as a satire, but I find the historical time period quite important. Why did you situate the story in Peru at the beginning of the twentieth century? How did you develop the storyline?

MA: History is incredibly important to *Cellophane*, because it unfolds in a time when the country was in high engineering mode. Things were being built. Industries were being tried. Land was suddenly closely monitored. The United Nations is just forming and making laws about coca planting and harvesting. I wanted to set my story in the context of that history. But, in fact, the story springs directly from many Arana family stories.

JH: I also consider this novel to be in dialogue with an important Peruvian film *Una sombra al frente* (2007) or *Crossing a Shadow* directed by Augusto Tamayo. It's basically the story of an engineer who tries to construct a bridge in the Amazonian area of Peru at the beginning of the twentieth century. Have you seen it? If so, would you agree that it dialogues with your novel?

MA: Yes, but of course I wrote *Cellophane* long before I saw the movie. There are other films that are relevant to the book, too: *Fitzcarraldo*, most notably.

JH: Speaking of cinema, how did you become involved with the documentary *Girl Rising* for which you wrote one of the segments or storylines? Do you have other similar projects?

MA: One of the producers of *Girl Rising* had read *American Chica* and sent it to the director, Richard Robbins. He told me he liked my memoir very much. He had been on a binge of reading memoirs of girlhood. His goal was to traverse the globe looking for places that would prove a very important new finding in social science: If you educate the girls in places of poverty, if you concentrate on the ages of ten to sixteen, you can transform the fabric of a whole community. There will be less disease. Education rates will rise. There will be potable water. Very basic things like that. The incidence of AIDS goes down. Infant mortality goes down. All these very tangible things will result if you just take that narrow population and educate it. In the process of making a documentary film about that simple fact, they were looking at all sorts of possibilities around the globe. They had not looked at any place in South America. When Richard called me, he said that he really liked *American Chica*

because he felt I had captured a child's mentality completely. But he added, "I am calling you for advice. I already know that Peru is not a country I will cover in this film, because it simply isn't poor enough." I gasped at that thought. Yes, of course, Peru's economy was improving. Growth was booming. But just because an economy is booming, it does not mean there aren't great social gaps. Indeed, there were and are staggering pockets of poverty in Peru. I encouraged him to send a film crew to the jungle (the Amazon) and to the *sierra* (the Andes). I gave him two places to go. So, they went into Madre de Dios, and then high up in the *sierra*—to the illegal goldmines in a no man's land called La Rinconada. The place had been mined by the Incas long ago, but it had been deemed an impossible mine, because it is on a remote glacial mountain and those who had gone there had died in droves. The Spanish colonials would not go near the place. Today, it is the highest human habitation in the world, and the illegal mining conducted there is undertaken in unbelievably harsh conditions. People live on glacial rock, with no water, no food. It's a wilderness, accustomed to wild ways, a frontier where rank alcoholism and prostitution rule. Young girls are kidnapped off the streets of Cuzco and Puno and brought there to service the miners. To make a long story short, the film people found in La Rinconada exactly the sort of place they were looking for. They sent me dozens of videos of little girls who were going to school there. Watching those videos, I found one child who took my breath away. Every time she was asked about her troubles—her father's dying, her big brother trapped in a mine—she would answer with the verses of César Vallejo [Peru's great poet of the twentieth century]. The film crew had no idea. They thought she was simply talking, and her words were incredibly moving. She was quoting the verses of Vallejo! I thought to myself: This is incredible! Here is a girl who lives in an absolute hellhole who has taken it upon herself to memorize these verses and is using them to express her pain. She was a girl for whom words were vital. Of course, I said, "That's my little girl!"

JH: The theory sounds like a statement I heard about education for young women around the world. To educate a man is fine, but to educate a woman means to educate a family because she passes down those values. What do you think of this concept?

MA: Well, of course. That is the idea, and it took a flock of social scientists to document it and prove that it is the reality. The poor are especially impacted by these findings. We were not poor in my family—we were reasonably well-off—but I come from a generation in which my Peruvian father actually wondered about the necessity of educating a girl beyond high school. Although our family has been highly educated for generations, the women always took it upon themselves to self-educate. So, a full spectrum of educational opportunities for women has been late to come to Hispanics. My father, of course, came around to educating his daughters, both of whom have graduate degrees.

JH: When your protagonist in *Girl Rising* recites verses from one of César Vallejo's famous poems, "Heraldos negros," I feel her struggle in unison with that of the poetic voice and essentially, Vallejo? Would you agree?

MA: She chose that poem. There is a reason why. Vallejo has an extraordinary ability to express the existential pain that many Peruvians feel. Or, for that matter, the pain that anybody who understands the challenges of the oppressed in Peru (or Latin America in general) might feel. His poetry addresses troubles between the classes, between races, between the individual and society. Vallejo says it all.

JH: How did you come up with the storyline for *Lima Nights*, a novel where you update contemporary relationships through romance again in metropolitan Lima? The two main characters could not be from further worlds apart, yet they share this city, this dance, this love to live life to the fullest in a tango club.

MA: It actually came from history, from reality. I was inspired by an old school-friend of my father who is German-Peruvian. I tried to capture the context of German Peruvians who are a little community unto themselves in Lima. That community arrived in Lima from Germany in the early 1800s. They built railways, ran banks, conducted commerce, and were generally very wealthy and accomplished. As time wore on, as Peru fell into hard times, they, too, fell into hard times. So, I was inspired by my father's friend who as some members of my family would say, "had stepped off the cliff" into dissolution. He was a terrible womanizer and fancied, especially, indigenous women. He was tall, blonde, blue-eyed, and was thoroughly obsessed with the opposite side of the racial spectrum.

I was fascinated by that racial dynamic and the sexual obsession. My father was always throwing up his hands and saying, "There he goes. Schmidt is at it again." One day when I was visiting my parents, sitting at the dinner table, my father said, "You won't believe what is going on with Schmidt. He has had such problems with women that he had to go ask the advice of a shaman. A shaman!" It turned out that he had engaged a *vidente* (a seer or clairvoyant) in Lima to exorcise a black magic curse that had been sent against him. That was all I needed to hear. The novel was born.

JH: How did you come up with the character of María Fernández in this novel who symbolizes the Indigenous migrant woman dealing with various family issues, especially violence, within the context of the Shining Path?

MA: The terror of the civil war in Peru plays a very important part in *Lima Nights*. It's a time when everything is disrupted, all bets are off, and people are too worried to care about a neighbor's interracial romance. In other words, it was a window in which such a thing could happen in the heart of the most racist part of the capital, because for a moment in time nobody cared. That is why *Lima Nights* is set precisely at that time.

JH: How have travels beyond the U.S. and Peru affected your life? For example, you lived in Asia for a while. Did you learn something in that experience?

MA: Of course. I am fascinated by the role of "the other." I have put myself in that role again and again. In Russia. In China. In Malaysia. In Mexico. Throughout South America. I'm always curious to see what happens to me when I'm dropped into an alien context. I'm curious to see what happens to the people I encounter in return.

JH: Where do you feel most at home? Do you have more than one? How does it feel to move back and forth between two world capitals, Washington D.C. and Lima, Peru?

MA: It is a privileged way to live. You and I are sitting now in the North American capital, in this extraordinary metropolis of the United States of America, which in its own way has colonial tentacles out there in the world. And then to say that I go back and forth to Lima, the Latin American metropolis that mirrored Madrid in colonial times, is amazing, truly. The more I learn about the colonial world, the more I understand how we Latin Americans kept the Old-World fed, clothed, and warmed. Europe didn't come to

America; America also came to Europe. People talk about globalization as if it's a new thing, but it has been around for centuries. It began with Columbus and the trade of gold, silver, coffee, and tobacco, and all the rest. When I am in Washington D.C., I feel that I now inhabit a place of power that Lima once held. It's like going back and forth in time. The differences in the two cities are dramatic for me and such a metaphor for my own very deep divide.

JH: In fact, you have also written introductory essays for photography books such as *Through the Eyes of the Condor* with Robert B. Hass and *Stone Offerings: Machu Picchu's Terraces of Enlightenment* with Mike Torrey. What have these experiences been like?

MA: Wonderful in terms of adventure! For the book *Through the Eyes of the Condor* I went up in a small plane and was able to see Peru from 5000 feet. Imagine that! You are in a tiny plane with the wind in your face, the photographer opens the door. You have three pairs of gloves on, many coats, and you are freezing. You can barely write. When you look down at the landscape below, what you see is what you never realize when you are sitting in Lima. The country is an amalgamation of land forms. I believe Peru is one of the countries that has the most landforms in the world. When you fly that low, it takes minutes to go from desert to jungle to mountain. You fly over micro-environments and see the lines clearly. You can imagine the tremendous geologic catastrophes that created the Andes. In some places, Peru has stone outcroppings that must have been a result of geological mayhem. You realize that the strange, wonderful, mystical feeling you sense in Peru is not related to any history you will ever be able to record. It is told in the land.

In *Stone Offerings*, center stage was given over to Machu Picchu, which has a tremendous hold on the human imagination. We don't know why it was built. We don't know why it is there. We don't know whether it was meant for Inca monks or princes. Who was meant to use those astronomical achievements? The wonder is that it was built during a time in which wheels existed, but were not used for construction. The Incas dragged tremendous boulders for many miles at 13,000 feet of altitude. The place is breathtaking in every way, mysterious. I think it's a metaphor for much of Latin American history, Peru especially. To be able to write about that

history in the company of beautiful photographs was a very rewarding experience for me. There isn't a human soul in sight in these images, but the photographer was able to capture the beauty, the majesty, and the sheer physicality of Machu Picchu.

JH: I read that you collect rocks whenever you visit a new place. If so, why do you have this habit? Is it something spiritual or natural?

MA: I've never thought of it as spiritual, but it does boost me to have a rock or two in my purse! I do believe that the earth holds a certain magic for us who inhabit it. I don't even think about it, I don't process it, I simply pick up stones and carry them. To me, it's the most natural thing in the world.

JH: Could you discuss your work between the Library of Congress and the National Library in Peru? Do you serve as a liaison between the U.S. and other South American libraries/archives?

MA: The Library of Congress has an excellent relationship with libraries around the world. The World Digital Library collects materials from around the planet. My role at the Library of Congress has been to build relationships, initiate ties. Little by little those relationships are being solidified. The work has been enormously satisfying.

JH: You also organize the National Book Festival here in D.C. How did that begin?

MA: It's a long story and it starts with Laura Bush, former First Lady, in 2001. Let's not forget: she was a librarian. I think the idea of the Festival dates back to when George W. Bush was governor of Texas. Laura Bush had inaugurated a book festival in Austin, and it turned out to be very successful. When she arrived in Washington D.C., that was one of her pet projects. She approached the Library of Congress and James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress, immediately responded that a National Book Festival would be wonderful. At that point I was literary editor of *The Washington Post*. I had been trying to build a *Washington Post* Book Festival for years. So, the moment I got wind of this, I got in touch with the Library of Congress as well as the office of the First Lady. I said, whatever you do, include *The Washington Post*, because we are thinking along the same lines. So, they did. The relationship between the Library of Congress, the White House, and *The Washington Post* has been very successful over the years. It has pro-

duced a marvelous national event, the model for book festivals around the country. I have had the distinct pleasure to be a talent scout for the festival for fifteen years now. Always looking for good authors. Always looking to shine a bright light on the nation's best literature.

JH: How did you feel when Mario Vargas Llosa won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2010? In fact, you introduced him at an event sponsored by the National Book Festival in DC 2012.

MA: We invited him and he came. It was marvelous. I remember looking out at the audience that attended the Vargas Llosa event. It was packed. There were two thousand people, minimum. The pavilion seats were filled and there was a great wave of humanity there. I had never seen so many Hispanics at the National Book Festival. I looked out at the audience and saw a sea of Latin American faces. The first thing I did was ask, "How many of you are from Peru?" And a multitude of flags shot up! It was wonderful to see that pride. I have always had a great admiration for Vargas Llosa and I am fortunate to call him a friend. My husband and I see him from time to time when we are in Lima. I have interviewed him more than once. He is an enormously talented, formidable figure in every way. He once told me, "I never have writer's block. The problems are the other way around. Sometimes I have to stop myself from writing too much." He is an extraordinary spokesman for Peruvian literature, but no less for our philosophy and history. He writes from many points of view. He has been a journalist. He is a historian. He is a playwright. He is a storyteller. He is our everyman. He is the best that we can be. There are Peruvians who don't love him. My father was one of those. He thought Vargas Llosa was too left-wing at one point; too right-wing at another. But Vargas Llosa has been part of a long trajectory and cannot easily be captured by those antipodes.

JH: Do you have any favorite novels by Vargas Llosa?

MA: There are quite a few. I loved *La casa verde* (*The Green House*). An amazing novel! But then I also loved *Conversación en la Catedral* (*Conversation in the Cathedral*) and *Tía Julia y el escribidor* (*Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*), which are very different quantities. There is Vargas Llosa heavy and there is Vargas Llosa light, and he swings easily from one to the other. My personal opinion is that he does this to entertain himself, to keep himself alive. Here is a seri-

ous historical work, and here is where I am going to play. And he has the talent to go from one to the other easily. Persuasively. His politics over the years has been equally flexible. [laughs]

JH: For a while now, you have been deeply involved in organizing book festivals and conferences trying to bring writers together. Could you talk about the event you organized with Sandra Cisneros, Francisco Goldman, and María Hinojosa?

MA: The work of a writer is a lonely business. You drill down, go to your rabbit hole, write. My career, on the other hand, has always been as an editor, first in publishing houses and then as literary editor of *The Washington Post*. I have always lived in the bustle of the literary world. In it, you look for talent. You judge talent. You are very much in the center of a marketplace of ideas and narratives. When I began to dedicate myself to writing, I missed that aspect. I missed that energy. So, whenever I was offered to structure something in which I could focus on talent and shine a light on other people's work, I always said yes. I love that aspect of the literary world. The collegiality. The ability to say "yes," go on, tell us about your book, about what you do.

In the particular event, you mention—the one with Cisneros, Goldman, and Hinojosa—I was asked to organize a celebration of Mexican literature and culture. We focused on dance, music, literature, philosophy, archaeology, all of it. In the process, one of the panels was on the Mexican American identity. I was lucky enough to bring together a few truly gifted yet distinct observers of that identity: María Hinojosa, Sandra Cisneros, and Francisco Goldman.

JH: What is your next project?

MA: I am writing a book that can be variously described as history, memoir, and opinion. It is about the Latin American personality; about what makes us the way we are. I am going to try to capture three important strands of history that tell us a bit about who we are. If I do it right, one thousand years will emerge to tell the story of what defines us in the Americas.

Dreaming in Brazilian: Kathleen De Azevedo

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Kathleen De Azevedo emigrated at the age of three with her family to California in the late 1950s. She earned a Bachelor's degree in Theatre Arts at San Francisco State University and a Master of Fine Arts degree in English at the University of Washington, Seattle. Although she was raised in a small town near Fresno, California, she grew up with Brazilian cultural influences thanks to her mother for the carioca elements from Rio and thanks to her Jewish American father who adored the northeastern music of Brazil.

It was not until De Azevedo was an adult that she embarked on a journey to reconnect with her cultural roots by learning Portuguese more fluently and setting on a mission to deepen her knowledge of Brazilian culture, history, and the arts through trips and further study. She earned a fellowship through the Latin American Studies Center at Stanford University to conduct research and pose further inquiry into Brazilian history with its African and Jewish cultural influences. De Azevedo has also contributed short stories and essays to the *Boston Review*, *Américas*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Gettysburg Review* among others. Despite the fact that Brazil is geographically an enormous country, she claims that very little is known about its rich and complex history and culture in the U.S. In fact, she sets the record straight when it comes to U.S. representations of Brazilian culture and gender matters, especially with respect to the portrayals of women from Brazil. In *Samba Dreamers* (2006), the first novel in English about the Brazilian diasporic experience in the U.S., De Azevedo

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responds to how the Hollywood's film industry tried to control the image of the legendary Brazilian/Portuguese actress and performer, Carmen Miranda. By exaggerating the tropical component of her voice and body Hollywood objectified her and emptied her of any intellectual and substantial thoughts.

De Azevedo has made her home in San Francisco for over thirty years. She is Professor of English at Skyline College. She continues to travel to Brazil and other parts of Latin America for fun as well as research.

I first met Kathleen de Azevedo in early 2012 to discuss her novel *Samba Dreamers* at a café in the Mission neighborhood of San Francisco. We continued correspondence over email until we reunited for a personal interview on May 26, 2013, while one of San Francisco's major cultural events, Carnival, took place on the streets, and then continued through email. She remembers her childhood and reflects on how Brazilian culture made an impact on her.

JH: You were born in Rio de Janeiro. Is that where your parents met? How long did you live there?

KA: My father was a surveyor for the Inter-American Geodetic Survey (IAGS). They had these all over Latin America such as Brazil, Central America and perhaps, the Andean region. After World War II, Brazilians wanted to construct roads. You had them on the borders with other countries, but you did not have anything within the country. If you wanted to go into Brazil, you had to go by bush plane or by river. They wanted to map the area. They needed mapmakers ultimately to build roads. My father worked up in the northeast, three cities—Juazeiro, Aracaju, and Recife. While his "home base" was in the cities, he actually worked in the "field." Though it was hard work in the northeast, my father liked it because he grew up poor. He liked the quietness about it. Growing up the music in our house was from the northeast. If you drank something at home, even a soft drink, he would say "That's cachaça!" referring to the strong rum popular in Brazil. He met my mother when he visited Rio, sometimes with other men he worked with. My mother was really sophisticated, sheltered, and upper-class from Rio, a carioca. It was a weird marriage. Usually, marriages between different countries don't work very well and then marriages between classes add their own complication. Usually, a woman marries up, not down. Since he was American, she thought she was marrying up.

My mother's experiences in the United States were the movies and the tourists in New York City.

JH: Where were you educated? How did you choose your major?

KA: Until I was in high school, I lived near Fresno in North Fork in Madera County, California. We grew up speaking mostly English. My mother wanted me to speak Portuguese, but in the U.S, as I could not find any friends willing to speak Portuguese, I ended up speaking English so I could have playmates. I spoke it when I was little, but I actually learned Portuguese formally in the U.S. after my first trip to Brazil as an adult. When I returned from a trip to Brazil in 1995, I realized that I wanted to study Portuguese. I studied a lot of it on my own and then I hired a tutor. I had studied Spanish but Portuguese was my calling!

When I was in high school, I wanted to go to college but I did not get any proper advice. My mother was an immigrant and my father was not equipped to advise me. I put on my application that I wanted to go to San Francisco State first, Fresno State second, and Chico State third because they were the only colleges I knew. The reason I knew about San Francisco State was because the student riots were in the news. Luckily, I got into my first choice. I was excited because I had always wanted to live in San Francisco. It seemed radical and beautiful.

After high school, I majored in Theatre Arts. Honestly, I was not that good in Theatre but I met my boyfriend then. He was working in a high school, but he was married to someone else and I was not interested in him at all. A couple of years later we hooked up again after he was divorced. I started working in high school theatre. For a while it was pretty cool. It was nice like a bohemian life, pretty flexible. But the funding was cut. I needed a job so I temped for a while. I worked at the Exploratorium in San Francisco. That's when I started writing short stories. I went from theatre to playwriting to short fiction. At first, I wrote a couple of novels. In the meantime, I started to publish poetry and short stories. Then I did not want to be a secretary anymore. I went to grad school and did an M.F.A. in Creative Writing at the University of Washington. At that time M.F.A. programs were not the dime a dozen it is like now. It was still competitive to get in.

JH: Is *Samba Dreamers* your first novel? What made you decide to turn this story into a novel rather than another genre?

KA: It is my first *published* novel. *Samba Dreamers* began as a story after I heard about the life of Carmen Miranda on NPR while I was in graduate school. This program gave me the idea of a short story with the heroine protagonist of *Samba Dreamers*, Carmen Socorro Katz. At that time, I did complete my first novel as a graduate project, along with the obligatory academic essay, but the novel was never published. However, the NPR bit on Carmen Miranda haunted me. I wanted to do a Brazilian novel, but I did not have enough schema to do so. I realized that I had to learn Portuguese and go to Brazil. Still, I had a lot of things to say about Carmen Miranda. The novel allowed me to talk about politics, gender, history, and Hollywood. I actually love novels more than anything else.

For the next novel, I wanted to explore the northeast of Brazil for subsequent writings because a lot of my childhood stories took place in the northeast. I wanted to go back to Brazil but I did not have the funds. At that time, the Latin American Studies Center at Stanford University was offering fellowships to study as part of these different working groups. One such group was the Brazilian Working Group. I applied to study *literatura da cordel*, basically a folk ballad from the northeast of Brazil. So I got the fellowship and headed back to Brazil to study northeast culture. I went to Recife and Salvador! I love Salvador because I love the mix of African and Europeans cultures. Then I just kept going back sometimes to write articles. I have been to the south of Brazil, Rio of course, and then the northeastern region. Brazil is big! One bite at a time.

JH: Who are some of your literary influences in general and any in particular for *Samba Dreamers*?

KA: Well, I think *One Hundred Years of Solitude* probably changed my life. Isabel Allende's earlier works to a certain extent. Louise Erdrich's earlier novels. While I was growing up I did not think of Latin Americans as serious writers. One time I was doing a project, a modern opera, with a colleague at a workshop at the University of Minnesota. She had worked a lot with Latino and African-American musicians. I was writing a script for her music. We were working together on a musical on cleaning women and she said, "You write magical realism." I asked, "What's that?" So she invited me to a bookstore and showed me *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which I

bought immediately. It was one of the biggest epiphanies of my life! I recognized so many familiar things. I have read that book so many times. But that book changed my life. It gave me permission to be Latina. You can write this way. You can think this way. You can have this kind of imagination. Because when you grow up in an American small town, they say, "That's too much. That's too passionate." But if it's not your voice, then it's not your work.

While I was writing *Samba Dreamers* I read *Dialogues of the Great Things of Brazil* by Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão, *A Grain of Mustard Seed: The Awakening of the Brazilian Revolution* by Marcio Moreira Alves, and *Brazilian Bombshell* by Martha Gil-Montero.

JH: The two storylines in *Samba Dreamers*—whose protagonists are Rosea Socorro Katz and Joe Silva—though very different intertwine and blend together. How did you develop the plot of the novel?

KA: In the novel, Joe Silva comes to the U.S. to flee the memories of torture during the Brazilian dictatorship. As part of his effort to assimilate, he marries an American woman and gets a job driving a bus for a Hollywood tour company. Rosea, the fictional daughter of Carmen Miranda (called Carmen Socorro in the novel) gets a job as a receptionist in the same touring company. They have an increasingly dangerous affair that develops into murder, and a darkening search for identity.

JH: What intrigued you about Carmen Miranda, reflected in the character of Carmen Socorro in your novel? She also made classic films during Hollywood's Golden Age period.

KA: I grew up in a small town and there weren't any images of Latinos except for Carmen Miranda. Whenever a movie came that included her, the old Hollywood films, we would make a big deal of watching it, complete with popcorn. It was the only representation of Latinos in the media for us. Even though my mother did not like the image of Carmen Miranda because obviously, it was very exaggerated, it was one of the few images of Latinos we had. One of the complaints my mother had when she met her in-laws for the first time in the United States, is that they expected she would be dressed like Carmen Miranda. When she came to the U.S. she dressed in regular clothes. They asked her why she was not dressed like a Brazilian.

As I was working on the novel, I happened to be in a bus station in Maceió, Brazil. At the station was a small bookstore. They had a biography on Carmen Miranda by Martha Gil-Montero which I bought. I learned about her life, her relationships with men, and Hollywood. Later, I found out that it was available in Portuguese and then translated into English. I read both. That was the only real definitive biography I knew. Even today the gringo image of Brazil is still very limited to Carmen Miranda. To Brazilians, she's kind of a love-hate figure.

JH: Why did you decide to include the Brazilian dictatorship of the 1960s and 1970s in your novel?

KA: Yes, the dictatorship was from 1964 to 1985. When I went to Rio for the first time as an adult, my cousin told me as we were driving to her house how she was a student during the dictatorship. During that time the police took the students to line them up and take them away. Because the U.S. was very culpable in supporting the right-wing governments all over Latin America, she talked about it so, in a sense, I could take that truth with me back home to the U.S. She rented a movie called *Pra frente, Brasil!* (1982) or *Go Forward, Brazil!* which presented how the dictatorship superimposed on the 1970 World Cup which Brazil won. All my life I knew that Brazilians were hostile toward U.S. politics in Latin America but I never understood why until then.

When I came back to the United States I became interested and read a lot more. I did a book review for *Thy Will Be Done: The Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil* by Gerard Colby and Charlotte Dennett. It's a huge book about the involvement of the United States and the CIA in all of Latin America. That book is how I actually learned about the extent of the dictatorship not only in Brazil but also in other Latin American countries. I heard the authors interviewed on the radio. The show gave me the phone number of where to get the book. First, I tried to look for it in bookstores but then I called the number and found out the book was marketed through an independent distributor. The woman in charge of distribution was really excited about the fact that I was interested in doing a review. I decided to read the parts on Latin America, including Guatemala, Brazil, and Argentina. I also met the authors and they talked about how hard it was to get it published. But the whole thing was very intricate. You could see

the familiar patterns in how the U.S. controlled foreign governments for America's benefit.

JH: In reading your novel, you refer to the *tropicalismo* movement as well.

KA: *Tropicalismo* burst in Brazil in the 1960s. For a long time the Brazilian art movement of the status quo pretty much ignored the African and Indigenous influences. A lot of Brazilian culture was European. If you visited the classical museums in Brazil, they actually imitated European paintings. In 1928 the *Manifesto Antropófago* was published by the Brazilian poet and polemicist Oswald de Andrade. Brazil had to own up to the fact that they were not just a culture of Europeans but in fact they were a mixture of diverse cultures. The manifesto had to do with the fact that in Brazilian history, cannibals consumed at least one Brazilian priest, Pedro Fernandes Sardinha. Basically, Brazil is a metaphorically cannibalistic culture that consumes all of these different aspects. So the *tropicalismo* art movement was a mixture of influences of African, Indigenous, and French New Wave. If you ever get a chance, see a film called *Triste Trópico*. It's a take-off on Claude Levi Strauss' tours of the Indigenous communities in Brazil. The film highlights how Westerners fetishize and objectify the female black and mulatta body. It's interesting yet disturbing because you realize that it is basically what the stereotype of a Latina is. You see how mixed races are objectified.

JH: Speaking of films, are you familiar with the movement called Cinema Novo?

KA: They had a Cinema Novo Film Festival here in Berkeley. I saw a lot of these films. I had read a lot of writings on people doing research of the *tropicalismo* movement. Artists were incorporating a lot of folktales and making them modern and more relevant. Another film to see is called *Iracema* (1975). The actual book was written in the early 1800s and explored the relationship between an Indigenous woman and an explorer. The film modernized it by portraying the relationship between a man driving a logging truck through the Amazon and an Indigenous woman. The connection between the two is similar.

JH: Could you explain the concept of *saudade* which I understand as "nostalgia" in *Samba Dreamers*?

KA: In Brazil they use *saudade* to mean you miss something or someone but with a touch of melancholy. It's kind of a longing, a homesickness. Eu sinto *saudade* por Brasil.

Brazil to me is very interesting because there is a bit of sadness that runs through the whole culture. The counterpoint is that it is very much alive. You have carnival and other celebrations. But there is always a sadness too. This sentiment may have come from several sources. One may have come from the Portuguese. Many traditional Portuguese poems and songs like the *fado* speak about the longing for home as the mariners were frequently out to sea. You also have the huge slave population who had the *banzo*, an intense homesickness which drove slaves insane. It is an African-rooted word and described when slaves could go crazy to the extent that they commit suicide. When the slave ships left Africa for Brazil, slaves would jump ship and take a bunch of people with them because they were all chained. It's a crippling homesickness that was part of being a slave. The threads of that sadness of leaving home to go somewhere just leads into the *saudade* for a human being, *saudade* for a food, *saudade* for a home. It's used a lot. Brazil is a country where people did not originally wish to come and settle. They had to be bribed with land grants.

JH: You have incorporated the idea of *saudade* very effectively in your novel. It informs the sentiment of the Brazilian diaspora in the U.S. in a very strong way. Various characters, be they immigrants or second generation, are longing for home in *Samba Dreamers.*

KA: It becomes part of their cultural fabric. My mother always had *saudade.* She never really liked the United States. There was always that thread of longing or sadness even though one could say that it is better here in the U.S. than there in Brazil.

JH: At the beginning of each chapter, you begin with quotes from colonial writings that are reminiscent of the *crónicas* from Spanish American writings. Why did you include the quotes?

KA: These are not Portuguese chronicles, but they are made up writings that are taken from dialogues in a book called *Dialogues of the Great Things of Brazil by* Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão. It's one of the earliest books about the natural history of Brazil, in what he knew at the time. He created an imaginary dialogue between Brandonio, the "ardent defender of Brazil" and Alviano, the "heretic in things Brazilian."

The purpose of the book was to present information through a dialogue rather than essays so they would pose questions. What kinds of plants are there? Why are the birds so strange? Why are some people black and others brown, or white? The book, written in the 1600s, gives us a glimpse of what the beliefs were at that time. For example, one belief is that salamanders would come from fire which sounds like myth but they are told with the voice of authority. Every aspect of culture (i.e. nature, race, custom) is explored in this book.

Brandão was a sugar planter, a merchant, and a new Christian who would be a converted Jew. He did write about the flora and fauna and engaged in some experimental planting because he owned land there. I know he was Jewish because a lot of the Jewish people were kicked out of Portugal so a lot of them came to Brazil. Many could write, were academics, and were able to travel to Brazil.

JH: In an earlier conversation, you had mentioned that Recife, Brazil, was a port of entry for many converted Jewish immigrants.

KA: During the Inquisition a lot of the Jews migrated from Spain to Portugal because Portugal was a safe haven from Spain. They also migrated to the Netherlands because many were merchants. Portugal welcomed Jews because the Portuguese needed people to lend money for voyages, and usury was forbidden by the Catholic Church. The Portuguese Jews were protected from the Inquisition for a while and then, it was initiated by King João, the Second. His son, Manoel I, actually expelled the Jews as a condition of marriage to the daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. The Jews escaped to Recife, Curaçao, and eventually to New York City because they were Dutch colonies. The Dutch tolerated the Jews because they were merchants and needed bankers to lend money and be involved in business.

JH: Some of these quotes explore Amazonian culture, in particular the role of women through myths. This perspective is different from how the Spaniards and English first viewed Indigenous women in the Americas as objects of exchange or concubines.

KA: Portugal brought the whole notion of El Dorado (Land of Gold). The Amazon legend is actually from Greece, and the Caucuses. But supposedly, Spanish explorer Francisco Orellana was working with Gonzalo Pizarro in Peru. He wanted to find a route from the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean. Pizarro who was also looking for gold did

> not know how formidable the Andes were nor the extent of the Amazon. By the time Pizarro's party crossed into the Andes the way Europeans did with horses, mules, and pigs, they had eaten half of their animals. They asked Orellana to go ahead of them and scout for food. Orellana saw that people in the Amazon were traveling by boat, not by foot because parts of the Amazon basin are sometimes under water. He started navigating the Amazon. He could not stop because the currents pushed him east. On the way they raided indigenous settlements for food. At one point, they were attacked by men and women with long hair. Because the Amazon myth already existed in Europe, the explorers thought that they had been beset by women warriors.

By the time they got to the Amazon delta they had barely escaped with their lives. Some accounts say that the Indians had been previously attacked by the French and other Europeans. So, by the time Orellana's crew drifted past, the Indians were not in the mood to welcome any more Europeans. The indigenous of the Amazon are called Tupi. Within the Tupi group, there are many tribes. The Guaraní are in the south near Paraguay. The Europeans never found El Dorado because it never existed.

JH: I find an interesting parallel between the figure of the Amazonian woman and some of the female protagonists in your novel *Samba Dreamers*. They are not only physically strong, but they hold an inner strength as well.

KA: I was responding to the stereotype of Brazilian women as being an object of beauty. True, some are beautiful and some are not. But Brazilian women do have an inner strength.

JH: Returning to the quotes they remind me a bit of anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro's *Maíra* where Indigenous people are studied as objects in the social sciences similar to how the Portuguese initially viewed them.

KA: It's going back to *El hablador* by Mario Vargas Llosa and in history as well where some people wanted to study Indigenous cultures as objects and others became their advocates. Some people wanted to turn the natives into Christians while others were fascinated with their natural customs. So many cultures converged in Brazil.

JH: Speaking of Vargas Llosa, you mentioned that his historical novel *The War of the End of the World* covers an important rebellion in Brazil in the nineteenth century. What impression did it leave on you?

KA: It's about Antônio Conselheiro. I am really interested in the northeast of Brazil which is where my next project is taking me. In 1888, when Brazil became a republic meaning they no longer had an emperor this group of poor people from the northeast, these *beatos*, the beatified ones, emerged. They are not official saints but they become saints when a miracle is attributed to them. They are worshipped like saints. They have shrines. Many poor people felt that the Catholic Church and the Vatican did not speak for their interests so they created their own cults. Conselheiro created a small cult where he had a bunch of followers and within these followers he also had amassed a small army because Brazil had a lot of itinerant armies since there was no unified government. They decided that they were not going to be a part of Brazil and wanted to be independent. But the government wanted unification so they sent troops. This small itinerant band of ragged people drove the troops out basically, defeated the Brazilian troops. The government sent the second wave and the same thing happened. The government decided that they were going to slaughter them and sent a massive army. By then, Conselheiro's followers gathered inside a church, and the troops blew up the church, leaving one survivor. Brazil did not exactly have big wars but there were many small rebellions in different areas against the government, against the Spanish, and so on. It was really hard to unite Brazil. Even today not all areas celebrate independence the same day. For example, Bahia's Independence Day is on July 2nd but Brazilian Independence Day is on September 7th.

JH: Brazil and Portugal had a colonial relationship for centuries. Can you comment on how that has changed now on a more personal and individual level?

KA: In Brazil when you say something is "Portuguese", you mean that it is inept. For example, you have a lot of classic Portuguese jokes of the thick-headed Manuel and Joaquim characters. Diplomatically, the Portuguese are able to work and live in Brazil. But if something goes wrong, my Brazilian family says, "We were colonized by the Portuguese. What do you expect?"

JH: By reading about Brazil's economy, it seems that they are better off than Portugal, as if the tables have turned.

KA: Well, Portugal was never that great economically. When I traveled a few years back, it was wonderful to visit but one knew that it did not compare economically to Germany or France. It was more like Greece.

JH: How would you characterize contemporary U.S.–Brazilian relations?

KA: The United States tends to care about countries when they have an economic advantage to do so. Now that Brazil has oil and other things the U.S. is paying more attention. Normally, if you go out of your Latino milieu you are not going to find too many people interested in Latin America and who really know about Brazil. When I look at lists of publishers, unless they are dealing strictly with Latin Americans, Brazilians are not really represented. For the number of Latin Americans in the United States, Latino authors are not generously represented. One way to find out more about Brazil, its culture and history, is to begin with a general interest in Latin America.

JH: It's interesting that we are conducting this interview while Carnival is happening outside this café this weekend. When I think of carnival, I immediately think of Rio de Janeiro, which is also your birthplace.

KA: Since Carnival is in February, it is in the middle of the academic year when I can't go. In June, *Festa Juninas* is celebrated all over the northeast. *Bumba meu boi*, probably the second-best thing to Carnival in Rio, is in São Luis in the state of Maranhão which takes place during the same time, but the dances involve the celebration of a bull. People don't know too much about it in the U.S. It's really amazing. The last time I was in Brazil I was in São Luis, specifically to go to that festival. The dance consists of young men and women dressed in decorative Indigenous attire. Their dance pattern is regimented in a circle or a line. Other dancers play bulls, or ranchers or medicine men. There is always one pregnant woman dancer, played by a guy in drag. The frenetic instrumentation can be an orchestra, on the drums, or *matracas*. There are auxiliary dance shows too, from quadrilles, Portuguese court dancers and African *tambor de minas* dancers. You are surrounded by a whirl of color for hours. The performance is wonderful! If you can't go to Carnival, you should go to this event.

JH: Have you found any kind of Brazilian community here in San Francisco, the Bay Area, or any part of the U.S.?

KA: It's a very scattered community. The guy who used to cut my hair was Brazilian but then he left. I shop at a store nearby that sells Brazilian products. It's different in a lot of ways. Many people who

come here from Brazil want to go back unless they marry an American. They are not as integrated as other Latino groups like Mexicans and Peruvians. Basically, they are people who can afford to come to the U.S. and make more money. They are not the really poor Brazilians and not the really rich Brazilians. Many will have businesses but they don't really advertise their businesses to the non-Brazilian community. If you pick up a Brazilian newspaper, you will see advertisement for Brazilian products. One of the problems is the language. Most gringos don't speak Portuguese and many Brazilians are not fluent in English. Then, the Brazilian Consulate does not really mix with the immigrants due to class. A major problem in Brazil that comes to the United States is the classism. Brazilians are put in different tracks: the ones who work in the pizzerias and the gardeners and the ones who work at the consulate. So there is not a sense of cohesion. They stay separate which is too bad.

JH: How much of your identity do you think is embedded or part of Brazil, a carioca, a U.S. Latina, an American or how would you describe yourself?

KA: It's really mixed. It's hard to say. If you are around Mexicans, you are Mexican. If you are around Chinese, you are Chinese. The identity is so succinct. I am half Brazilian. I am half Jewish. I have two passports. I am sort of on the border. I can say I am American because I have or know all the things I need to survive as an American whereas I would have a tougher time integrating in Brazil. When I go to Brazil, they may say, "You are Brazilian like us." If they are kind of annoyed at me, they may say, "Well, you are American." Identity shifts depending on what the need of the other person is. So even in America, if they want me to be Latina, I can be Latina. If they want me to be American, I can be American. Unfortunately, there is no situation where I feel totally comfortable in one identity.

JH: How did you develop the Jewish component of your identity?

KA: You know my father converted to Catholicism. His last name was Feinblum. One of the difficulties about the Jewish identity is that when I was young my father's family did not accept my mother's family because she was Catholic and Latina. Conversely, they never accepted his children either because we were not "really Jewish." There were a lot of issues on the Jewish side of my family not accepting our identity at all. Now in the second generation my

cousins are intermarried. Some are gay, some are straight but all of them have Christian spouses or partners. Because I did not grow up around them there is not a close relationship to them. The Jewish family did not really let us enter the Jewish identity. And yet, when you have a name like Feinblum everybody asks you about being Jewish because everybody thinks you are Jewish. That's really interesting, too. You are kind of like an outsider trying to understand what everyone thinks about you.

JH: Speaking of last names, why did you decide to adopt De Azevedo as a last name? Is this decision recent?

KA: De Azevedo is my mother's maiden name. I had written a story about abortion that had a lot to do with Catholicism. I wanted to submit it to an anthology called *Catholic Girls*. If I submit this with my Feinblum last name, who would believe I was Catholic? But if I submit this with De Azevedo, they will know I am Catholic and I am Latina. Of course, the story was accepted for the anthology. Somebody at the Exploratorium where I worked suggested that I change my last name because "ethnic was in." I don't have a lot of work written under Feinblum in those days. Almost at the beginning of my writing career, I started publishing under De Azevedo. But, I don't really write a lot about Jewish things. If I do, I infuse them with the Brazilian. It's a real hybrid.

JH: As far as Latino cultures are concerned, do you see commonalities as well as differences between Brazilian Americans and Mexican Americans or other U.S. Latinos?

KA: Well yes, there are a lot of commonalities in the culture. But there are also historical differences because Mexicans have been here a long time. So when you are talking about who controls Latino culture and literature, it is authors of Mexican descent. If I go into the Latino literature world, there will be some Mexican American writers that are very protective of their typical tropes. A Mexican writer friend of mine complains about "the mamá sufrida," or the suffering mother stereotype. Some Mexican Americans want the influx of different voices. However, there is a very powerful gatekeeping in Latino literature and I wish the gate would open. Because I think we need a lot more variety.

JH: Do you think that literature perhaps has more depth or substance in representing Brazilian diasporic identity rather than the medium of film?

KA: Unfortunately, because people are reading less and less, I don't know the effect that literature may have on the public in general. One of the problems with *Samba Dreamers* is that I did not market this book to Brazilians here in the U.S. because a lot of them do not know enough English to read literature. I know it's hard to read literature in a foreign language; I go pretty slow reading Brazilian literature. One of the unfortunate things about the published Latino writer in general is that if you want to get noticed by the mainstream, you have to put forth the image that is recognizable. It's a little bit of what Carnival does here. We recognize the Guatemalan. We recognize the Brazilian because this is what we are used to. It's really hard to subvert that and be accepted. Yes, I watch a lot of Latino cinema and it is often filled with stereotypes. Then you have to ask yourself, "Do you want to be different or do you want to play along with the stereotypes?" Well, if I want to make it, I have to be Brazilian in the way a gringo would see it. That to me is the challenge for Latino artists. They have to break the stereotypes and they have to break through the mainstream too. Everyone wants to expand their audience. So, Brazilian literature can fall under international. *Samba Dreamers* fits in Latino literature because of the immigrant experience. Sometimes it's not even what you write but the image that you put forth.

JH: To some degree literary writers are more in control of their work whereas screenwriters and film directors have to negotiate constantly with Hollywood. How do you feel about that?

KA: A few years ago I was at the Latino Family Book Festival in Los Angeles. They had opened this award called Latino Books Into Movies. So when I went there they made a big deal about it. The next year I entered my novel. I did not hear from them for about a year. They finally announced the winners. So *Samba Dreamers* won second prize in the category of drama. Luckily my publisher submitted a bunch of books for me. I don't know if anyone has ever gotten a movie contract. But it was a way of getting this book into the hands of people who make films. Hopefully, someone will pick it up. I went into this with my eyes wide open. *Samba Dreamers* may or may not be picked up by an independent film director to be made into a movie. I suggested some Brazilian directors like Walter Salles, but I never heard back from my suggestion.

JH: Where do you think U.S. Latina/o literature is going? We know it's a growing segment of American literature and in some ways, hemispheric literature. Do you see it becoming more diverse?

KA: No. The publishing industry is going through this big upheaval. So they choose a few people to represent the whole Latino population. Junot Díaz is an example of that. It's getting harder to break through. A lot of agents are circling the wagons. Before you saw a lot of independent agents. Now you see a lot of mega agents trying to survive. It becomes now even harder to contact these agents. I had an unfortunate experience with my next novel. I had a London agent for many years. We went through a rewrite process that in the beginning was constructive. What I found out is that he wanted a particular narrative. It became overbearing and at the same time, his agency was falling apart. It was like a five-year bad marriage. It's like being married and finding out your partner has been cheating on you. It was like that. I rewrote some of this novel and now I have to start over again. I am in that position. I am sure I am not the only one who has had this experience.

JH: Could you talk about what you are working on or completed?

KA: I have finished a book of related short stories called *The History of the Jews of Brazil*. It is the story of a mother and three sons and how they are unaware of their Jewish heritage yet their lives are following similar trajectories of Jewish history. I finally got the title story published in a London online magazine.

JH: What is your current relationship to Brazil and Rio de Janeiro?

KA: I think I am realistic. By not being totally Brazilian, I may have a clearer view of a culture, including a lot of the flaws like the classism and racism. More people may realize this as the Olympics gets closer. Brazil wants to "clean up" the city. As a consequence, they are moving people out of neighborhoods, but they are not developing what really needs to be done and that's social equity. That needs to happen. That's how the crime is going to end. Just because you put a cop in place, that does not solve anything. There is a lot of corruption in Brazil, it's hard to break a pattern that has existed for ages.

Now they have the stadium ready for the World Cup and a subway that passes through more of the city, including the northern part of Rio de Janeiro. So, that's some progress I guess.

JH: Speaking of the World Cup, how did you feel about the Brazilian team in 2014 and do you have any predictions for 2018? Did you grow up with fútbol (soccer) or futebol?

KA: I grew up with the fact that my mother's family all were Fluminense fans (a Rio team). Basically, fandom is instilled at birth and goes throughout your life. Generations of families all cheer for the same team unless they are a rebel. The two biggest teams in Rio are Flamengo and Fluminense and when they have a game together, it's called Fla-Flu. A Fla-Flu game is where you see a lot of passion.

I became interested in soccer when I decided to go to Rio as an adult. The World Cup was held at Stanford and Brazil won. I also read some interesting material on soccer by Eduardo Galeano. As far as futebol in the future, I can't make predictions. The problem with the Brazilian team is that they play for other international teams who pay them better, so they are not used to playing with each other. Their style too, is less jogo bonito (beautiful game) and more Madrid, or Manchester United. Though soccer is popular I don't think it is the mainstay of the Brazilian identity as it was. A lot of Brazilians are disgusted with the World Cup team, though they prefer their city team. I think as Brazil gets more sophisticated, they will always love soccer, but I don't foresee as much hysteria (like suicides) like there used to be, when their team lost. They pretty much know to move on.

JH: Have you read or heard much of the concept of a South American diasporic identity? Do you think it's important?

KA: One of the problems for Brazil goes back to this classism. Sometimes the upper-class will not consider themselves Latino. They will say that they are Brazilian. However, the workingclass feel like they are more a part of Latino culture, especially in the United States. They most likely do not think about it much. Because the immigration is more recent compared to other Latino groups, they may start to feel more like a diaspora in a decade or so.

This concept is probably more prevalent among academics like yourself but I don't think it is that well known among most Brazilians. It's ok if scholars give me this label. It means that more people get interested in the work.

JH: What books, films, or other arts do you find inspiring these days?

KA: Right now, I'm on a Werner Herzog film kick. Thank God for Netflix! I'm trying to see all of his movies. He is a German director who explores a lot the white man's relationship with "primitive culture." *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (a mashup of the stories of Francisco Orellana and Lope de Aguirre who went crazy exploring the Orinoco River) is my favorite, and really wild. I love the novel *The Sound of Things Falling* by Colombian author Juan Gabriel Vásquez. I'm finishing the very intriguing novel *The Fishermen* by Chigozie Obioma. I've gotten into non-fiction too. This summer I read *The Shape of the New: Four Big Ideas and How They Made the Modern World* by Scott L. Montgomery and Daniel Chirot. Also, a great read is the non-fiction book *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* by Steve Silberman. I'd say my tastes are pretty eclectic.

It Takes Two to Tango Across Montevideo and California: Carolina De Robertis

While Carolina De Robertis may have been born to Uruguayan parents, raised in England until the age of five and then educated in Switzerland until the age of ten, she emigrated with her family to Los Angeles, California, in 1985, where she spent her formative years. She received a Bachelor's degree in English from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing at Mills College. De Robertis has published three novels *The Invisible Mountain* (2009), *Perla* (2012), and *The Gods of Tango* (2015) that have been translated into seventeen languages. She has earned a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 2012, Italy's Rhegium Julii Prize for *The Invisible Mountain*, and a Stonewall Book Award in 2016 for *The Gods of Tango* among other honors. In 2017, she edited a collection of letters in the form of essays entitled *Radical Hope: Letter of Love and Dissent in Dangerous Times*. She is also the English translator of Alejandro Zambra's acclaimed novel *Bonsai* (2012) and Roberto Ampuero's *The Neruda Case* (2013). She is currently an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.

Before becoming a published writer, De Robertis worked at non-profit women's rights organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area. This first-hand experience with counseling victims of domestic abuse has influenced her thinking and writing about the victims of political dictatorships in her heritage countries, Uruguay and Argentina. She explains the importance of giving voice to those who have been silenced throughout history. As an adult, De Robertis has returned to Montevideo to reclaim her heritage.

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She has felt an especially warm welcome with the reception of the Spanish translation of her first novel *La montaña invisible* which she considers "a love letter to Montevideo." In addition, De Robertis and her wife Pamela Harris won a Fulbright to spend a year and a half in Montevideo collaborating on *Farías: An Afro-Uruguayan Love Story* (2016), a documentary about Afro-Uruguayans. In 2013, they also witnessed a pivotal moment in Uruguayan history, the legalization of gay and lesbian marriages.

De Robertis currently lives with her family in Oakland and maintains strong cultural ties to the River Plate region. She feels at home in both California and Uruguay, as a *californiana* and a *rioplatense,* because she has formed strong communities. She has also explored with new eyes and incorporated cultural practices like the tango in her writings.

I first met Carolina De Robertis at a lively reading of her novel *The Gods of Tango* in a Los Angeles bookstore in summer of 2015. We subsequently reunited for lunch and coffee to conduct this interview on August 6, 2015, in Oakland, California. She reflects on her first favorite books that she discovered at the public library.

JH: When did you begin to write? What experiences motivated you to become a writer? What were you reading then and now?

CD: I have always loved reading. I have always been an incredibly avid reader and have just disappeared into books since I was a small child. I wrote my first collection of poems when I was seven. I grew up knowing that my bohemian grandmother Tonita De Robertis Semelis, who died when I was seven, was a poet. It was fascinating to learn about her in my scientist family. When I was ten, we moved to the United States and suddenly, I had access to the public library full of English language books. I tore through a whole shelf of Louisa May Alcott. And then I hit Jane Austen. I know that at ten years of age so much of Jane Austen went over my head but it was so exciting. Plunging into all of these books. That was a formative moment actually when I decided that the most incredible thing that I could do with my life was write novels. These books have moved my soul so deeply, beyond reason. At ten, I vowed to dedicate my first novel to Louisa May Alcott and I did not do it! But I still appreciate the influence that she had.

In terms of a role model, I am in awe of Toni Morrison. She is one of my absolutely favorite living writers. Perhaps, writers period. I admire the

depth with which she has restored voice, emotional presence and fullness of truth to aspects of history that have been lost in time. Specifically, in her case, African American history. There is so much silence in history that I think fiction has an important role in filling. A few more novelists who have been profound inspirations or influences along the way are Virginia Woolf, Gabriel García Márquez, James Baldwin, José Saramago, Eduardo Galeano, Jeanette Winterson, Salman Rushdie, Italo Calvino, Arundhati Roy, Laura Restrepo, Yukio Mishima, Dostoevsky…many more…

JH: What inspired you to write novels as opposed to other literary genres? What were your influences in literature or other arts in writing your three novels, *The Invisible Mountain*, *Perla*, and *The Gods of Tango*?

CD: I wrote poetry as a teen as many people do at that age. I secretly write poems now as well as essays. I occasionally write short stories, but mainly I am a novelist. It is by far the medium that I am the most drawn to and feel the most comfortable in. As a reader, the novel is the literary genre that has moved me the most. There are poems that I love and treasure. Short stories I admire but really nothing has moved my soul like the novel. There is something about being able to plunge into a different world, move so deeply through the consciousness of others.

With *The Gods of Tango*, there was a lot of musical influence because the main character was a musician. I listened to a tremendous amount of tango music from all the different eras, striving to infuse the book with those sounds and moods and rhythms. I took violin lessons to better connect with my protagonist, a tango violinist. Painting played a role in *Perla* because there are paintings on the walls of the house where the dramatic action takes place, and these paintings, including a Dalí, interact with the characters' inner worlds. In *The Invisible Mountain*, there is a strong relationship to poetry because one of the main characters is a poet. In each of these cases, I researched the forms both in more traditional, academic ways, and by immersing myself in them whenever and however possible.

JH: In *The Invisible Mountain*, what made you decide to cover almost 100 years of Uruguayan history? You return to the period of the gaucho whose lifestyle is disappearing in the first generation in this novel.

CD: Yes, I go back to that agrarian lifestyle of the gaucho at the beginning of the twentieth century that was disappearing as the novel opens. I began writing *The Invisible Mountain* spurred by the desire to capture all of Uruguayan history, or at least twentieth century Uruguayan history, in the arms of a single narrative. It's almost an absurd ambition when I look back on it. But it felt like the only first novel that I could write because of my urgent need, in my mid-twenties, to write my way into my Uruguayan heritage. I needed to write my way into Uruguayan culture and the legacy of the different histories and times of my great-grandparents', grandparents', and my parents' generations. Delving into them was the only way that I could fully understand who I was in the world. Writing my way back into a heritage that felt lost to me at the time.

JH: To what extent would you situate *The Invisible Mountain* in dialogue with the novels by Uruguayan author Juan Carlos Onetti who also writes about family sagas à la Faulkner or the Uruguayan poets, Juana de Ibarbourou and Delmira Agustini, both quite passionate in representing the female poetic voice in their respective literary traditions?

CD: I feel that *The Invisible Mountain* is in some ways very much at odds with the legacy of Onetti although I admire his prose tremendously. He is without equal in his prose. It's so beautiful. On a global scale, he is very much an underappreciated author who deserves to be on the same level of recognition as Cortázar and other major members of the Latin American boom. However, my work comes from a very different tradition than Onetti. It has more to do with what García Márquez did with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. While Onetti's prose style is very poetic and beautiful, his books are very bleak, and can be very grey and morose. They can be grim in their vision, which is a very Uruguayan trait, I must say. Uruguayans can often be very melancholic. Complaining about the weather is sort of a sport. Who can exaggerate more about it?

However, I do think that *The Invisible Mountain* has a lot to do with the Uruguayan women poets, Juana de Ibarbarou and Delmira Agustini. Especially Juana de Ibarbarou, who was a personal friend of my grandmother's. My grandmother Tonita was an Argentine poet, but living in Uruguay in the late forties and early fifties because her husband, my

grandfather, was exiled under Perón. My grandmother's relationship with Ibarbarou was complicated by the fact that Juana had an affair with my grandfather, my grandmother's husband, which actually broke up their marriage. But there is no question that their lives touched each other. That same grandmother, Tonita, inspired a major character in *The Invisible Mountain* and an exploration of what it meant to be a poet and woman in that time. Even writing that I was very much aware of the fact that my grandmother had been a personal friend of Juana de Ibarbarou and Gabriela Mistral—that she was part of a milieu that included women poets, a thriving community in Montevideo at the time.

JH: Your references to popular culture icons like Che and Eva Perón also situate your novel in conversation with Argentine politics and society. What do these public figures who have been made into myths at home and abroad mean to you?

CD: Che and Eva Perón are two interesting examples because both of them mean a great deal both in South America and beyond. Che Guevara and Evita are well-known figures in the United States and other parts of the world. Growing up Uruguayan in the United States, I became accustomed to people having absolutely no idea what my country of origin is like or even where it is. My sister once had someone say to her, "Oh, really, Uruguay? Where in Africa is that?" Just a few months ago, I said Uruguay to someone and ten minutes later, he asked, "So what do people eat in Paraguay?" The only reason I knew the answer is because I have a friend from there, but otherwise I would not have known.

So, the invisibility of Uruguay is profound. Even though Argentina is less invisible, there is still so much people do not know about the culture. People could have a reference point with Che and Evita. There is a way they are made legend within the United States and then, there is what they actually mean within South American culture, and, then, there is who they actually were. Right? Che visited Montevideo, and then he died in Bolivia. He had a very complex trajectory, beginning with his Argentine origins. For me, bringing those public figures into the fiction is a way to work with them and expand them from the inside, a way to subvert the assumptions that have been made by outsiders. Who were they in history? What did they mean to South American culture and what have they meant in U.S. culture which are two very different perspectives? I have also tried to

reclaim them. South American public figures, stories, and names can be appropriated by U.S. culture in ways that are not necessarily in connection with the root of what they are. You see it with the tango as well.

JH: In the second generation in *The Invisible Mountain*, the character of Eva finds herself migrating from Uruguay to Argentina where she cultivates her talent as a poet. She also experiences a sexual awakening but keeps this a secret from her family. How does this relate to the silence and self-censorship with respect to sexual identity in Uruguay then and now?

CD: Uruguay in general is a relatively progressive country. In the context of Latin America, it is by far the most secular nation. It has had separation between church and state for a hundred years. Women gained the right to vote shortly after the United States, long before Argentina. As well as the right to divorce, long before Argentina. In fact, my grandparents—the ones broken up by that affair with Ibarborou—could not get divorced in Argentina for many years. But even so, there can be a pervasive culture in Uruguay, “Just don’t talk about it. Don’t say it if you are going to cross the line.” El qué dirán (what will people say) is very important in the culture. The same goes for sexual identity. That is really how many gay people survive in Uruguay. When I first went back as an adult in 2001 and I met Uruguayan lesbians for the first time, everybody I met lived the life that they wanted, had a partner, but never talked about it explicitly with people outside the gay community. You did not tell your mother, your family, and certainly people at work that you were gay or lesbian. Eventually, after a decade or so, your mother might stop asking why you did not get married or whether you would ever marry. This was a quiet way of avoiding coming out completely. The generation I am speaking of was impacted by the dictatorship in which silence was a form of survival. The gay people I know came of age or were young adults during the dictatorship. They went into a deep closet and it still affects the way they are today. Although the younger generation is coming out more freely, and we are seeing an enormous shift as gay marriage was legalized in 2013. Even the gay activists who fought for the legalization of gay marriage have been shocked at how many people came forward and got married. Far more than *Ovejas negras*, the organization of activists, expected. The shift that is happening is pretty significant.

JH: In addition to the poetic language in this novel, I am particularly struck by how the main female characters try to overcome domestic and political violence. In Salome's generation, women involved in left-wing politics must suffer further by being raped. Could you comment?

CD: Salomé was modeled on a real person called Yessie Macchi who was a schoolmate of my mother's. Looking back, I think the first seed for *The Invisible Mountain* was planted when I was ten years old. It was 1985 and we had just moved to the United States. My mother received news that her high school friend Yessie had just been let out of prison. Yessie had been a Tupamara since the age of fifteen. At eighteen she was imprisoned. She was raped. She had a baby while she was inside. The baby was taken out and raised by relatives in Montevideo. Unlike the novel, it was not abroad. But still, she was a political prisoner for the first thirteen years of her daughter's life. All of those details were true. My mother was absolutely traumatized by the news. She heard that Yessie had lost half her teeth. She could not imagine. For me at ten years old, I had barely heard anything about the dictatorship because my parents never ever talked about it. I had only heard these pretty nostalgic memories of Uruguay which makes sense because my parents were homesick, especially my mother. How on earth did the Uruguay that my parents remembered combine with the Uruguay that had done this to this young woman Yessie? How do these two stories mesh into one country? And the need to understand stayed with me. So, she is a real person. I really believe in doing stories like that justice, in doing thorough research, striving to tell the hard truths. I think we owe it to the real people if we are going to write fiction about it.

While I was writing *The Invisible Mountain,* I was also working full-time as a rape counselor. In my five years of working at the center, I counseled over a thousand rape survivors and their significant others. I got to bear witness to so many stories—the most incredible suffering but also the most incredible resilience, the ways that people survive, overcome, and even thrive. That gave me tremendous gifts as a human being, but also as a writer to be able to draw on what I learned from so many brave people.

JH: In Salomé's generation, I sense a strong critique of dictatorships because many years of her youth are robbed when she is imprisoned. Could you elaborate?

CD: It is devastating. There is no apparatus with which to measure the damage a dictatorship perpetrates on its people. When I was writing *The Invisible Mountain,* I focused on the damage of the people who were politically imprisoned. But in the years since, I have deepened my understanding of the damage the dictatorship wrought on the people who were outside, the people who were not technically in prison but were still terrorized every day by the most mundane details. It does not end. I wanted to explore the possibilities for recovery and one of the first steps from a devastating trauma like that is taking some measure of the loss.

JH: Did you write the Spanish translation of *La montaña invisible*? Do you know what the reception has been for this readership in Spanish, for example in Uruguay or Argentina?

CD: I did not write the Spanish translation of *La montaña invisible*. When I translate, I go from Spanish to English. Like most professional translators, I translate into the language in which I feel most comfortable and dominant. I certainly feel comfortable in Spanish but my English is more sophisticated because I was educated in English (and briefly, as a child, in German). I did, however, have the opportunity to review the manuscript of the Spanish language translation and make a lot of comments on it and have editorial input, especially making sure that the Spanish sounded *ríoplatense* because the translation was done in Madrid. In particular in Uruguay and Argentina, I wanted the book to come home in a way that felt real to the *ríoplatense* language because the characters are speaking to each other in Uruguay and Argentina.

The reception was incredibly warm. I was so nervous. I thought that I would be questioned about my right to tell about these histories, especially because a significant portion of the novel focuses on the Tupamaro Revolutionary Movement in Uruguay. There are many former Tupamaros alive and well in Uruguay, some of them in positions of leadership. One of our recent presidents, the extremely beloved José Mujica, is a former Tupamaro. I felt really nervous as to how it would be received and how I would be received as someone who didn't grow up in Uruguay and now is telling these stories on a global stage. In 2011, I went on a book tour to Uruguay and Argentina. I was on the Uruguayan version of the *Today* show. There were bus ads for the book. My friends were emailing me from Montevideo saying, "I just saw your face on a bus!" Huge on the side of

a bus! It was really fascinating to go back and do this. I did not know how it would be received. It was received very warmly in both countries, but particularly in Uruguay. I had intended it as a love letter to Uruguay and a love letter to Montevideo. One of my friends who grew up there said to me, “You could have written about anything, southern California, or something else. And you chose to write about Uruguay which shows a love that is moving.” As a small country, it is so customary to be invisible on a global scale. A country of three million people. Uruguayans are often pleasantly surprised when they are seen or valued or held up to the light as a culture. People thanked me for telling these stories. The biggest compliment I got was when people said, “I can’t believe that you’ve never lived in Uruguay after reading this book.” Now I have lived in Uruguay, but at the time I had not. So, I was very moved.

JH: Could you discuss your role as a translator and how you switched to that of novelist? How did you become involved in the translation of Alejandro Zambra’s critically acclaimed novel *Bonsai* which was also made into a film?

CD: I became a translator somewhat by accident. I remember that I had a birthday party when I was eight years old. I was the only person at the party who spoke both German and English. My Swiss friends only spoke German and the Swiss German dialect, and my girl scout friends only spoke English. My parents insisted that I continue girl scouts so that I would not forget the English from the prior country we lived in (to them, English was the linguistic equivalent of gold). So, I spent the whole party translating instead of playing. That’s a big piece of my childhood and my life. In a sense, it should not be surprising that translation would come naturally to me. I was five years into writing *The Invisible Mountain* when I went back to graduate school for an M.F.A. During this time, I took a class on the craft of translating poetry with an amazing translator, Chana Bloch. I took it on a whim and ended up falling in love with the translation process.

As far as how I came to Zambra the other person I was conversing with about translation in the M.F.A program was Daniel Alarcón, who was there as a Distinguished Visiting Writer. I felt very lucky. I took a class with him which was incredible. I loved his work and I roped him into doing an independent study with me so we could discuss contemporary Latin

American literature. I tried to madly pick his brain about contemporary Latin American books of fiction. One day he told me that he had just come home from Chile with a book in his suitcase that was the most talked about book in Chile that year. This was *Bonsai* by Alejandro Zambra. It had just come out, this little novel, and he let me photocopy his copy so that I could read it and we could talk about it. Then, I started translating it for fun, staying up late at night in grad school. Then, Daniel heard from the *Virginia Quarterly Review* that they wanted to publish the translation of the book in its entirety because it is a novella. I translated it for *VQR* and Melville House later picked it up to publish as a book. It was something I was doing for fun. I used to stay up late translating because I found it compulsive. Compulsively enjoyable! It's so pleasurable to me to inhabit that space between two languages. Translating trains my mind to make more precise language choices when I am writing. That is what I value most about getting to be a literary translator alongside writing fiction. It makes me a better writer.

JH: Your second novel *Perla* is situated in the post-Dirty War period of Argentina and told from the perspective of the daughter of a disappeared couple. How did this idea emerge?

CD: The original idea came from an image I couldn't get out of my mind. When I was writing *The Invisible Mountain,* I traveled to Uruguay three times during eight years. People were incredibly generous telling me stories, answering my questions, connecting me to resources, walking me around Montevideo, but also handing me books, including dog-eared books that were out of print. I read a book called *The Flight* by Horacio Verbitsky which is the book that first broke the news in Argentina about the fact that some people that had been disappeared by the government were dropped from airplanes into the sea. This book came out in the mid-1990s after more than a decade of democracy, and yet people still did not know what had happened to their loved ones who'd disappeared. It was a very unclosed wound. When I read *The Flight,* I became obsessed with these bodies that disappeared into the river. I started to have an image. I thought, "What if those bodies from the river could return to Buenos Aires? What would be their unfinished business?" Looking back, I see that this approach gave me the opportunity to do something I have not seen done elsewhere in the literature of the disappeared of

Argentina, which was give the disappeared a voice. By definition, since their bodies are gone, they are voiceless. But through the magic of fiction, a dead person can return and be given a voice.

JH: In fact, *Perla* seems to be in dialogue with the critically acclaimed film *The Official Story* (1985) that you reference in the novel as well. It's like the continuation of Gaby's story but in fiction. What effect did that film have on you?

CD: *The Official Story* is a masterful film. Norma Aleandro, the actress who played the main role, is a genius. She is an incredible Argentine actress. The difference with the film is that it takes place when the children of the disappeared were still little children and not yet adults grappling with these issues for themselves. I knew people who read my novel would think about the film, and that even the characters in the novel would know about the film since my book takes place in 2001 Argentina, when there is this public conversation about the disappeared. It makes sense to have that reference to contextualize the culture that the characters find themselves in, and also to give a tip of the hat to that film. Just like I give Saramago a tip of that hat in this novel because I feel that I owe him a debt. *Blindness* was a novel that was important to me as I was writing *Perla*. The first time I read *Blindness*, it absolutely blew me away—the voice of it, the euphoric swirling structure, the collision of linguistic beauty and thematic horror, and also his seamless use of surreal elements to explore extremely real, gritty, urgent social themes. In writing *Perla*, I felt that debt, and so I have a scene in which Perla is reading a Saramago novel, and, if you've read *Blindness*, you'd recognize it by its description.

JH: In *The Gods of Tango*, you return to the early twentieth century by shifting the landscape to Italy and Argentina in 1913. This is one of the largest migrations that occurred in Argentina and Uruguay but you also portray a very multicultural and multiracial Buenos Aires. Could you discuss the significance of the geographical and cultural landscapes in this novel?

CD: As for the geographical landscapes, there was a great migration of Italy to the Americas in the early twentieth century. New York is certainly included in that but many people in the United States don't realize that destinations for Italians also included Argentina and Uruguay. My great-grandfather might have gone to the United States, but he had an older brother who had gone to Florida. The

older brother, Tom De Robertis, wrote back to Italy saying, "Whatever you do, don't come to Florida. I am working in the mines. It's horrific." So, my great-grandfather took a boat to Argentina instead at seventeen years old. These are the great migrations. Italy is not the only country from where people migrated but I did want to explore that wave because it has had such a tremendous and profound impact on *ríoplatense* culture, on Argentine and Uruguayan cultures. Over half of Argentine and Uruguayans have Italian ancestry—if you look at our food, the way we speak Spanish, our gestures, our way of thinking about life, the influence is strong. That aspect is underexplored in the arts, especially outside of the country.

But I also wanted to tell the multicultural story of Buenos Aires. Often, I think it is just understood as Spanish and Italian immigrants, but there are also the Polish, Russian, Lebanese, and people of African descent who were already present due to the slave trade to South America. We owe a tremendous debt to people of African descent, Afro-Argentines, for the tango and many other things. I wanted to tell that story because it is a true story that has been flattened by a white-washed image of Buenos Aires, both in the U.S. and in Argentina. Scholars in Argentina still deny, dismiss, or minimalize the African influence on the tango. And they also minimalize the way women performed on stage. I had to dig so hard to find that information. So much has been erased.

JH: In this novel, you choose very symbolic names like Dante (inferno/hell) and Leda, seduced by Zeus in Greek mythology. I could not help but think of Yeats' poem, "Leda and the Swan," where Leda is raped. What influenced you in selecting these names?

CD: Marilyn Robinson says that a name for a character should have five layers of meaning. No pressure, right? I strive to give names to characters that have layers of resonance. Dante is a common name in Italy. He undertakes a journey into the underworld to transform himself in the inferno. In some way, my character Leda also takes a journey to transform herself from one gender to another. Leda is raped by Zeus in mythology. In the novel Leda is haunted by the rape of her cousin. It's also very incestuous because of the family member involved. Zeus as a father was also very oppressive. Leda's relationship to patriarchy, violations, and the journey that she takes

in Buenos Aires has something to do with undoing that curse. One of the issues that I have not talked about in book tours that I wanted to address in the novel is to dismantle a family curse which is in my family. Cora is based on a real sister of my great-grandfather's that I heard about growing up. I took a bit of facts here and there where there is so much silence and pieced them together with fiction. This girl, the real person Cora is based on, my great-great-aunt, was called crazy, locked up in a shack on a hill by a monk, and only the father visited her. As it turns out, her father was "having sex" with her. There were babies, and the priests helped with the cover-up. What is that? How does something like this ripple out to affect generations?

JH: Nature also has deep symbolism with references to Río de la Plata.

CD: I have always been obsessed with el Río de la Plata. I seem to be incapable of writing a novel without el Río de la Plata in it because it's the river between these two nations, Argentina and Uruguay. I feel very *ríoplatense*, meaning from both shores. Well, here is something where I do feel great kinship with Onetti. He invented an island in the middle of el Río de la Plata and many of his novels are set on that island. That does things to my heart so deeply. That there can be a place where people live in the middle of the river. I relate so deeply to Onetti on this level because he lived in Buenos Aires for a time and loved Buenos Aires but he also loved Montevideo. People from outside of our region don't realize the depth to which Uruguay and Argentina, especially Buenos Aires and Montevideo, are interwoven.

JH: Speaking of Río de la Plata, you use the term, *ríoplatense* culture or *cultura ríoplatense,* often. Is it one that can be transported to the diaspora in the United States, for example?

CD: So, when I encounter someone argentino o uruguayo, I can say, "somos ríoplatenses," and there will be an understanding of what that means. It's a little bit like a Vermonter and a Bostonian meeting in a foreign land and connecting to each other by saying, "we're both New Englanders." I feel very Uruguayan and like to claim it, but I claim Argentine too in the sense that I have connections and roots there as well. But really, really what I feel is that I am *californiana* and *ríoplatense*. This term is used in both countries. Uruguayans, for example, would say, "El tango no es argentino, sino ríoplatense."

JH: In the discussion after your reading in LA in July this year, you referred to Uruguayan composer Francisco Canaro as an influence on your novel. How does he tie in with Carlos Gardel, considered the Father of Tango?

CD: Inevitably, one does an enormous amount of scholarly research in order to write a historical novel, at least for me that is essential. All the scholarship I was reading about the tango had plentiful footnotes. The ones that really spoke to me in visceral ways of what it was like in early twentieth century Buenos Aires all had footnotes from Francisco Canaro's memoir *Mis memorias: mis bodas de oro con el tango*, a five hundred page book. He was one of the few people from the old guard of the tango to document what it was like. In this book, there was a fifty-year retrospective look at the tango. It took me a year and a half to get a copy of the book but I finally got it from a musicologist in the Bay Area who was able to get it from an interlibrary loan at U.C. Riverside. It was incredibly valuable because he captures so many details not only of the early tango, but also what it was like to grow up in a *conventillo* (the Buenos Aires tenements of the time). Canaro was an instrumentalist and a composer while Carlos Gardel was a singer. When the tango *canción* started to emerge in the 1920s that made Carlos Gardel a superstar. He was in movies as well. But Francisco Canaro did well for himself too. He had a big career as a composer.

JH: In *The Gods of Tango*, you trace the African origins of tango. The Afro-Argentine character Santiago is important in restoring the memory of the African diaspora in Argentina through music. Could you explain how you developed this idea?

CD: I'm very horrified by the way the story of Afro-Argentines has not been told. I grew up in a family in which, unfortunately, my parents are racists, I hate to say. They have had negative things to say about black people when I was growing up and absolutely diminished the existence of the history of black people in Uruguay and Argentina and even in contemporary times. I did not realize the significance of black people in the community in Uruguay until I returned myself as an adult and saw it for myself. My parents, like many white Uruguayans, had painted an image of Uruguay as a nation of white immigrants from Europe. That's what Uruguayans often like to say about themselves, their culture and nation. Somos europeos (We are Europeans). We are like a little outpost of Europe. It's a

fantasy that many Uruguayans and Argentines have of their culture. It's a false fantasy.

As a woman who is married to a black woman and has multiracial kids of African descent, it has been very important to me to open those spaces and to bring those stories forward. Those stories exist and are told by incredible Afro-Uruguayan community leaders, writers, essayists, and activists. I have been fortunate to meet and work with them, to make friends, to listen to people's stories. So, my wife and I went back to Uruguay for a year and a half and worked on a documentary on Afro-Uruguayan culture. All of that was also incredibly valuable for the research on my novel *The Gods of Tango*.

JH: I am also interested in the Afro-Uruguayan documentary you are collaborating on with your wife, Pamela Harris. How has this experience been?

CD: We have completed production which means we have all of our footage and all of our archival material photographed. Now we are in post-production for the coming months. We are actually going to show some work at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco next year. Pam is actually the director and producer of the film, the lead on the project, while I am producer. I conducted a lot of the interviews. She has the vision and knows the direction it will take. It's also been an amazing collaboration in the sense that she is black but not Uruguayan. I am Uruguayan but not black. For us to have teamed up in this way and to go into people's homes together and to be on television together discussing our project as a couple in Uruguay, she brings trust-building to the project and working with the community. She knows what it's like to walk in that skin. I bring an immediate relation to Uruguayan culture. It has been a beautiful creative collaboration.

JH: In *The Gods of Tango*, gender and location influence identity in major decisions the protagonist Dante/Leda must make. Could you discuss why you transported her and her partner to Montevideo as her destination/destiny?

CD: Just as a portrait of the tango would not feel complete without black characters, the portrait of the tango would not feel complete without Uruguayan characters because the tango is really *río-platense*. "La cumparsita" is the most famous tango song—the

song everyone thinks of first when they think "tango"—and it was composed by a Uruguayan. It seems like there is a relationship between the search for the full self and crossing borders that is involved there. So many tango musicians in those early decades crossed that river, crossed that border, back and forth. It's an important aspect of the history.

JH: The role of women in connection to music is also important in this novel, especially in the characters of Dante/Leda and Rosa. Who has the right to sing and play music, essentially perform? Could you comment?

CD: The early days of the tango are a great time for exploring the limitations placed on women because in the 1910s and before the only musicians who were permitted to play in tango contexts were men. The only women who were in the seedy cafes of tango were women of so-called ill repute, basically prostitutes. For Leda to transgress and cross that line, she dresses and passes as a man. That's really a form of infiltration pushing the boundaries of gender. Women have done that in history, pushed against those boundaries and found places of resistance. Rosa is based on real women in the history of tango, but that research took over a year to find because it is so buried. In the early days of tango songs, the lyrics were all about men's experiences. Women were told that they could not become tango singers because the songs were not from their point of view. So, some women pioneers like Azucena Maizani responded to this by dressing in a man's suit and fedora and getting on stage and swaggering like a man, singing from a man's point of view. It was a different kind of transgression playing with drag and gender roles. As Rosa does in the book. I think this is an incredible part of musical history, cultural history, and Latin American history that these women existed. It's unbelievable to me that tango scholars in Argentina would pass over this legacy like it's nothing.

JH: What is the relevance of cities in your formation as a writer, traveler, and observer? Do you have favorites?

CD: I love cities. I have roots in Montevideo and Buenos Aires. They are the parts of the countries in which I feel most at home. Cities are incredibly fascinating cauldrons of culture and exploration and identity. They are often the place where culture meets creativity, where new musical forms are born, tango and jazz, for example. They come out of the mixing and the buzz, the cacophony of cities. I feel most at home in Oakland and the surrounding Bay Area

where I have made my home, and Montevideo. But I also love Buenos Aires, Paris, Mexico City, New York City, Rome, and Oslo where I went to present *Perla*.

JH: Can you discuss your own identity? When do you feel American, European, Uruguayan, Latina, or all of the above?

CD: I don't ever feel European even though I partially grew up there. I do feel of European descent, the Italian part. When I am in Italy, I feel very Italian. I am shocked to discover how at home I feel there. I think that is part of the cultural roots being present in *ríoplatense* culture. But I don't identify as Italian. I do identify as U.S. American. But I identify more as Californian—that is to say, when I am in other regions of the U.S., particularly the South and the Midwest, I feel like an absolute foreigner. I would rather leave the country than ever have to raise my multiracial queer family in one of the so-called red states. I feel my Californianness quite strongly when I am in Uruguay and Argentina because I can feel the difference between my way of thinking and a Uruguayan's way of thinking—in the level of freedom I feel as a woman, for example, or in my optimistic disposition. Of course, I feel *ríoplatense* which we already discussed. I feel Uruguayan when I am in Uruguay, but I also identify as a Latina in the U.S. because I can connect with other diasporas.

JH: Why do you sometimes use the term, "South American," in your novels? How do you see it as important?

CD: And I love that you focus on South America! It's almost like identity can be a series of floating circles that overlap each other gently and move away. So, Latin America is like a big circle and within that circle there is South America, Central America, the Caribbean. This is opposed to limited boxes which don't reflect reality. When I am asked if I am Latina or white, that is a problem with these oversimplified categories, because I am both. I walk in the world with the white privilege of a person of European descent, but, as a Latina, I experience racism in the publishing industry. So, it's very complex. It's important and valuable to reflect on regional identity (i.e. South American, or, more broadly, Latin American) as well as national (i.e. Uruguayan).

JH: Where do you find a sense of community in the U.S., especially having lived in England, Switzerland, LA, Uruguay, and the Bay Area in California?

CD: In the Bay Area. Just as we discussed overlapping circles, I see overlapping tribes. Latino tribes, progressive tribes, queer tribes. A lot

of my community happens to be of African descent, people with whom I have great resonance. And it also happens to include a lot of immigrants, a lot of people with nuanced or multicultural identities, a lot of queers. My community is both local and of the world. I am not culturally like anyone else I know here in the Bay Area, or anywhere, really. My close Uruguayan lesbian friends are all in Uruguay so they don't have the same experience of crossing borders that I do. My closest lesbian friends in the Bay Area are not Uruguayan (though, happily, there are other *ríoplatense* lesbians in the Bay Area). No one around me is exactly like me, but as long as I have a tribe that is full of difference in ways of being and wide-open minds and hearts, I can feel at home.

JH: Who are some of the writers you admire now and currently reading? Any U.S. Latina/o ones?

CD: I am a great admirer of Junot Díaz; his work brims and bristles with genius, and it will endure. I am also absolutely in awe of Achy Obejas's books. Patricia Engel is a terrific writer, whose work breaks the mold of expectation of what it means to be South American. Cristina García, Francisco Goldman, Daniel Alarcón, and Kirsten Valdez Quade are just a few more contemporary U.S. Latino writers whose work I love and admire. More broadly, I love reading literature in translation, reading very widely internationally, which people do not tend to do within the borders of the United States. I think it's really important. I just finished a wonderful novel by a Norwegian writer, Per Petterson. Elena Ferrante never ceases to blow me away. Reading her in the U.S. context is particularly refreshing, as she blasts apart the tidy, safe aesthetics that are fashionable right now in this country, and demonstrates the glorious and infinite possibilities in the landscape beyond. Among contemporary writers, I'm also a huge fan of Mat Johnson, Edward P. Jones, Amara Lakhous, Marie N'Diaye, David Mitchell, Haruki Murakami, and, well, many others.

JH: Any other comments or observations you wish to add?

CD: Only that I am thrilled by the scholarly attention given here to South American writing in particular. I think that in the U.S. that particular writing is rare. Certainly, I read, enjoy and value Mexican and Central American culture, literature, and identities. And I think there is a place for thinking about South Americans in the U.S. That is absolutely wonderful!

JH: Thank you!

Traveling the Caribbean, Colombia, and the U.S.: Patricia Engel

Born in New Jersey to Colombian parents, Patricia Engel was raised and educated on the East Coast. She received a Bachelor's degree in French and Art History at New York University and a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing at the Florida International University. She made her major literary debut with her short fiction collection *Vida* (2010) which received honors such as a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2010, a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Fiction Award, and won the Premio Biblioteca de Narrativa Colombiana, a Best Book of the Year by NPR and the *Los Angeles Weekly*, among others. Her first novel *It's Not Love, It's Just Paris* (2013) was an *Elle* Reader's Prize winner. Both works of fiction also won International Latino Book Awards. *The Veins of the Ocean* (2016) is her second novel. Her short fiction has been published in *The Atlantic*, *A Public Space*, *Boston Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Harvard Review*, and collections such as *All about Skin: Short Fiction by Women of Color* (2014). Her non-fiction has appeared in venues like *The New York Times.* Her contributions to anthologies and literary journals from which she has also won prizes are extensive. She has also earned fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and the National Endowment for the Arts in 2014. In addition, Engel's fiction has been well received in international literary and cultural venues such as the HAY Festival in Cartagena, Colombia.

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Engel discusses how her U.S. experiences and her travels to Colombia at various stages of her life, France, and more recently, Cuba, have been important in her development as a writer and informed her short fiction and novels. Her influence by Francophone writers has also been crucial in understanding how displacement affects various communities of im/migrants globally. Engel shows a sense of motion that "immigrants and children of immigrants have internalized" in her fiction. From the civil war in Colombia to globalization in Paris and the effects of the Cuban Revolution in contemporary times, the narratives by Engel are preoccupied with characters in search of friendship, romance, and a sense of belonging. She claims that these characters connect across cultural boundaries because they carry wounds and experiences that bring them together.

After leaving the East Coast Engel has made her home in Miami where she is a Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Miami. She continues to travel to Colombia to visit family, Cuba and other places for fun as well as research.

From the spring of 2013, Engel and I began correspondence over email until we met up for coffee at a local bookstore in Miami to conduct this interview on October 16, 2015, and then completed the remaining questions on her novel *The Veins of the Ocean* over email. She recalls how the arts influenced her painting and writing as a youngster.

JH: What motivated you to become a writer? When did you begin to write fiction? Do you recall what you were reading at the time?

PE: I came from a very creative family of painters and musicians so I was always encouraged to be artistic. I used to draw a lot and as soon as I learned how to write, I began writing captions for all my pictures that gradually got longer and longer until they became stories. I always kept journals and was also quite captivated by writers who were faithful diary-keepers and writers of autofiction like Albert Camus, Anaïs Nin, Marguerite Duras and Colette. I always imagined I'd grow up to be a person who wrote books, but all the artists in my family had day jobs so I thought I'd have one career and would somehow write books on the side. I didn't know any writers so I had no sense of the more or less practical path one can take to becoming a professional writer. So, while I was always writing, I also had many other passions and it wasn't until I graduated from college with a degree in French and Art History, and I had been in

the work force in Manhattan for five years that I decided to take writing more seriously and pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

JH: What moves you about Marguerite Duras?

PE: At the time I loved the way she wrote in a very spare yet very emotionally sensitive way. Now, in hindsight, I can see that what those writers had in common is that they were all displaced in some way. They were writing from a position of exile. Marguerite Duras was French but she grew up in Indochina. Even though Albert Camus was of French origin, he grew up in Algeria. There was always this sense of displacement and exile in all these writers. That's what I connected to.

JH: What do you take from Colombia and from the United States when you write short fiction or a longer narrative such as a novel?

PE: I can just tell you what I am, which is that I grew up in a Colombian household but in the United States, with a strong connection to Colombia; that's part of my perspective in everything that I experience. My mother had my brother and me reading García Márquez when we were kids and poetry and literature. Of course, there must be a shred of influence there, but I should say that I grew up in a microcosm of what I knew Colombia to be, which was the culture of my home and our community.

JH: What do you remember about reading García Márquez's fiction, be they short stories or his novels?

PE: My favorite was *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother.* I have always been attracted to the short form, but this was the first short story I read that I felt was sprawling and profound as an entire book. I first read it when I was about fourteen and it remains my favorite work of García Márquez with a few close favorites in the collection *Doce cuentos peregrinos,* which I read in Spanish when I was seventeen or so.

JH: *Vida*, for which you received many positive reviews, including one from Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times*, placed you on the literary map in the U.S. How did you develop this collection of short fiction?

PE: The book of *Vida* was kind of an accident of fiction. I was working on a novel at the time that was very challenging and caused me a lot of difficulty. To distract myself from the project of the novel I would write short stories just for fun on the side. After a period of time I

realized that all these stories were connected. They were all speaking to each other. It was kind of by chance that *Vida* came to be.

JH: The structure of *Vida* is very intriguing. How did you know that this would be short fiction instead of a novel, or would you say it is mixed-genre?

PE: I was writing what I thought it needed to be. Afterwards, when the book was being prepared for publication, people asked me if it was a story collection or if it was a novel in stories. I still don't have an answer. It is what it is, which is the story of one protagonist, Sabina, over three decades of her life. The stories do bleed into each other. They do have echoes, and the stories can be read separately. But at the same time, for me, it's all part of one body.

JH: In *Vida*, you traverse many geographies, countries as well as cities, in the U.S. and in Colombia. Why did you migrate your characters between New Jersey, Florida, and Colombia? What significance does each place have for you?

PE: Well the world I grew up in is one of constant motion where you never have your feet too firmly planted in one place because there is always a pull, whether it is a physical or emotional pull, to another place. Everyone that I knew or that I cared about growing up was also in a similar position. They occupied different spaces in different countries or different cities. I wanted to show that in my characters. I grew up in New Jersey, so I have an intimate relationship with it just like with New York, where I lived for many years. It's also the case with Miami, where I've made my home for over a decade already. I wanted to show that sense of motion, which I think immigrants and children of immigrants have internalized.

JH: *Vida* is also a global work because you have characters from Hungary, Argentina, Peru as well as Colombia and the U.S. It's not even monolithically Latino where you only refer to one country or one nationality in Latin America.

PE: That is something I am interested in for all my books. When you exist in this blurred space of what we know to be immigration or its after-effects, different immigrant communities mesh and melt together, particularly in a place like Miami or New York. It's not that I only interacted with Colombians because my family was Colombian. When I was growing up, my parents' best friends were Lebanese and Cuban. They identified greatly with their Lebanese friends even though they spoke entirely different languages and

came from different cultures. They both communicated in a very accented English but their stories were similar in what they had gone through and sacrificed in order to end up where they did. So I am interested in how people connect across cultural boundaries because they bear the wounds of having to abandon their homeland to make a home in a strange new country, and those experiences are what bring people together in friendship.

JH: I sense a critique of violence in many of its forms, be it political, physical, or emotional, in *Vida*. Is this a warning or caution of believing in the American Dream for future immigrants and women such as the protagonist Vida?

PE: Doesn't everyone have a critique of violence? The book opens with Sabina's uncle, who has murdered his wife. It's part of the landscape of her life. And of course, her family has migrated from Colombia, which is suffering its own violence. That is part of our reality. I did not make that up. For me to ignore that and its impact on Colombians would have been a kind of fraud. What I wanted to show is how young lives come to be in spite of all these brutalities that surround them, and find tenderness within that dark space.

The story of "Vida" is not an uncommon one. I wrote it because I heard that story so many times in different ways. Being lured from Colombia to the United States or to another country with the promise of a better life. I thought it was important to include this voice and perspective from women who are betrayed and lured into leaving their home for the promise of what we call "the American Dream."

JH: Could you elaborate on the complexity of the female friendship that ensues between Vida and Sabina? Could this relationship also be an allusion to the encounter between Colombians of different places of origin or colombianidades? United yet divided by a national border?

PE: They are both encountering each other from very different places. Sabina is what happens to the daughter of the next generation after someone leaves Colombia. And Vida is what happens when you stay, in many ways. They are curious about each other although there is a mistrust that Sabina describes when she is confronting her own fascination with Vida and the fact that she is not even sure if it comes from a sincere place. She is intrigued by Vida and her

troubles. There is also a gray space of whether Vida is interested in Sabina at all as a person or if Sabina has something to offer her. Sabina may just be a diversion or she may see an opportunity in Sabina. They do arrive at a common ground and a mutual understanding in how they are able to help each other out of their situations of experiencing oppression in their relationships with different men. Sabina and Vida are of the same generation but what separates them is an ocean, a war, and a world of political realities that one is subjected to and the other is not.

JH: Could you expand a bit more on the context of the civil war in Colombia in the 1980s?

PE: It's something that has existed and predated their parents' generation. It is something that is so ingrained in the mind, in the psyche, and in the heart of a Colombian that sometimes you can't help but try to forget that it's even there. But it has a presence no matter what. What I wanted to show is the intimacy and the quiet space that Sabina and Vida navigate together. They come to their own periods of growth within that friendship.

JH: The female heroine is an important character in this collection. Vida is rescued by a female friend of the Colombian diaspora. Why did you decide to move the narrative in that direction?

PE: I wanted to show that Sabina was pulling herself out of her own unfavorable situation by stepping up to help Vida. She becomes what Vida needs but Vida becomes what she needs. Vida is also very courageous in her own way. She just needs that break to get her out of her situation and Sabina who will help her get there. But also Sabina is a bit powerless in her own situation. So the two girls really help each other.

JH: It adds a nice touch in the formation of female friendships. Sabina goes out with different men, some who exploit her. Since she is quite smart, one wonders why she does that.

PE: People become very self-righteous when it comes to literature for some reason. They become very judgmental of the characters' choices. I say, "Why don't we line up all your past lovers then? See how favorable all of them are." I think what often happens is that women explore their identity through their relationships and that is how they come to understand who they are. It also happens that Sabina is a person who has been ignored and treated as invisible for most of her life. So she's become compassionate and takes chances

on people others might deem unworthy of such attention because she often felt shunned in the same way. Sometimes the situations turn out to be something other than what she expected, but is something that each of those relationships offers her in her growth.

JH: Do you hold a literary affiliation with Junot Díaz who also wrote an endorsement for *Vida*?

PE: Junot published my first story "Lucho" which is also the first story in *Vida* in *The Boston Review* and was very supportive of my work. That was enough to make me think that the voice and the character were worth pursuing.

JH: How do you find the time to teach, mentor future writers, and write your own work?

PE: It's an ongoing challenge. Usually something suffers. I have not been able to find a balance. At different times, priorities shift. Sometimes it's teaching. Sometimes it's writing or mentoring.

JH: Your other short fiction such as "Aida" has been published in various journals and magazines. How do you know if this work will stand on its own or become part of a larger work like a novel?

PE: I write a lot of stories. Basically, if the story stays with me in a way that others don't, or if the character lingers, then I feel that there is something to go back to. I tend to write stories intending for them to remain as stories, not grow into novels.

JH: Have you traveled often to Colombia since you were a child? What is your present relationship with Colombia? What does it mean to hold on to this heritage?

PE: I go to Colombia a few times a year. I still have loads of family that I see when I am there, so I do feel quite connected to them. It's something that I have never separated from my life in the United States. It's always been a part of me.

JH: You have given some very important interviews to newspapers and other outlets in Colombia. How do you feel about the reception of your work in Colombia?

PE: It's been very special and gratifying for me to have my work published and so well received in my parents' homeland.

JH: You have also been to the Hay Festival in Colombia. What was this experience like?

PE: It's a wonderful festival in an exceptionally beautiful location. They have a diverse lineup of writers from all over the Americas and around the world, which makes for some excellent dialogues.

JH: To what extent would you say that you participate in the cultural arts scene in Colombia or other parts of South America or Latin America?

PE: I participate in events there related to my work but I don't live in Colombia and it's difficult to have an ongoing participation in any particular creative scene. Miami is where I make my life.

JH: In correspondence you mentioned that you traveled quite a bit this past year around South America and Cuba. What have you learned from these experiences?

PE: I have been to Cuba many times. Every time I go I have a deeper understanding but I also come to an awareness every single time that there is so much that I don't know, which keeps me interested and provokes more curiosity on my part, and that is why I keep going back. Colombia is a place I know pretty well, and there is a familial connection that I draw upon. Colombia is an extraordinarily beautiful and complex country with some of the most spectacular geography and landscapes in the world, which I find inspiring and invigorating.

JH: I also ask about Cuba because traveling there is not easy for all kinds of reasons but you seem to go on a consistent basis.

PE: As a writer I am able to get permission to travel there for research purposes.

JH: You have been part of important writing workshops/communities as well as an M.F.A. program in the U.S. How do you recall these experiences?

PE: Each experience served a purpose in the larger portrait of my formation as a writer. Workshops, conferences, and M.F.A. programs are where a lot of community-building occurs and when writers go back to the solitude of their work, it is often that sense of community that sustains them.

JH: What inspired you to write your first novel *It's Not Love, It's Just Paris*? What does the title mean?

PE: I wanted to write a realistic and intelligent love story. I thought that Paris has suffered by becoming a cliché in literature and I wanted to show the Paris that I knew, which is not always beautiful and is full of social conflict and racial tension. My protagonist is a U.S. Colombian experiencing another sense of displacement, twice a foreigner. I wanted to show how the sense of being a stranger never goes away. It's almost like a permanent state that you come to live with. Those are the origins of the book's inspiration.

The title is a line from the book. One character is skeptical of the relationship the protagonist, Lita, develops with Cato. She poses this line to Lita as a question. It is not meant to be a declarative statement.

JH: Because this novel is situated in one of most global cities in the world, you are in literary and cultural dialogue with a host of writers. Which have been more important and why?

PE: As far as influences are concerned, my earliest writers happen to be Francophone writers, Marguerite Duras, Colette, Anais Nïn, Camus, and the existentialists. My earliest formation as a writer or as a girl who would become a writer is Francophone literature.

JH: You give a moving portrait of young women in search of love, especially the Latina protagonist, Lita. Could you expand on this theme?

PE: The only thing Lita knows when she begins her journey in the novel is that she wants to experience *something*. She wants to live and feel something deeply but it is not quite identified. She meets this guy and things transpire between them. It's that space of getting to know someone but not being able to know that person entirely. Lita is also the daughter of two orphans who has inherited her parents' pain in a lot of ways. That is something that I think is common among the children of immigrants. You inherit the family story, the family lore; everything that was sacrificed, everything that came before so that you could exist at this moment. For some, it's a difficult burden. It's something that each generation has to sort out in different ways. She is also coming from a family that is so tight, so insular that they don't have anyone else. She has been sheltered in a particular way. She has seen representations of different women while she is in Paris. Young women who have made their own choices and she now has to decide what kind of woman she is going to be.

JH: *It's Not Love, It's Just Paris* is also a timely narrative that addresses questions of migrations, and shifting cultures in a major metropolis. To what extent do you feel that Paris exemplifies this phenomenon on a global level?

PE: I studied in Paris. I know it very intimately. The discussion around immigration in Paris, France, and Europe in general is very different from the United States. I wanted to show what happens to characters when they are displaced and how they experience the world around them. Lita is coming from an American Dream story in her

family and they have done quite well for themselves. But in France she is experiencing things very differently, encountering prejudice in very different ways. I would not say it is more or less difficult living in France in terms of immigration. I would say that they have a clearer policy against immigration. There is a more outspoken public discourse against immigration. There is fear of the dissolution of the French identity.

JH: What is the relevance of cities in your formation as a writer, traveler, and observer? You refer to cities at various moments in your fiction/interviews—Bogotá, New York, Miami, for example. What place do cities hold for you? Do you have a favorite or favorites?

PE: Depending on what space we occupy in the world we become different people. Our identities shift in relationship to wherever we are. I'm interested not just in cities as cities but in the particular relationship that my characters have with that city and how it affects them or informs who they are just as different cities have affected me in my identity and my life and even the choices that I have made in my life. In that way cities become a character unto themselves.

I grew up in a small suburb of New Jersey. Of course, New York City, Miami, and Paris have been hugely important for me. Then, I also consider the cities of my inheritance, which would be Bogotá and Medellín in Colombia. Lately, it's been Havana. I have spent so much time there. Havana has become very special to me.

JH: How do you identify? When do you feel American, Colombian, Latina, Colombian American or all of the above?

PE: I don't think about any of these labels in my personal life. When I was growing up the word *Latina* was not popular. It was not even used. I think we were still *Hispanics* at that point. I don't even know what the popular label was at the time. I don't think of myself as American because I am reminded quite regularly that I am not. At the same time I could never say that I am fully Colombian when I have not lived there. No matter how much time I spend traveling there, there is always a time when I leave. This idea of labels is a bit limiting. There is an entire generation of people like me who have participated in more than one culture and who live simultaneously and constantly from various cultures to form one unique identity. Then there is the ethnic and racial answer that the census bureau

would like. I have two passports, so technically, I am a citizen of both the United States and Colombia.

JH: Why do you sometimes use the term, "South American," in your fiction? How do you see it as important?

PE: Well, South America is its own continent. That is just a fact. When people say "American" broadly, they are always referring to the United States. They are not even referring to North America, which includes Canada. When they say someone is American, they are negating a large portion of the Americas, including South, Central, and the Caribbean. I always thought one should respect the differences between North America and South America.

JH: More recently, you mentioned Havana, Cuba. Do you find community there?

PE: While I have friendships there, I would not be as presumptuous to say that I am part of the community there. I have relationships that are very meaningful to me over there but I am not subjected to the hardships that they are subjected to, and I am allowed to leave the country while they are not, which is a great injustice.

JH: Who are some of the writers you admire now or are currently reading? Any U.S. Latina/o ones? Do you hold any literary or cultural affinity to transnational literature by U.S. Latinos in the twenty-first century?

PE: I have been working on this book for the past couple of years so the majority of my reading has been focused research toward that novel. As far as reading for pleasure, I buy a lot of books while I travel. I have stacks and stacks of books that I intend to read, and I am a fan of many Colombian writers like Margarita García Robayo, Santiago Gamboa, and Juan Gabriel Vásquez. In the U.S., I admire the works by Chantel Acevedo, Carolina De Robertis, Daisy Hernández, Isabel Allende, Alex Espinoza, Ana Menéndez, Manuel Muñoz, and of course, Junot Díaz, among others. There are a great many.

JH: Do you think one can say there is such a thing as a Colombian literary diaspora which is different from what Gabriel García Márquez wrote, of course?

PE: Yes, we are in a very different time. Even literature within Colombia has changed into something else. But that's what is compelling about literature and what keeps us reading. Of course, Colombian writers in the diaspora have a few influences in common and then we have traveled our own separate roads to arrive at what we now write.

JH: Can you comment on your second novel *The Veins of the Ocean*? What is it about?

PE: It was published in early May of 2016. It's partially set in Miami, the Florida Keys, Cartagena, Colombia, and Havana. It's a very Caribbean story, a novel of the Americas. It treats three themes: exile, incarceration, and captivity in different forms. There is a relationship in it but I would not necessarily call it a love story as we think of them. It's much longer than my last novel. It covers more ground in space and time. It is not necessarily a historical novel, but it charts certain aspects of history. I needed to learn and experience a lot in order to write it the way I wanted to. It was not an easy book to write at all. It also comments on our connection to nature and the ways we abuse it. So uniting all these things in a story was challenging.

JH: You just called this novel *The Veins of the Ocean* very Caribbean. What do you mean by that? Are we mainly talking about the geographical spaces—Havana, Cartagena, and Miami? What does Caribbean mean to you?

PE: Aspects of the novel are Caribbean in the cultural sense and examine the crossing of the Caribbean as a result of slavery, colonialism, and immigration and its effects on subsequent generations.

JH: In *The Veins of the Ocean*, the idea of solitude comes up time and again for the brother Carlito and the sister Reina. Could you talk about Carlito's experience of incarceration? Why did you feel it was important to write about this?

PE: I wanted to shine a light on the ways the government systematically tortures and executes prisoners and the shame and pain felt by families of the incarcerated. We often are so preoccupied with villainizing criminals that we cast aside their humanity.

JH: On the other hand, Reina thinks that sometimes it is just as lonely being around a crowd of people. What does she mean by that?

PE: Reina is speaking specifically of her experience being shunned by her community as a result of her brother's crime.

JH: In the same novel, the character of Dr. Joe makes an important observation. He says, "It does not have to be violent for it to be torture." What is he talking about?

PE: He is speaking about solitary confinement.

JH: Could you talk about your research on Santería for this novel? What was the most important discovery you made about Santería? Yemayá and other orishas make an appearance.

PE: I spent a great amount of time over many trips to Cuba at a Santería temple with practitioners and scholars of Lucumí. I also read about a hundred books on the subject. And I did considerable fact-checking with members of La Asociación Cultural Yoruba de la Habana. Though there are aspects of the faith and its practices that vary among different communities and regions, it was important to me to be accurate and true to the practices of Cuban Santería.

JH: I like the personification of the ocean in the novel. At one point, Nesto refers to the ocean as female. He says that the ocean can nurture but at the same time take away or hurt. What does he mean by that?

PE: Nesto brings to it his own experience of having lived all his life on an island (Cuba) that many are desperate to leave, even if it means throwing themselves into the ocean in the hope of crossing it and landing on another shore. But he also has an intimate relationship with the ocean in the way that can only be felt by those who have grown up close to water.

JH: Thank you!

My Poetic Feminism Between Peru and the U.S.: Carmen Giménez Smith

Born in New York City in 1971, Carmen Giménez Smith was raised on the East Coast until the age of ten and then settled with her family in San José, California. She received a Bachelor's degree in English at San José State University, and a Master of Fine Arts degree at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. In addition to chapbooks and contributions to various anthologies, Giménez Smith has published poetry collections such as *Odalisque in Pieces* (2009), *The City She Was* (2011), *Goodbye, Flicker: Poems* (2012), *Milk and Filth* (2013), a memoir *Bring Down the Little Birds: On Mothering, Art, Work, and Everything Else* (2010) and coedited the anthology *Angels of the Americlypse: An Anthology of New Latin@ Writing* (2014) to wide critical acclaim. She has forthcoming poetry collections entitled *Cruel Futures* (2018) and *Be Recorder* (2019). In 2009, she became a member of the Poetry Society of America's biannual New American Poets Series. She also earned an American Book Award for her memoir and the Juniper Prize for Poetry for *Goodbye, Flicker* in 2011. *Milk and Filth* was a finalist for the National Books Critics Circle Award in 2014. Since its inception in 2009 she has been a Canto Mundo fellow, a very dear endeavor to her.

Giménez Smith's poetry and lyric essays reveal a voice preoccupied with mythology, history and popular culture with respect to the changing roles of women over time. She engages historical figures from Malinche to public celebrities like Joan Rivers in her revision of female representation and

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J. Heredia, *Mapping South American Latina/o Literature in the United States*, Literatures of the Americas,
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archetypes. She is an ardent feminist and credits her Peruvian mother as well as Second-wave feminists for influencing her and opening critical avenues of thought to “an organic feminism” that comes naturally. She recalls her formative years as being very rebellious, going against the norm, and not conforming to “girly girl” behavior. Nonetheless, she asserts that she did feel feminine and looked up to her mother who would break the mold of a complacent female figure. Giménez Smith admired her tenacity and her exemplary work ethics taught her about survival in a male-dominated society as much in the U.S. as in Peru. This heritage also comes full circle for Giménez Smith who as an adult returns regularly to Lima, the city where her parents grew up, to visit her mother who has Alzheimer’s. Her travels to Lima have not only opened doors to family but to a vibrant literary world with which she is increasingly engaged.

Giménez Smith currently makes her home in Blacksburg, Virginia, where she is Professor of English at Virginia Tech University. She is Vice President of the board of *Thinking Its Presence*, a conference and advocacy group dedicated to supporting the success of writers and artists of color in the community and in the academy as well as the publisher of Noemi Press. She is also one of two poetry editors for *The Nation*.

Since the spring of 2013, Giménez Smith and I began correspondence over email until we finally met up for a fun and lively Skype interview on July 12, 2015. She reflects on writing between the genres of poetry and the lyric essay in the development of her “poetic feminism between Peru and the U.S.”

JH: How did you develop an interest in poetry and the essay? Is it easy to switch between these genres?

CGS: I wanted to be a fiction writer when I was in college so I think I became a poet in part when I was deciding what material was going to be best for my graduate school application. At the end of the day it was the poetry. So, I applied as a poet and it kind of set me on that course. I think that I did not discover the essay as a form probably, seriously engaged with it as a form, until I was a graduate student. I was very, very attracted to it and I loved the intellectual life that an essay had. It was similar to the kinds of questions that I liked to address in my poetry about selfhood. But they were a little bit more teased out. At the time, I did not see any Latinos writing essays except for maybe Richard Rodriguez. I did not see that it was my place to write an essay.

Then after graduate school I was teaching at City College of San Francisco from 2000 to 2002. I was living in San Francisco and Oakland. I was teaching about writing essays. I was really enjoying learning about how they were formed and shaped. Now I understand clearly why I thought that it was not my place to write an essay. I had less of an understanding and I was starting to realize that I had internalized this idea of who could speak with authority about experience and various subjects. In that moment, I started reading the essay in a new way with a lot more curiosity and interest. Meanwhile in the following years, the lyric essay makes an appearance. In fact, John D'Agata who does the lyric essay was in my graduate poetry workshop. I remember being completely bewildered by what he was doing. But then I read Jenny Bulley. I was very, very attracted to their work and what they were doing. This is in the course of five or so years. I decided to write a lyric essay which was about being a mother, watching my Mom decline. After I finished it, it was good. It was solid. I thought I am going to write a book. I think I can do this. I am going to give it a shot and that's how I started writing non-fiction. What I want to address informs the genre. If I want to approach a very linguistic lyric subjectivity, I go to poetry. If I am ruminating an idea and examining a subject, I go to the essay.

JH: Which writers, poets, or artists were some of your influences as you began to cultivate yourself as a poet? How has that changed now?

CGS: The influences that led me to that are Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Wayne Koestanbaum. Those are three very important writers who gave me a sense of how varied subject matter could be. I did not have to be writing about philosophy and nature. I could be writing about television and pop culture and that was ok. Robert Motherwell was an abstract expressionist painter who was a great influence on me. He was one of the painters of his era who could write about art eloquently. He kind of became the spokesperson for abstract expressionism and wrote really beautiful essays about them. Those early works were really important to me. On a more intellectual side, Johanna Bruckner who writes about book culture and art culture was an influence to me in the visual arts. Those are people who come to mind.

What is interesting about non-fiction is that you can be attracted to a subject matter and want to read about that subject as you are attracted to the writer, himself. I will read anything non-fiction that is obsessing me in that moment. Right now, for instance, I am reading a lot about pop culture and the body because I am writing about television. That is what I am attracted to. But I am actually consuming a lot of pop culture now and not reading as much as I could be.

JH: What kinds of television programs catch your eye?

CGS: It's completely indiscriminate. I am interested in how television is a type of folklore. It's also a way of communicating cultural values, preoccupations and releasing some cultural anxiety. When I watch television, I like to see what the message is, how they want me to see my body, how they want me to see family, how they want me to see my job, how they want me to see government. All of that—how the stories are portrayed, where the stories are set. All of it is based or influenced by the moving of capital. So, I watch all kinds of reality shows, bad reality shows, true crime reality shows. I watch comedies, dramas, all kinds of stuff.

JH: Do you have any thoughts on programs like *Ugly Betty* or *Jane the Virgin*?

CGS: I think telenovelas are changing television. I think it's presented as campy in a way like *Glee*. I think that guy has tapped into some telenovela energy. Right? He definitely has. Inevitably we are going to see some shows like that. I was sad to see that *Cristela* got cancelled. I thought if Eva Mendes would have been the main person that show would have been a success! But you know, television is very zeitgeist.

JH: You have mentioned Wallace Stevens as an important influence. What about Latin American poets such as those of the vanguard period in the 1920s and 1930s such as César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda, and even the early Jorge Luis Borges?

CGS: Absolutely! Very much so, especially Pablo Neruda. Reading Pablo Neruda gave me a taste for the possibility in language. Vallejo, I knew as a child peripherally. Of course, I had limited exposure in college and was reintroduced to it in graduate school. I tend to conflate his work with a kind of surrealism I was reading at the time. I think it is a mistake in conflation. Borges, of course, who is a magnificent essayist. But also, his fiction changed how I

thought about fiction, what I thought about a short story. These procedural short stories that he wrote were very attractive to me.

JH: In your poetry collection *Milk and Filth*, for which you were a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, you pay homage to Second-wave feminism as well as your mother. Could you elaborate on these two kinds of feminisms in your literary formation and consciousness?

CGS: I started college in 1989 and finished in 1994. So, it was when all the Second-wave feminists got jobs as professors. I had these amazing professors who are hardcore feminists. They were introducing me to all kinds of works. I always had a natural attraction to feminism since I was tiny, much to my family's chagrin. But I did not know the tenets. I watched my mother purely out of necessity how she played in a man's world. She worked in sales which is a very masculine industry. Very racist in the particular industry she was in. Yet, she did not stop. She was not let down by anything and she did not let it get to her. The center of it was about survival. But it also made me realize that women are very good survivors. Women are better survivors than men. At the same time, I am reading Adrienne Rich and Andrea Dworkin. I am reading these really important formative feminist thinkers who are making my identity as a woman, an intellectual investigating and exploring. And I loved it! I loved thinking about my subjectivity being influenced by the feminine in many ways. I think in part because I grew up not as a girly girl. In Latino culture, there are differences between the girly girls and not girly girls. I really struggled with my identity when people reacted, "Pareces un macho!" People would say that to me all of the time. Also, comments like "You walk like your Dad!" I would really struggle with this contradiction. I was pretty sure I was a girl but I was like boys. I did not want to wear dresses. But at the end of the day, I did like being a girl, a young woman. I admired Naomi Wolf and Camille Paglia who were writing about those anxieties. The fact that I had experienced this instinctual feminism with my Mom coupled with my own intellectual curiosity about not only feminism but also what being a woman was. Then, I discovered Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray at the same time. They are in a completely different orbit when thinking about identity. I was really attracted to the polymorphous version of feminism that they described or they

suggested. It was kind of monstrous, an "other," and I identified with it. Those two things came together and became my particular brand of feminism.

I felt like Second-wave feminism was getting a raw deal. Second-wave did not fail because of Second-wave feminism. It failed because of a very strategic marketing effort on the right to disqualify feminist thought as being legitimate. It was not anything else. I saw that some of the things that Third-wave feminists were rejecting of Second-wave feminism were actually young women buying into the right-wing ideology about Second-wave feminism as opposed to having any substantive critique. Feminism is a civil rights movement. That is really what the book wanted to do. It wanted to remind and evoke the beauty of Second-wave feminism. At the same time, I pointed to the fact that not everyone's Mom was a Second-wave feminist intellectual or college educated person. Many of us did not have that experience, but found feminism in this other way. So, I wanted to honor that too. A more organic feminism if you will.

JH: You mention Third-wave feminism. Would you say *Milk and Filth* is in dialogue with their ideology?

CGS: Yes, I think it incorporates Third-wave strategies and tropes. But I think there are some poems in the book that are syntactical imitations of *No More Masks!: An Anthology of Poems by Women* (1973). But the mythology of femininity which is so prevalent in Second-wave feminism I replicate in *Milk and Filth*. At the same time, I employ a lot of more contemporary feminist approaches to the subject matter.

JH: The photograph on the cover as well as the title *Milk and Filth* present the contradictory aspects of independence for women and how that freedom is both a blessing and a curse. Would you agree?

CGS: The title was suggested by my friend Rosa Alcalá. I had lots of different titles before. The press did not like them. I asked Rosa. She found that milk and filth appear in the last line of one of the poems in the book. She said that is what the book is about. It was so perfect. The image has a few different desires or objectives. One of them is to pay homage to Ana Mendieta who used her body in her visual art to suggest both erasure and legibility. So, that was part of it. The other part was to evoke pro-body second wave burning bras mythology. I love my body. Think of *Our*

Bodies, Ourselves. I am going to put my crowning baby out of my vagina on the cover of my book. That sort of energy. I also wanted to evoke that. Then, of course, my husband designed the book. I told him I wanted a cover of a naked lady on the book. I was in a robe. I thought that I am not taking a naked picture of myself right now. Do we have other pictures of me? When I was pregnant with my son a million years ago, I was a young woman. I loved my body. So that is a picture of myself when I was three or four months pregnant with my son. That is the only extant naked picture of me that I know of that exists in the universe. That is how the cover came to be.

JH: In this collection, you also play with female archetypes in mythology, history and popular culture—la Malinche, Ana Mendieta, Joan Rivers. What are you trying to achieve by incorporating these references?

CGS: I tried to pick women whose heroism as a feminist or even as a person were questionable. But I also wanted to combine high and low culture because that is what informs my feminism. I remember watching Joan Rivers on Johnny Carson when I was a little girl and saying, "This woman is a revolutionary!" I thought she was the most brilliant person I had ever seen. She was so transgressive. I could not believe how brave she was. For better or worse, Joan Rivers was one of my feminist icons as a child. Then, she went another way. We drifted apart. I will never forget how emboldened I felt by seeing her go onto Johnny Carson's soundstage and make the jokes that she was making. Phyllis Diller was another one. Erma Bombeck. Yeah, she was a feminist. Erma Bombeck wrote about her dissatisfaction and she joked about her marriage, her family and she kind of laid the challenges of being a mother. It was not like, "Venerate me. I'm beautiful and I love my children." It was very honest. Reading and watching these women were very important to me. Later in my life, I was thinking about Malinche and these other mythological, folkloric and historical characters who have an ambiguous relationship first to femininity and then secondly, to goodness. This is related to milk and filth, the Madonna/whore complex. The dichotomy. All of the women that I choose are weirdly positioned in relationship to milk or filth because I think most of us are weirdly positioned between milk and filth.

JH: In "Parts of An Autobiography," you say, "I want my problems to be Wallace Stevens, but they're Anne Sexton." What do you mean by this statement?

CGS: Wallace Stevens is a problematic guy to say the least. The female body is prohibited from the intellectual world. That is another dichotomy that is made particularly evident in different poetic movements and how they have treated the stories of women or how they have situated the female experience. It happens in all these traditions. A woman will never write a great American novel because only men have the types of experiences that can be embodied in a great novel. The female body has domestic experiences. Those are not great subjects. I was thinking about that. I also thought about the way Anne Sexton brought subject matters like abortion, menstrual blood, suicide, and divorce to poetry. She brought this kind of visceral life to poetry that I think was very vital. But again, mutually exclusive. You can't live and be embodied and be of the mind simultaneously. There is this weird intellectual prejudice of that in poetry. I think that is why I evoke them. At the end of the day, I am invoking these two great white influences and prominent figures on my work but I am never going to be either one of them. A big way that I am defined whether I like it or not is through my Latinidad. Whether I like it or whether I don't, it does not make a difference.

JH: In *Bring Down the Little Birds: On Mothering, Art, Work, and Everything Else*, you write part memoir and part essay touching on various important themes in the very title. How do you negotiate time and energy for mothering, art, work, and everything else?

CGS: At great cost to my health and well-being. I think I've come to realize that I watched my Mom kill herself working. She worked seven days a week, fourteen hours a day. She is in her late sixties and she is dying of Alzheimer's. I don't think that it is a coincidence. I think I fell into this do or die approach to all things that I was doing for various reasons. I think in part because it is very difficult to be a woman of color in the academy and in the literary world and not be seen through this very narrow lens. But on top of that I realize that part of the problem is that there are not enough people of color pushing the buttons, pulling the strings, guarding the gate, and so I've also tried to take the opportunities

that have presented themselves for me to participate in any way, in those machinations. Again, I've talked myself. I have not had what you call a sustainable approach to things. I am trying to remodify my life and protect my body from insomnia, for example. Physical things that happen when you don't take care of yourself. I'm forty-four and I realize that I better pay attention because this is it. This is all I have.

JH: The narrator in this collection also finds herself in the middle generation and must learn how to accommodate both her newborn son and her mother's growing brain tumor and dementia. How does the narrator deal with all of these family situations simultaneously?

CGS: I think my husband was integral to this by being a very present and amazing father when I had to be present for my mother. He is an amazing partner and I think that has been a big part of it. As an artist, as a mother, as an academic in my career, in all of those endeavors, my husband has been by my side. I am so lucky to have a partner like that. But I think a big part of it is also that my Mom taught me great tenacity. My Mom like many other immigrants barely spoke English when she came to this country. But she made a life for herself and she was able to get independence from a very difficult and challenging marriage and support her family and send her kids to college. She did her best. In that way, it's a bit of survivor guilt. It's the least I could have been, as hardworking as she was because she always did it for us.

JH: It seems like looking at the past via memory is significant, but also looking at the future as the narrator is also preoccupied with her children's thoughts of her as they get older.

CGS: Yeah, and that was how I conceived the book. I am retrospectively thinking about what becomes important about one's mother's life when you are her age. Now I am thinking, "What was my Mom doing when she was forty-four years old?" I was twenty years old when she was forty-four. She was putting me through college. She was working fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. When I go back, I am also imagining the moments in my kids' lives. The difference is that in my kids' lives both of their parents are writers. So, they understand in a way about how their lives are a subject matter for better or for worse. For worse for a while. They recognize that. We talk about our lives. They give us ideas for things to

write about. In a way that is already implicit in our family dynamics. But I think it's this thing you do for your parent because you want to know the outcome. You want to know that your parent is going to be ok. You want to know that they are not going to hate you. My son is eleven and my daughter is nine. Now they are big and hairy. They want things and get angry with me. They have this complicated relationship to me now when it was very uncomplicated when they were little. I think it is a constantly evolving sense of how one reads another family member.

JH: In parts of this collection, you incorporate a mother's voice/perspective in italicized writing. She says, "Do I leave it [tumor] to be handled by this country in which I've lived most of my life, or do I take it back to Peru?" How did you come up with this strategy of mixing voices? What role does Peru play in this collection?

CGS: My Mom is Peruvian. Now that she is in an advanced stage of Alzheimer's she is back in Peru. She has been in a nursing home in Peru for a year and a half. It's very difficult and challenging. The idea is giving my Mom a voice, a desire to inscribe her story. In a wonderful essay by Alice Walker she describes how quilts made by African American women represent their artistic ambition. They could have had these lives with art. My Mom wanted to be a singer. She wanted to be an artist but she could not. She had to work. She did not have time. She gave herself over to her family. So, I thought that she was always telling stories, a great storyteller! Well, I can inscribe her by giving her a voice in an imaginary notebook that describes her life, her story. I took what she told me and I tried to imagine what she would sound like if she had been a writer and tried to give it life.

JH: How do you identify? For example, when do you feel American, Peruvian, Latina, South American or all of the above? Do you have any current connections to Peruvian culture?

CGS: I do have connections to Peruvian culture. For example, I've visited in the last sixteen months three times. The first time I took my Mom. The second time I followed up with her. The third time I was there to see her. I am going to be going every six months because my relatives are taking care of her. The least I can do is show up. While I was there the last couple of times, I was with my husband. We started to read contemporary Peruvian poetry and

immerse ourselves into Peruvian culture. So, our long-term goal is to apply for a Fulbright and spend several months there. We will see how that goes.

JH: Do you know Daniel Alarcón?

CGS: I know his work, but not him yet. I think I identify myself as a Latina. I think that is just an inevitable identity in American culture. In terms of Peruvian, I grew up in California and there were Peruvians there, but primarily Mexicans and Mexican Americans. But even in Latinidad there are huge cultural differences. Mexican American culture is very different from Peruvian American culture such as the sound of the language, the food. I have had people ask me if I was from Spain because of the way my Spanish sounds. I was born in New York City and lived on the East Coast the first ten years of my life. I remember being very East Coast-centric. We moved between the East Coast and California because that is where we had friends and family. That is where my Dad's peripatetic job history took us. We lived in el D.F., Mexico City, for a year. That was the year Princess Diana and Prince Charles got married. I remember that. Because our family moved so much, we became kind of clannish. I identify most primarily with my family because that is where I find my most consistent sense of self as opposed to my kids, for example. They have a life when they are out there in the world. They have their friends and connect with their friends. I often went to school districts, especially on the East Coast, where I was the only Latina kid, only student who spoke Spanish. Less so in California. But that was very formative for me. That experience of I am the only kid who speaks Spanish in the whole school or in the whole first or second grade. That kind of thing. In that way, I guess I feel very Peruvian. My father was born in Argentina. He lived there for the first years of his life, but he grew up in Peru. In going back and forth to Peru, I have discovered that my great-grandparents were from Spain on my mother's paternal side. It's been interesting finding out these variations in my family background. Now I took one of those genetic tests. Surprisingly, I am 66% southern European. I expected to be a little different than that.

JH: Why do you sometimes use the term, "South American," in your essays? How do you see it as important? I notice that you refer to

this term in the introduction of your anthology, *Angels of the Americlypse: An Anthology of New Latin@ Writing*.

CGS: I think it is to acknowledge that Latinidad is not a monolithic experience. The cultural experiences foreground the aesthetics, foreground a lot of things. I wanted to make a little distinction between being a Chicana and other Latina. I am not a Chicana. Secondly, the idea that there is some kind of neutral space called Latinidad that everyone can share and connect with. Let's face it. Cubans in Miami. Many are Republicans. It's a very different experience as you move from culture to culture.

JH: In *Odalisque in Pieces* I notice that you tend to read the poem, "Finding the Lark," at invited talks. The verses, "My father becomes a ghost of industry./My mother wraps herself in cloaks at night" capture my attention. What does the lark give the poetic voice and then, the mother?

CGS: I think I read this poem because I inscribe my mother as an artist, as a voice. I think the lark speaks to that romantic tradition as being transmitted to both myself and my mother. Retrospectively, that is how I think about that poem. I think the reason I read that poem a lot is that it does connect to my very fundamental interest in folklore and mythology and these bodies of literature created by the literature people.

JH: In the poems "Cities, I Still Love You" and "Translation" in the same collection, you refer to the contradictions of living in a modern city. Could you elaborate?

CGS: My parents basically grew up in Lima. They loved being in cities even when we were not living in a city. We would spend a lot of time in museums in cities and they loved that intensity. So, I've always loved cities more than I loved anything else. When I moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, that was quite an adjustment. There was no city here. Even El Paso did not have that same feeling. It was not San Francisco, Oakland, nor Los Angeles. It was not these cities in which I grew up having complex relationships but at the end of the day, ultimately identifying with as home. So, I think that those poems, especially in *The City She Was*, are stories about homesickness, about the ambivalence of the city because the other problem with the city is the constant contact with mankind and this constant friction. At the same time that I love cities I also really like my interior life and small closed-off agoraphobic spaces.

So, I think that's at work too. Homesickness and also that desire to be locked into a quiet, private my space kind of world.

JH: This is also a good bridge to your collection *The City She Was.* What experiences influenced this work?

CGS: *The City She Was* describes a becoming into a voice. When I moved to San Francisco, this was the time when I decided that I was going to fail as a poet or succeed as a poet. But for many years I had to work hard very hard to get really good at poetry. I conflate the city with that becoming.

JH: Did you find at the time that San Francisco provided inspiration, motivation, energy or not at all? I ask because there are many San Franciscos.

CGS: It was amazing for me because it was the first time I lived independently on my own. I had just gotten divorced from a graduate school marriage. I guess that was what you called it. It was the first time I was by myself, on my own. I had roommates but they were my friends. They did not have to take care of me. They were not family. That was really significant for me. The San Francisco I am writing about is pre-9/11, pre-Google owned San Francisco before it became a suburb of Google corporation. I lived near the Castro so there was also this gay culture in which I felt at home.

JH: How did *Goodbye, Flicker* come about?

CGS: I started writing that book in 1999 or 2000, a very old book that I kept going back to and revisiting and reconnecting with. The book had two central ideas. First, it was loosely going to allude to various dream songs in its polyphony and use of high and low diction, in its use of self-contained archetypes. Second, when I was growing up my Mom would tell fairy tales. My Mom was very funny and continues to be. She has not lost her sense of humor. She would adapt the fairy tales based on who tells them and who the audience is. She would make the tales very feminist and empowering. She would change the political context, the class terms. I was fascinated by that. I thought she was brilliant. The third aspect of that is about who can adapt fairy tales. I think about this young girl creating this imaginary world out of her own life. Historically, she is the candidate to be producing folklore in a way. This resurrects the idea of a native raw unclassed, unelite person creating a folklore system and that was a big part of it. I worked on that book on and off. I did not know what to do with

the poems. About eight years ago, I was able to look at it again to begin seeing how I could make it a better book and I kept looking at it over the years. I finished writing it in 2010. I worked on it for five years to get it into really good shape. A lot of the material is original from the first draft in 2000 and some of it is heavily modified. About 50% is written in those five years.

JH: How have your travels affected your philosophy of cities?

CGS: I love cities. I like spending time in them. Even though I live in Las Cruces when I get to do readings, it is so exciting for me because I get to be somewhere else. I get to visit a city, go to great restaurants, and I am an aficionada of cities. For example, I love Lima. It's changing. Now that I am spending more time there I am reading about it. My sense of Lima was carved out in the eighties and nineties when *Sendero Luminoso* (The Shining Path) came about and seeing how economically desperate the circumstances were and hearing my Mom say, "I am so glad we don't live there." You stick your hand out to signal, you are turning and someone will steal your watch. It was a place I became afraid of quite frankly. So now that I have been going I am less and less afraid of it and more curious about it. I want to know it more intimately now that I have spent time there. I have been to Paris a few times. I have traveled more extensively in the United States, Mexico, and Lima. In a way, I am very cagey here in New Mexico.

JH: Returning to *Angels of the Americlypse*, you and John Chávez propose a new aesthetics or sensibility for poetry in your introduction. Could you elaborate on this idea?

CGS: My sense of Latino Americlyptic writing keeps evolving. First of all, there were so few writers of color, hardly any, especially no Latino writers, as part of the conversation around vanguard poetry in the late twentieth century. I don't think it's because it was not being written. I think it's because the definition was circumscribed to preclude writers of color and their experiences or to eliminate or exclude. So, Juan Felipe Herrera started a touchstone in that regard. I think he is such an innovative writer. He has been part of the experimentation with subjectivity and language but of course, there are also the Nuyorican poets who are also reflecting their work with politics and different musical styles. One intention is to suggest that there is a pre-Latino lineage. Another idea is to remind audiences that there is a simultaneity occurring in

poetry. It was not just white poets who were figuring these different things out about language, how post-structuralism plays a role in language, how politics can or cannot have a place in poetry. Poets of all races and colors are asking these questions. A great example of that is the anthology *Charlie Chan Is Dead* edited by Jessica Hagedorn which came out in the early 1990s. These are the two main principals. Who are the Latino poets doing the hot, interesting, and hard to classify work and who are the Latino poets who have been identified as avant-garde? It's a conversation of bringing them together to suggest a body of work that could be looked at with impulses, desires, aesthetic choices, to suggest something about art and an affect.

JH: How did you select the poets and critics for this anthology? I notice that you include veteran as well as new poetic voices such as Farid Matuk and Daniel Borzutsky. How did you meet?

CGS: I am a huge fan of these poets! John Chávez and I were able to come up with a core list very quickly of who we wanted to include, for example Juan Felipe Herrera, Rosa Alcalá, Norma Cantú. We wanted to have Gloria Anzaldúa, but obviously that would cost money. I think I first encountered Daniel Borzutsky as Raúl Zurita's translator and then his work. There was nobody writing like Daniel Borzutsky so he came later. The anthology took five years to put together and then trying to find a publisher. Times are changing. New poets were arising, including those poets who were changing the anthology so that it reflects the complexity of this body of work. At the very last minute we made changes based on the publisher's suggestions and also people we saw like Jennifer Tamayo. Wow, we thought, this person could definitely be in this anthology. We wrote to people telling them that we loved their work. We want you to be in this anthology. Then, we had to find people to write about them. The other idea was creating a body of critical work around these poets which I think is often the obstacle to being the first person to write about somebody, especially if it is a marginalized writer. But if there is a critical body of work already available it becomes easier to talk about them. There are lots of poets that I would still want to include retrospectively in this anthology. I keep meeting poets that I wish could be part of a subsequent version. It's such an exciting time to be a poet, to be a Latino poet, in my mind. A lot of it was approaching people and saying, "I want you to be in this anthology!"

I knew Farid because he is married to my friend Susan Briante. So, I actually knew Susan before I met Farid. Daniel, I think I started with a fan letter. Some contributors were friends, but others I never met.

JH: What was it like being a Canto Mundo fellow as well as a graduate from the Iowa Writers' Workshop? Is this the same Workshop that people like Sandra Cisneros and Daniel Alarcón attended?

CGS: I am going to Canto Mundo this week so I am very, very excited about that. It's like going home. It's become such a vital part of my life, the soul of my aesthetic life. I go there because there is a lot of shared experience that I have, *íntimos*, deep connections and conversations that I think are important. Right now, at this moment I think it is a wonderful time for Latinidad. This past week in the news they said that Latinos are the majority in California now. Not a minority! That means the world is changing and we have to change with it and we have to be ready to make new art that helps people make the world their own and not be afraid to make the world their own. Working also with young poets and seeing their ambitions and how they approach things. It's an honor. It's amazing. It's very fulfilling.

I learned a lot in Iowa. I was there 1995–1997. It was challenging because I went in the nineties. There were frustrations about being a person of color. I think there was a double life that I led in graduate school. I did not see myself in that place. I think a lot of Latino writers or writers of color who had gone to Iowa had that experience of being in this program and not seeing anything that felt familiar. This is the opposite experience I have of Canto Mundo. It's just the mentorship and fellowship that are so important to me. I can't imagine my life without them.

JH: Do you have any thoughts on the writings by the Peruvian diaspora in the United States such as Daniel Alarcón, Marie Arana, and Farid Matuk, also part of this collection?

CGS: It's exciting. I recently finished an Alarcón novel because it gives access to this history that I want to rediscover with a place that up until recently, I have only known in a folkloric sense. My Mom taught me about this idyllic childhood she had there. As I come to know it as a political space, a historical space, I learn about the

politics and the history—all of that is exciting to me and bolstered by reading Farid and Daniel Alarcón.

I am also reading contemporary Peruvian writers, such as poets and fiction writers. I am reading Santiago Roncagliolo. There are a couple of Peruvian poets I am really excited about like José Watanabe. Recent discoveries. I am looking for women poets and found one I am excited about named Mariela Dreyfus. I try to find them in translation. But now that I am going there more often I can go into a bookstore and browse. Eduardo de Chirinos is another fantastic poet at the University of Montana.

JH: Which writers, musicians, and other artists do you admire these days?

CGS: I have always really liked electronic music. Right now, I am really focused on popular culture and television. I can tell you about the true crime shows in the U.K. that I think are very interesting and well-written. That is just all I am in immersed in right now. Yes, I love Quartet. I love what my husband plays for music. I am also reading about television and affect theory. I am reading a Donna Haraway book about animals. A few French novels by Edouard Levé and Marie Redonnet.

JH: What is your next project?

CGS: My next project is auto-fictional. It's a fictional group of essays, a cross-genre book. There are going to be fictional parts based on non-fictional aspects of my life and there are also non-fictional aspects of my life set to fictional contexts. It's about this person who watches a lot of television dealing with a mother who has Alzheimer's. She only has one child as a son and he is growing through puberty. The factors are different and yet very similar to my life. That is what I am looking at right now.

JH: Sounds fascinating. Any other comments you care to add?

CGS: I don't think so. This is very thorough. Thank you.

Gender and Spirituality in Colombia, Cuba and New Jersey: Daisy Hernández

Born in Union City, New Jersey, in 1975, Daisy Hernández was raised in a mixed heritage household by a Colombian mother and a Cuban father. She received a Bachelor's degree in English at William Paterson University, a dual Masters of Arts degree in Journalism and Latin American Studies at New York University, and a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing at the University of Miami. She coedited the essay collection *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* (2002) with Bushra Rehman. Her debut memoir *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* (2014) was awarded a Lambda Literary Emerging Writer Award, a Kirkus Best Nonfiction Book, an IPPY Award, and received honorable mention from Casa de las Américas in Havana, Cuba, all in 2015. Hernández has also been part of important writers' workshops such as VONA in Oakland and Macondo in San Antonio founded by Sandra Cisneros that helped launch her memoir.

Before teaching in academia, Daisy Hernández worked as a full-time journalist at *The New York Times*, *Ms.* magazine, and *Colorlines* at different stages of her life. These versatile writing experiences have made her aware of the discrepancies that exist in selecting which stories to tell as far as gender, race, and immigration issues are concerned in the media. Through investigative reporting, she also learned much about the untold stories in the U.S., particularly the hate crimes against youth of color of LGBTQ

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communities such as the Gwen Araujo story and the impact on the family that she includes in her memoir.

On the other side of the coin, Hernández realizes that her vision of social justice extends to her Colombian and Cuban heritages that have also left a lasting impact. She is interested in the effects of Chagas disease, a neglected tropical and parasitic disease, because it affects millions of Latin Americans and American doctors are not trained to identify it in patients. Over the years, Hernández has also united different kinds of spiritualities—Catholicism, Santería, and Buddhism—and, perhaps, embodies the role of a new santera who heals the spirit as well as the body of her loved ones.

Hernández currently makes her home in Ohio where she teaches as an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing in the Department of English at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Since the fall of 2014, Daisy Hernández and I began correspondence over email until we met up for a wonderful Skype interview on August 23, 2015. She reflects on her role as a translator in her family.

JH: In the essay, "Las Lesbianas Are on the Other Side," published in the collection *Sex and the Single Girls* (2000), you say, "English had given me freedom but it had also alienated me from my family… I say very little in Spanish about my career, my dreams, my lovers… For my parents there will always be sides of me that exist only in translation." Could you explain how translation has defined your identity and affected your life?

DH: Reflecting on translation is something that I grappled with very intensely, especially in my twenties. Writing that essay was my way of trying to understand the experience of essentially being a daughter that exists in translation to a great degree. There are aspects of my life that my parents can't understand directly. For a long time it cost me a lot of grief and sadness because I wanted them to know me in both languages. I think it was a very slow process of grieving that it was not going to be possible. At the same time there were larger structural reasons of why that was the case. My Dad is from Cuba while my Mom is from Colombia. There were reasons why they had access to the kind of education that they had in those countries. There were also reasons for the access that they had here in English and Spanish. As I got older I started working on the memoir and understanding more about my family. For example,

my Mom had wanted to study English and my father did not allow her. He was very controlling. So gender dynamics play out in the migration process. I'd had no idea how that influenced our family and the relationship with my parents.

JH: In this essay, you also discuss the need to be surrounded by bilingual or multilingual people, and a multicultural community. Why is that important and has that changed much now?

DH: The desire and the need have become stronger with time. I am now much more comfortable with who I am so the quality of the need has changed. When I wrote that essay I needed to be around other bilingual speakers. To feel at home with myself and as the passage of time happens we make peace with ourselves. English and Spanish are both important and Spanglish I could consider a third language in my world. As time passes, they become more necessary. I noticed that I lived in major cities where there are large Latino populations. I lived in Florida for two years. Last year I lived in North Carolina where there are many Latinos but it was incredibly racially segregated where I was. Now I am in Ohio where it also seems kind of similar. I am only going to come into contact with Latinos if I go to a certain neighborhood whereas in Miami it is totally different. But in Washington D.C. or New York City, I could just hop on a bus and see Latinos. So, now the need has become more important and intense. When I am with someone who can connect with me in both languages the conversation and the experiences feel very rich. Spanish does connect us in a much more profound way. It's wild! That's why people study psycholinguistics. It's amazing how one word in Spanish touches a million and one emotions.

JH: When did you begin to write fiction? Do you recall what you were reading at the time?

DH: I have been writing since I was a child. I was one of those nine years olds who got her library card and thought she had found heaven. I checked out books every week and could not believe that I got to take them home. I thought that the books were written by magical people who lived in places like New Hampshire. I had funny ideas about who writers were. I was reading quality literature as well as romance novels and adult novels I probably should not have been reading. I read a lot of British novels, including writers like Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot.

> These works spoke to me very deeply because so much was happening around class and class mobility. I noticed these issues a lot growing up in my own community and in my own family. I thought, “People can write about this in novels.”

I was also drawn to Russell Baker who had a column in *The New York Times*. He wrote very personal essays of what was happening in his community. That really influenced me along with a book called *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* by a minister. It was written in the tradition of spiritual essay writing. Those two really influenced me. I think that shows up in my work in my inclination toward the personal essay and also toward issues related to spirituality.

JH: What experiences motivated you to become a journalist and then, write a memoir? How has writing in these two different genres formed you as a writer?

DH: Initially, I went into journalism because I knew that writers could have a job. In elementary school I wrote for the school newspaper. One of my teachers said that if we are writers we become journalists. Now I wish she would have said that if you are a writer you can write books or teach. What I tell my students is that writers can pretty much do anything as long as they can make time to do their writing as well.

At the same time the relationships that my family kept with Cuba and Colombia were largely through media—television, radio, and newspapers. So, I really saw journalism not only as they say, “a first draft of history,” pero también the connection between people and these places that were really important to them. If journalism did not exist, we would not have access to those worlds. In my home it was very loaded emotionally. I understood that there was Spanish language journalism and English language journalism. The two never met. The contrast was very acute and intense for me. In the Spanish language news it was all about the civil wars happening in Central America and the drug war in Colombia in the 1980s. In the U.S. English language news you almost never heard anything about similar reports. That is still the case for me. I am always astounded when I spend periods of time watching news in English and when I turn to Spanish everything is about immigration. In English you don’t hear anything unless Obama just did something. This always underscores for me

that there are two Americas, two different countries that you can see so radically different.

I had a deep desire to understand not only my private world but also that public world and journalism seemed like it would be a way to do that. I was really lucky. I was actually working at NYU. They had a dual program, an M.A. in Latin American Studies and Journalism. I thought this was made for me! Since I was an employee I got a discount. I only intended to take one class. I did not have any big strategies. I ended up qualifying for a working scholarship there. They said that if I wanted to do this full-time, I could. By that time I had done internships at *Ms.* magazine and at a Spanish language television station that was an amazing experience. I've had other experiences in journalism, including *ColorLines* which we'll talk about a bit later. This is where I found a home as a journalist who wants to write about issues of race and politics.

JH: In *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* which you coedited with Bushra Rehman, you update classics like *This Bridge Called my Back*. In the foreword to your anthology, Cherríe Moraga calls women of color, "warriors of conscience and action." How do you see this work continuing and differing from her anthology?

DH: I think that *Colonize This!* definitely continues in that tradition. We are standing on shoulders of giants that came before. It differs because the contributors to *Colonize This!* are a generation of women who grew up with Women's Studies where feminism was being institutionalized in a certain way. We worked very closely with all of our writers. They were an amazing group of women who tolerated all of our edits and questions. We really asked them to dig deep. When Bushra and I started organizing the collection we realized that we could not use past models. Since this generation had grown up with Women's Studies, some themes dealt with the bell hook's kind of tradition of talking back to the Establishment. We also had a section on mothers, which differed from the generation of *This Bridge Called my Back* because you had many contributors of *Colonize This!* who are the daughters of immigrants. So, we needed to have a whole section on the impact of gender and migration.

JH: In this anthology, virtually all of the contributors discuss the limits of mainstream feminism. Instead, they redefine the concept of

empowerment for women by looking at the experiences of their mothers, grandmothers, and others from their communities, those not found in classroom textbooks. In your essay, "Bringing Feminism a la Casa," could you discuss how you negotiated your own feminism in this respect?

DH: However you come into contact with feminism, a history of ideas, bodies of ideas and political action, you come into consciousness about gender and, eventually, you go back home. You start thinking about your first lessons in gender and where they happened. For me that also includes language, existing in multiple languages. I commuted to college and lived at home. I took the buses into New York City. When I returned home, my mother asked, "Feminist qué?" How do you translate the ideology as well as the word? Feminism for me was a word that was almost not translatable.

In *Colonize This!* we have a section on mothers because many contributors felt that they did not have the right vocabulary or language to describe the ideology of feminism that came from their homes. They were raised by aunties and mothers who were not a formal part of the women's movement but all of our ideas about what it meant to be a woman in this society were coming through them for both, better or worse, actually.

JH: What was your experience like in working with WILL (Women in Literature and Letters)? Is this how you met one of the founders, Dominican American author and editor, Angie Cruz?

DH: In 1998, I had started as an editorial assistant at New York University Press. I opened up *The Village Voice* and found this gorgeous woman inside. It was Edwidge Danticat who was doing a collaborative reading and fundraising for WILL. That is how I met Angie Cruz, Marta Lucía, and Adelina Anthony. It was amazing because I attended a predominantly white college in New Jersey as an undergraduate. I was fortunate that the president of our Latina collective was Latina but otherwise it was a very white experience. Here I found this whole group and they were speaking my language. They talked a lot about being writers of consciousness. WILL was like going to a different college, one with a political consciousness. I did not have many women of color role models in college. I thought the woman writer was Mary, her husband, and

a dog in New Hampshire. At the time Angie Cruz's agent was in the process of selling her first novel *Soledad*. I thought, "You can write a book and make money from it!" Everything at that time became more possible. They were these three power house women. In terms of experiences, they had different life trajectories than I had.

This exposure was also really essential because I had grown up with the mentality of keeping my eyes on the prize. I was going to graduate from college and get a job in the city. I was not going to be a factory worker or someone's maid. I was very invested in that. When I got my second job out of college at NYU, it was supposed to fulfill so much—my dreams, family's dreams, community dreams and it didn't! It did not satisfy my dreams! If I had not found WILL, I can't imagine what my life would have been like because in many ways WILL became my compass. These women are talking about how writing can change our communities. I already knew it because I had experienced it personally. They were so sweet in sharing their knowledge in recommending books by Audre Lorde or *This Bridge Called My Back*. I discovered a whole new library!

JH: Could you discuss your experiences as a journalist, especially when you worked at *The New York Times* and *Ms.* magazine? I read that you had mixed feelings about these places.

DH: I had a very unusual situation. I noticed that other women of color who had ended up in that situation had often acclimated to a middle-class white culture over many, many years. Por ejemplo, they had gone to prep school or a very elite college. My sister went to Smith College. They had these layers of support that happened over time very slowly. I had a weird experience because I did not go to those places. I attended a predominantly white high school but I had my little Latina posse which was very South American. I was very isolated in a lot of ways. I did not learn how to adopt white culture. I knew how to talk to white women because they were my teachers. There were hardly any white men in my life. I did not date outside of my community either. College was pretty much the same. WILL was a similar group of women like myself, very supportive and amazing, but it was not necessarily a preparation to be working and being around white folks who came from a

specific class background. Even though it was a feminist magazine being at *Ms.* magazine was a very intense cultural shock.

The New York Times was more intense because I was working with predominantly white men. I had never seen so many in one room in my entire life. I was also young. All this was a good training ground in terms of journalism and politics in the year and a half that I was there.

JH: How did you become involved with *ColorLines* where you focused on political issues such as race and immigration?

DH: In 1998 I first discovered *ColorLines* because I was working at NYU Press and they had a subscription. It was the first time I saw a man of color on the cover and it was about the arts for political change. He was not a criminal, not a football player. Initially, Jeff Chang, one of the founding editors of the magazine, and I connected through a friend. I told him that I was moving to California and needed a job. So, when he mentioned *ColorLines* I was in awe. It was an amazing six years. It was an incredible life-shaping experience. I was free to write about the things that I cared about. For me it was having a political family. It's rare to have your work life also be your political family. I was going to work with people who wanted to change the conversation around race in this country and who were committed in all aspects of their lives to social justice. By the time I got to *ColorLines* I knew *The New York Times* and the lifestyle that accompanied it in New York City were not for me. I began to re-envision a different life for me where social justice work was going to be at the forefront. The immigrant dreams that my parents had for me and that I had for myself had to reorganize themselves. I got to work with writers from all over the country. I told people that I had the most multiracial newsroom in this country or the world. I had the opportunity to work with writers who had such a spectrum of experiences and that was a deep, deep pleasure for me. That was partly how I came to realize that I would love teaching. We had professional journalists as well as community advocates, recent college students, and young writers. So, I got to teach a lot of what I had learned at NYU and *The New York Times.* I got to see these people from all walks of life develop their skills as writers and storytellers. They were able to tell stories that

were not being told anywhere else and we wrote about them in a meaningful way.

JH: Which pieces do you think affected you the most, be it in the research process or final outcome? Why is this so?

DH: One story that I wrote that deeply stayed with me because it got into the memoir was about a young transgender Chicana teenager who was brutally murdered. I wrote about that for *ColorLines* in that particular year that two murders took place. I wrote about Gwen Araujo who had grown up in Newark, California. I had grown up near Newark, New Jersey, where another young black butch teenager named Sakia Gunn had also been brutally murdered. For *ColorLines* I wrote that these two towns that happen to share the same name had not been able to keep these two teenagers safe. You have people coming out at younger ages, as teenagers or pre-teens but you don't have towns, communities, or cities set up to support them at a basic level—to keep them safe and keep them alive. What was really moving for me as a queer woman, myself, was that in both of their cases, they'd had loving support from families of origin and chosen families. A lot of times when you hear about brutal murders you don't hear about the love, support, and relationships in their communities. In communities of color it is assumed that African Americans and Latinos are homophobic. No, the story is much more complicated. It's also something I think about now with all the police brutality that has happened in the past years. We don't hear about the family context of the victims. We don't get to see them as brothers, fathers, mothers. That is not the dominant narrative. It is still focused on the brutality and murders. I am always struck by how the news annihilates the family relationships.

JH: You have been part of important writing workshops/communities such as VONA and Macondo as well as an M.F.A. program. How do you recall these experiences and what did you learn from them?

DH: I attended VONA and Macondo before I did my M.F.A. so I feel really lucky because I got to hear how terrible it is to be a person of color in an M.F.A. program. I picked mine very strategically because I had my own needs and desires to be with like-minded people. VONA is a workshop for writers of colors. That's where I began to study memoir and how I would write memoir.

Macondo was started by Sandra Cisneros in Texas. This was a home for writers who are engaged in social justice work. That was wonderful for me. The years that I attended it was predominantly Latina and white allies. It was incredibly inspiring and nourishing for me. It also oriented me in how I could be a writing teacher so that was really powerful. Both workshops gave me a sense that my work had a readership regardless of what happened in my M.F.A. program. There were people who connected to my writing in a very real way. It also helped me choose an M.F.A. program. I applied and was accepted to many schools, including the University of Iowa's Non-Fiction Program which is really well known. I visited and I felt that it was too alienating for me. I thought that I did not have the energy at that point in my life to step up to that. I needed to be in a place that was going to be more supportive for me on a different level. So I ended up going to the University of Miami. I studied fiction instead of non-fiction in a smaller program that I think worked out well for me.

JH: What inspired you to write your memoir *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* before trying other literary genres? What were your influences in literature or other arts in writing this memoir?

DH: When I was twenty-five I was writing personal essays to understand my experiences at the time, specifically dating women, for which I did not have any training. A friend suggested that I take stock of what I had. One day I looked at my different essays and thought that I may have a book. I did not think of it as a memoir but rather as a book of essays. From the beginning I organized it into three parts. The first part is specifically around family life, heritage, and religion. The second one is about sexuality and the third part is about class mobility. It was a slow process in coming to understand these stories of growing up, making sense of them, and healing a lot of confusion I had about my childhood and my family.

The book that I found inspiring is Richard Rodriguez's first book *Hunger of Memory*. It is also very controversial for being anti-affirmative action. It was the first book I read by a Latino author, the second one being *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. What I responded to so deeply was that Rodriguez wrote about living with two languages and having a private self and a public self with which I did not agree. It was so powerful for me to read about someone who was writing about his own

experiences and articulating them so well. As a writer, he was an incredible stylist, a love for language, and he is writing in my genre, the essay.

JH: What do you think you took from both heritages, the Colombian as well as the Cuban? I know that you had more limits placed on the travels to Cuba because of the embargo. What do you recall most from your trips to Colombia? I am thinking of the essay, "Stories She Tells Us," which is also included in the anthology, *Wise Latinas.*

DH: I feel really lucky to continue to have two countries that are very intense and that also have very intense relationships with the U.S. in different ways. I went to Colombia when I was eight months old, four years old, and then seven. Then I did not go again until my thirties. In a lot of ways the relationships with both countries have been mediated through my elders: my tías and my mother have been the mediators with their country and my father with his. What is similar about my mother and father is that they were of similar minds about Colombia and Cuba, respectively. They both have a lot of pain about their countries and they have associations with extreme poverty in their countries of origin. They don't want to go back and have a relationship with their countries. They can really only see it through that lens.

That said, I do have a tía who claims, "Colombia! En Colombia hay el mejor español!"

JH: That is debatable as far as South American Spanish is concerned! [laughs]

DH: I got my linguistic arrogance from the Colombian side. My parents both grew up in very poor families in both countries. My mother often likes to distinguish herself as being a city girl. She grew up in the city. She did not grow up in the countryside like my father. He is from el campo. They really struggled in similar ways as children in their families of origin. That is part of their heritage. It's cyclical, generations that struggle. That said, there's an incredible rich history and continuing rich culture on both sides. On my Dad's side, I did end up becoming more interested in Ocha or Santería, the Afro-Cuban religion. My father is a practitioner. It's a two part initiation process and I went through the first one.

As I grew older one beautiful aspect that I appreciated about my parents is how accepting they were of each other's cultures. For example, even though Colombia is a very intensely Catholic country my mother and her sisters were very embracing and accepting of Santería. I ended up growing up with a Latina Catholicism that is very all-encompassing. Not only do you have your santos but there is room for Santería. There is room for espiritismo. I associate that with the Colombian side even though it may not be the way Catholicism is practiced in an orthodox way. This has to do with issues of class and migration.

I do think of my Colombian side as having to do directly more with the language because my tías had all been teachers in Colombia which is also an emotional tie. They were correcting my Spanish as I was growing up. This is very dramatic but I feel like Cuba is the religion part of my life and Colombia is the language part of my life.

JH: What is your present relationship with Colombia? What does it mean to hold on to this part of your heritage?

DH: I applied for a Fulbright to spend a year in Colombia for my next project. I got through the first round but I did not get it. I need to spend a year in Colombia. There is a part of me that really wants that. Last year I did my first interview with someone in Spanish. That was really overwhelming. I feel very young with my life in Spanish which is still the language that I primarily use in my home setting or in very personal communication. That's begun to change over the years little by little. Spanish is becoming more a part of my professional life and social justice work. So, I'm excited about starting a relationship with Colombia in an adult way. I am at that point where my cousin and his wife just had a baby. So, my generation is starting to have children. I feel all grown up all of a sudden. I see Colombia opening up in a lot of ways. Their literary scene is exploding. That's really exciting for me as a reader from a distance.

JH: What does the title of your memoir, *A Cup of Water Under My Bed*, mean which is also an essay in this collection?

DH: I had another title. My editor called me to ask if I was married to my title. I told her that we are seriously engaged and have been together a long time. Why? Marketing does not feel it is sexy enough. I thought, "Oh, my God! The words of death, the marketing department." So, I came up with the final title. I liked it

because it refers to a gesture of the reality of literally putting a cup of water under your bed when you are having a hard time sleeping because there may be bad spirits bothering you. The water will protect you.

A friend of mine, Carolina De Robertis, whom you are also interviewing, emailed me. I trust her literary judgment. She had an image of a small vessel holding so much. When she said that, I said, "That's it!" It's an image that a reader can hold unto. It also speaks to a theme of the memoir which is how immigrant women take care of their children when they come to a country and have few resources and don't know the language. One of the ways they took care of me was with this cup of water. That's how I made sense of what I was going through as a teenager and as a young woman. This cup of water speaks to the spirituality that is a part of the memoir but it also speaks to how the women took care of me with their limitations.

Then I found out that the novel … *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1970) by Tomás Rivera also included the image of the cup of water. I was so happy that my memoir was stepping into this collective work of Latina/o literature that refers to this important symbol.

JH: In terms of sexuality, you give a moving portrait of bisexual identity, especially what it means for a Latina in your memoir. Could you expand on this theme?

DH: A reader asked me where did the memoir start because it is not in chronological order. Actually, it started in part two, which is all about sexuality and desire. As I said, I did not have training for being a queer woman. I was actually using the writing process to understand my sexuality and I did not have any role models. I had some sense from reading Cherríe Moraga and Audre Lorde of a more explicit lesbian identity. I did not have a portrait of what it would look like to belong to neither straight nor lesbian categories. To me it parallels a lot like having two countries, Colombia and Cuba. It also parallels having two languages. It feels like my life is richer in a lot of ways. It also feels like I have a different question. Each chapter in the memoir is definitely a question I was trying to answer.

JH: Another important theme in this memoir is violence against women and transgender people. In "Queer Narratives," I am thinking

about your experience and Gwen's story once again. What do you wish to bring to light in writing about these experiences?

DH: I wrote about the experience of abuse with my Dad when I was very young. I wanted to add to the narrative that already exists about how we can love someone who hurts us that deeply in our immediate families. From the outside it can look so simplistic. It can be reduced to "that person is a monster." But when you are a child, your father can never be a monster even when he may be a monster. Even before contributing to the memoir I saw how writing was a way to understand my experience. People ask if the memoir is therapy. No, I respond. I also wanted to see that larger context. For example, my Dad is part of a community of refugees and exiles and dealing with his own pain in his upbringing.

The Gwen story really stayed with me. She had a family life that was very similar to mine, that is people who wanted to keep her safe. They literally could not. In many ways it seems as though violence is always on the edge of our lives. Their gender is perceived as a transgression that has to be corrected somehow. We are reading more narratives of trangender people but not necessarily of the partners. I thought it was important to connect that. Well this is what it also feels like to be in a relationship. The threat is not directed toward me but is by extension, the relationship.

JH: The issue of violence is also one you connect with your spirituality in the essay, "The Buddha Loves Boundaries and Then Some." How do you reconcile these issues?

DH: Buddhism was what first helped me be in a loving relationship with my father. That's what I write about in that essay. This is not true for other people but I have never been interested in cutting off ties with my family of origin. People always ask me, "Why do you talk to these people anymore?" It has never been an option to cut off ties. I know many people do it and it's the right choice for them. My Dad is still very much an active alcoholic. If you are going to stay in relationships to sources of pain, you need spiritual help. Buddhism was the first spiritual tradition that spoke so directly to me about being in a painful relationship. It made it possible for me to be present and to know when to leave. Buddhism is so practical. It gave me tools to adjust.

I also wrote another essay on *azabaches* for the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*. In Cuban culture there is a pin of a black fist that babies are supposed to wear to warn against the evil eye, la envidia. I wrote about how the Buddhist practice of loving kindness is like an amulet for me now. I can't wear the amulet to ward off my own envidia. When I practice loving kindness it has the same impact on me now.

JH: In *A Cup of Water Under My Bed*, throughout your various journeys, you eventually end up in the Bay Area. You talk about taking the bus and the difficulty of getting off the bus in the Latino neighborhood of the Mission in San Francisco. Could you explain what you meant?

DH: Even though this book is a memoir it is not only my personal story. It's a communal memoir. The stories are about other children of immigrants as well, about working-class communities and those who take the bus all the time. When I was on the bus even though I was miles away from where I was raised on the other side of the country, I felt like I was home. I know what it's like to miss your bus stop. I felt deeply at home.

JH: What is the relevance of cities in your formation as a writer, traveler, and observer? You refer to cities at various moments in your memoir/essays—Union City, Bogotá, New York, San Francisco, Miami, for example. What place do cities hold for you? Do you have a favorite or favorites?

DH: I never thought of myself as an urban person because I never thought there was anything else for a long time. For most of my life I have lived in cities. For me cities are an innately immigrant experience. What I mean by that is that you migrate, you arrive in a foreign country and you form a chosen family. You are forced by circumstances. I think of cities in the same way. I still think of cities as places where you are going to meet people that are coming from someplace else. So, it's a very immigrant experience for me. Not San Francisco per se, but I think of the entire Bay Area as my favorite in that I felt the most at home there. My cousin said that San Francisco reminded him a lot of Bogotá in the sense that there are mountains but there is city life and the climate can change very quickly the moment you drive outside of San Francisco. That is my favorite due to the combination of the landscape and the people who have settled there. I felt very at home there.

JH: How did you feel when you heard that your memoir received a special mention for the Casa de las Américas prize in 2015?

DH: Yes, they give out several prizes and one is specifically for writing produced by Latinos in the U.S. It was an incredible honor and I felt so delighted and hopeful. I am now working on getting the book translated so that it can be accessible to a Spanish-reading audience. That helps to boost it to give a new readership.

JH: How do you identify? When do you feel American, Colombian, Latina, Colombian Cuban American, or all of the above?

DH: I pretty much feel all of them. There are no borders among them. I am all of them all of the time. I don't think of myself as straddling different cultures or having a foot in two or three worlds. I think of myself as being in one place and the different worlds are happening around me.

JH: Why do you sometimes use the term, "South American," in your memoir/essays? How do you see it as important?

DH: Because I was growing up Colombian and Cuban there was a clear distinction between the Caribbean and the experience of South America. There is also so much tension within South America from the Southern Cone of South America, from Central America, from Mexico. There are very strong attachments. I think all that is important. I don't know the Central American experience. Within my family context I know the experiences of South America and they are very distinct. For example, my Colombian tía told me all the time to not be "una india." That touches on the racial hierarchies specific to countries in South America.

JH: Where do you find a sense of community in the U.S. or in other parts of the world?

DH: I notice now that I find a sense of community wherever people are interested in the arts, social justice and issues of race. Wherever I find those people I can make a tribe anywhere.

JH: Who are some of the writers you admire now or are currently reading? Any U.S. Latina/o ones?

DH: I am currently reading Héctor Tóbar's *Translation Nation*. I am reading a lot of non-fiction because my next project is more journalism. I just read Tracy Kidder's *Mountain Beyond Mountain*, Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby*. I am reading again Herta Muller's *The Land of Green Plums*. She writes fiction, novels, but I think of them as lyric essays in a lot of ways. She is someone who

engages not only with art but issues of social justice. She grew up in Romania under the dictatorship. What did it mean for her as an artist to grow up under these conditions? I just see a lot of parallels between her work and Latin American/Latino writings.

Holding a close affinity I am so in love with this Filipino writer Oliver De la Paz's *Names above Houses*. I feel an affinity with Jennine Capó Crucet's *How to Leave Hialeah* because she has a very sassy protagonist who has grown up in the community where my parents are living now. I identify with her. Joy Castro's *Island of Bones* and her memoir have been guiding lights for me with my non-fiction.

JH: Do you think one can say there is such a thing as a Colombian literary diaspora which is different from what Gabriel García Marquez wrote, of course?

DH: I think a diaspora is beginning to happen. But I don't identify solely as a colombiana. I identify more with a Pan-Latina diaspora experience. I could not directly identify with the Chicana experience and the borderlands, for example, but I thought that JFK was the frontera, that is, picking someone up from Colombia was always an intense experience.

JH: I was very taken by your essay, "Falta," and the effects of Chagas disease on women and other disempowered people. Could you elaborate on this health issue? What are you working on now?

DH: My next book project is on Chagas disease, a neglected tropical and parasitic disease. It mainly affects people in Latin America, around seven or eight million people, though 300,000 people in the U.S. are estimated to have it. It is serious because it leads to heart failure for every one in three people who are infected but most American doctors are not trained to identify it. Yet, if they have a Latin American immigrant as a patient, Chagas disease is something that they should be tested for.

The Colombiano of Greenwich Village: Jaime Manrique

Born in Barranquilla, Colombia, in 1949, Jaime Manrique moved with his mother to Bogotá when he was seven years old, where he lived for four years. The family returned to Barranquilla and in 1966 migrated to central Florida. He received a Bachelor's degree in English literature at the University of South Florida. Manrique has published prolifically in Spanish and English since the 1970s. He earned Colombia's National Poetry Award for his first collection *Los adoradores de la luna* (1975). Among his poetry collections is *My Night with Federico García Lorca* (1995) and co-translated with Joan Larkin, *Sor Juana's Love Poems* (1997). His more well-known novels include *Latin Moon in Manhattan* (1992), *Twilight at the Equator* (1998), *Our Lives Are the Rivers* (2006), and *Cervantes Street* (2012). He earned a Latino Book Award for Best Historical Novel for *Our Lives Are the Rivers (*2007*)*. After he published his memoir *Eminent Maricones: Arenas, Lorca, Puig, and Me* (1999) he received a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has held numerous Writer-in-Residence positions. In 2009, he was bestowed with a Writer of the Caribbean honor in Cartagena, Colombia. His novels have been translated into nine languages and his poetry into five. Manrique was a Trustee of the board of PEN American Center, as well as other literary and academic organizations.

Jaime Manrique has lived most of his life in New York City with his late partner, the painter Bill Sullivan, who died in 2010. However, he has maintained strong cultural ties to Colombia by returning frequently and

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participating in literary festivals. He paints a diverse portrait of Colombia from the Caribbean coast to the Andean interior. His travels throughout the world have also informed his essays and fiction by reimagining canonical authors of the Hispanic literary tradition and recovering marginal figures in South American history. He also takes us on a journey into the caves in the Algerian countryside where Miguel de Cervantes was imprisoned in the fifteenth century as well as a trip to the remote port of Paita, Peru, where Ecuadorian freedom fighter Manuela Sáenz, Simón Bolívar's great love, spent the last twenty years of her life.

Manrique provides an alternative perspective as much in his poetry as in his fiction and memoir writing, especially with respect to his identity as a gay Latino of mixed racial heritage. He presently lives in New York City where he teaches as a Distinguished Lecturer in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages and Literatures at the City College of New York.

In spring of 2013, Jaime Manrique and I met for brunch to conduct this interview in Greenwich Village, the neighborhood in New York City where he has lived for over twenty years. He remembers the early immigrant years of his family in central Florida.

JH: Could you talk about your departure from Colombia and what you experienced? When and what motivated your family to move to the U.S.? How did you and your family view your experiences at the time?

JM: I came with my mother and later my sister joined us in Tampa. My parents had separated when I was seven. When she was forty-seven years old, my mother decided to come to the U.S. so she could support us by finding some kind of work. She had a friend in Lakeland, Florida, so that's how we went there. My mother was not formally educated. She stopped at the second grade but she could read and write. She never really learned English very well but she could understand some things. She found work taking care of old people and working in factories. That's how we moved to Tampa. I attended a Junior College in St. Petersburg, Florida, for a year and a half before I transferred to the University of South Florida. All that time I had a job working at Sears Roebuck's gas station. I had earned a scholarship in Tampa, which paid for my college education. I graduated in 1972. At the time Tampa was not a big city like it is now. There were many Cubans and, in smaller numbers, other

Hispanic communities. There was also a large black population. It was a segregated society; in terms of race, it was the deep South. The white people were called Crackers.

JH: What influenced you at the time? How do your Florida experiences differ from those in New York City where you eventually settled?

JM: I knew that I wanted to get out of Tampa. I was gay. I wanted to get away from my family because they would disapprove of my coming out of the closet. So, I started traveling to New York in the summers. Eventually, I began to go back to Colombia and stay there for six months or a year. I worked teaching English, writing about the movies, and doing book reviews for newspapers and magazines. I also worked at CIDALA, an ecumenical organization that tried to serve as a bridge between traditional religious Protestants and Catholics and the priests and pastors involved with the Theology of Liberation.

JH: When did you know that you wanted to become a writer? Who were your influences?

JM: I knew when I was twelve or thirteen that I wanted to write. I thought I was going to be a journalist because I read newspapers every day. I found out I could write when I was in middle school. My teachers would say that I wrote good compositions. There were some journalists in my father's family in Colombia, especially in the nineteenth century. I thought being a journalist would be the same as being a writer. I started writing fiction and poetry when I was fourteen and fifteen. I read Colombian writers. I also started reading the great novels of the nineteenth century: Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Flaubert, Balzac, Dickens, the Brontes, Stendhal. I'm not sure if I decided that I wanted to be a writer at that point, but I thought that writing fiction must be the most wonderful thing anybody could do.

JH: Do you remember what captured your attention about these nineteenth-century works, many of which are part of the realism literary movement?

JM: I could immerse myself in a world that was so completely different from mine. I could imagine myself being in Russia or walking on the Yorkshire Moors in *Wuthering Heights* or catching tuberculosis and dying like a hero in one of Dostoyevsky's novels. Those novels have great stories with fabulous heroes. I read these works in Spanish translation.

JH: When you talk about journalism and newspapers, I immediately think of another wonderful Colombian author … Gabriel García Márquez or Gabo. Do you hold any literary affinities with him?

JM: Yes, I do and I'm so proud of it. I adore his work. He is from the Caribbean coast like me. I started to read him when I was fourteen. In school we read *La hojarasca*. I felt culturally we were the same because we were from the same part of Colombia. Also, before I was born my parents had lived in the zona bananera where my father had banana plantations. That is where *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is set. I know that area because I visited it as a child. García Márquez wrote about a place that was very familiar to me. And the Buendía clan was like the Ardilas, my mother's family.

JH: Since you bring up different regions of Colombia, could you comment on how these geographic places reflect something about the culture and people? For example, how do you compare Barranquilla on the Caribbean coast and Bogotá in the interior?

JM: When I was seven, I moved with my mother from Barranquilla to Bogotá. We lived there for a few years. Growing up in Barranquilla and Bogotá was almost like growing up in different countries. The Spanish they speak is very different. The coastal Caribbean culture is extroverted and melodramatic. In Bogotá, people are much more reserved. I think they see the people of the coast as being semi-savages; their attitude continues to be very condescending about the costeños.

JH: Do you, yourself, identify with any particular region or are you just a sojourner traveling across various places?

JM: I like both regions of Colombia. I love the mountains, the Andes, in Bogotá. They are very beautiful and melancholic. They appeal to me because I am very melancholic. On the coast, I love the Caribbean Sea. The coastline is beautiful. Also, the culture is very Afro-influenced. People are more mestizo in the Andes. The races really mixed on the Atlantic coast. Everyone is like me, or darker, or black. White people are a minority. Bogotá is more of an indigenous influence mixed with Spaniards.

JH: Speaking of that cultural and racial hybridity, I notice that your works tend to address questions of race and ethnicity more prominently or explicitly than other Colombian authors, including Gabriel García Márquez. Would you agree?

JM: Maybe this is so because I've lived in the U.S. for so long. People are more aware of race issues here. When I was younger and wanted to bug my mother, I'd say, "I'm black." She'd respond angrily, "You are not black!" I'd retort, "I'm almost black." She would get furious! But her mother was black. I know that I'm a mestizo, having a mixture of Spanish, black and indigenous blood. Being here in the U.S. I am all that and embrace it all. My mother's family was dark. My father, who was racist, called them, "Los negros."

JH: Do you remember your maternal grandmother very much?

JM: She died not long ago. She was 103 years old. She never left her village, Barranco de Loba, which was a Palenque, a settlement of runaway slaves. Barranco de Loba is on the Magdalena River and hours away by boat from a big city. I would visit her ever year up on my way to see my grandfather when I was growing up. She was a matriarch. I met different aunts and uncles when I visited. All were racially mixed. My grandmother was very proud of her donkeys, an extremely valuable commodity because they carried water from the river and fruits and wood from the forest. I remember some African dances at night with torches. I was a kid, so I did not know exactly what was going on. When my great-grandmother (perhaps a slave, herself) died, she left my grandmother her avocado trees in the forest. When harvest time came, we would go pick the avocadoes from her trees. Everyone knew that and would respect her trees. I think that must be an African tradition, to leave someone a fruit tree in the forest.

JH: Could you discuss your transition from poet to novelist and memoir writer?

JM: It's more natural for me to write poetry than fiction. I think poetry is in my blood. For the most part I read a lot of poetry in Spanish. I still write poetry in Spanish. Every day I read poetry from the Internet and the printed word.

I think the novels are born out of a desire to address something large, something that almost certainly could not be contained in a short poem. Also, I don't write poetry every day, so writing novels keeps me busy in between the times when the poems are getting ready to hatch. However, at this point in my life, I really enjoy writing every day. I need to write constantly, so only writing novels quells that yearning. Besides, novels usually represent a titanic struggle to shape the material, the themes, my

concerns, to make the characters come to life on the page, to make them believable to me. I like that constant striving; it keeps the blood pumping in my heart.

JH: What motivated you to write your first novels, *El cadáver de papá* and *Colombian Gold*?

JM: *El cadáver de papá* is a novella I wrote while I was living in Spain in 1976. I wrote it in fifteen days. I hoped my father would read it and he'd die of a heart attack.

On the other hand, with *Colombian Gold* I was trying to strike a death-blow to the corruption of Colombian society and the government of those years—the 1970s and early 1980s. I had lived in Colombia with my lover Bill Sullivan for two years (1977–1979) and we got in trouble with the secret police, because we were charged with "disrespect of authority" (i.e., a government official in the immigration service took offense to something I said). Bill was detained. It became a scandal in the Colombian press. At the time, people were disappearing. Colombian friends had been tortured and died. The army harassed us. They would not let Bill leave Colombia. Every time he boarded the airplane, they would take him off. When I returned to New York, I told myself that I was never going back to Colombia. I think this is when I decided to start writing in English.

Writing in English was my way of rejecting Colombian society. My first book was about revenge on my father. Now it was Colombia's turn. One of my half-brothers on my father's side was involved in shady stuff, I've been told; he was shot fifty times. I never even met this brother. So, in the novel I addressed Colombian political issues of that time as people continued to be tortured and disappeared. The urban guerrilla M19 appeared for the first time in the late 1970s.

JH: In your following novels, I think you lay a foundation for a Colombian diasporic literary identity and voice in the U.S., especially with *Latin Moon in Manhattan* and *Twilight at the Equator*. Portions of those novels take place in Jackson Heights, Queens, which is also known as Little Colombia. Does this place hold any significance for you? Then or now?

JM: Mostly then. Jackson Heights was very important for me when I first came to live in New York City. I lived there one summer when I visited a friend in New York. Later, after I had moved to Manhattan,

I would go there often in the 1970s and early 80s. Visiting friends who lived there, and seeing Colombians who lived and worked in the Colombian restaurants and sold arepas on the streets, was very nostalgic for me. You could buy Colombian newspapers. It was like being in Colombia, but in the U.S. I liked that. This was not the case in Florida that had many Cubans, but had no Colombian flavor. In Jackson Heights, you felt the Colombian presence. During Colombian Independence Day, you could see Colombians everywhere. You could hear music and attend concerts. After I wrote those two books I think I had said everything I needed to say about that place and that time.

JH: In your fiction, especially in *Latin Moon in Manhattan*, you are an admirer of the moon. To me, it is reminiscent of Greek mythology.

JM: Yes, I love the way the moon appears in the poetry of Sappho, Sylvia Plath, and García Lorca. In their poetry the moon is a haunting symbol of mortality, beauty, love. And I love their poetry. I love watching the moon. In the city, it's difficult. But when I'm in the country I pay attention all the time.

JH: In your memoir *Eminent Maricones*, for which you received a Guggenheim, you pay tribute to significant authors of the Hispanic literary tradition—Argentine Manuel Puig, Spaniard Federico García Lorca, and Cuban Reinaldo Arenas. Why these authors in particular?

JM: Puig was my teacher at Columbia University in a workshop that was open to anyone in the city. Arenas was my neighbor. At one point I was asked to write a biography of García Lorca but then the small publisher went under and I was left with a bunch of pages.

Once I began to study García Lorca I saw this complicated human being—how he struggled with internalized homophobia and how much pain it cost him. When I was in Colombia we used to recite his poems but nothing of his sexual orientation was ever mentioned. I remember reading *Poet in New York* in the 1970s and then I knew that García Lorca had been a homosexual and how he had been tormented. When I started researching him, I learned more about the silence surrounding his homosexuality. The family had tried to control his image. People who tried to write about this aspect of his life were denied permission to quote him or publish his work. It was in the English-speaking world where books first began to

appear about him. There is still a lot of resistance to accepting his homosexuality. Young people don't mind as much.

JH: Speaking of *Poet in New York*, it's on exhibit here at the New York Public Library. Do you recall what you enjoyed about that particular work?

JM: I was drawn to the violence and anger in the voice. García Lorca sounded like he broke down when he wrote that book. It's all there on the page. The intensity of it all!

JH: What was it like working under Manuel Puig?

JM: He said that my writing came from "under the epidermis," and that changed my life forever. It was very important to get his approval. He liked *El cadaver de papá*. He was probably the most original person I ever met. On the one hand, he seemed very silly and playful. On the other hand, he would say profound philosophical things. He also had a gift for intimacy. When he spoke to you, for that moment, nothing else existed in the world. He would smile and you fell under his spell. It was magical. When he visited Colombia for three months, I was his host and we spent a lot of time together. He returned to New York before moving to Cuernavaca. After that, I saw him whenever he came to read in New York.

JH: Puig, himself, was an exile writer from Argentina.

JM: He never went back after he left in the 1970s when there were death threats after the publication of *The Buenos Aires Affair*.

JH: Reinaldo Arenas was your neighbor.

JM: Yes, he lived around the corner from me, when I lived on 8th Avenue and 43rd Street. We shared the same agent, Mr. Thomas Colchie. When Reinaldo got to New York, Mr. Colchie introduced us. Since Reinaldo was my neighbor, I would see him all the time. We got together for walks or he would come over. He invited me to submit work to the newspapers he published. Whenever he published a book, he would give me a signed copy. He signed very few books. At the end when he was dying, he gave me the manuscript of *Before Night Falls* and a typed copy of *The Color of Summer*. They had not been published yet. I read them before he died.

JH: Would you say that you belonged to a community of writers when you began to settle in New York?

JM: Not at first. That came later on. Through my partner, Bill Sullivan, who was a painter I met the artists he knew, among them John

Ashbery. I met many people connected to what is known as the New York School, a group of painters, poets, and composers who were friends and shared the same sensibility. The poets Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler were part of this group. There were many openings and book readings and parties and dinners. It was an extremely social period. I also became friends with *The New Yorker* critic, the legendary Pauline Kael, and she introduced me to many critics and movie directors, movie stars and film producers. This was the late 1970s and early 80s. In Colombia, in 1979, I had published a book of essays on the movies, *Confesiones de un crítico amateur*, which I had dedicated to Pauline. She was a major influence on my formation.

JH: In your novel *Our Lives Are the Rivers*, you are more preoccupied with blurring the lines between history and fiction. Why do you return to the nineteenth century in the relationship between the South American liberator Simón Bolívar and his great love, Manuela Sáenz?

JM: I was older by the time I began to write about Manuela. Fifty, I think. I could not stand writing any more autobiographical books. I love history. I was a fan of Manuela since I was a boy. It all started coming together. When I was younger we learned that Manuela was Bolívar's great love and that she was scandalous. People hated her or loved her. I did a lot of research for this project and a little traveling. For example, I visited Paita, Peru, where she died. And in 1983, I had visited Quito, Ecuador, where she was born.

The writing of the novel took six years. It went through dozens of drafts. After four years of writing, one day I found Manuela's voice, and then things got easier. I could write a hundred pages just about the process of writing that book. I had to learn so much. After I finished the novel, I felt that for the first time I was a mature novelist.

JH: Marie Arana published a historical biography of Simón Bolívar in 2013. Why are writers of the South American diaspora in the U.S. preoccupied with these nineteenth-century historical figures?

JM: I can only speak for myself. Simón Bolívar's thinking is still very alive today. He is still relevant to legions of people in Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador. Chávez claimed him as well. In those three countries, I think, still lives the legacy of Bolívar. When I visited

Peru for research on *Our Lives Are the Rivers* I told people I was writing a book about Manuela Saénz. Many did not know who she was. In Lima the taxi drivers were not aware that she had lived with Bolívar in La Magdalena, a house in the outskirts of Lima. It was only when I arrived in Piura and then in Paita, where she died, that people knew very well who she was.

JH: Since *Our Lives Are the Rivers* focuses on a female protagonist of the nineteenth century, you engage in recovering an alternative side of history. Would you agree?

JM: Yes, I do. I wanted to understand Manuela. So much has already been written about Bolívar. He appears, of course, in my novel but my focus is on her life. I was interested in her because I thought she was a very complicated historical figure. Psychological reasons also. She was illegitimate. My parents were not married either. That sense of illegitimacy is a theme I've explored in most of my fiction. The Sáenz name has a Jewish origin. They came from Germany to Spain in the fourteenth century as German Jews. When the Jews were expelled from Spain, those who stayed behind had to convert to Catholicism. I mention this because Manuela was extremely antagonistic toward the Catholic Church. It's entirely possible that her ancestry played a role in her attitudes toward the organized Catholic religion.

JH: Speaking of an alternative voice in history, you also entertain this perspective in your poetry translation. I notice this when you translate a collection of poetry by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz called *Sor Juana's Love Poems*. She is not only considered the first important female poet of Mexico, but perhaps also of the Américas. Why are you interested in her poetry?

JM: Well, she's a great poet and the most important writer Latin America produced during colonial times. I also think *El sueño* is a very great long poem. I co-translated that collection of love poems with John Larkin as a political act because I wanted to out Sor Juana. I think she was always "out" in her poetry, but most people who wrote about her thought it was not important to explore her lesbian tendencies. Most of those poems had been translated in such a way that you could not tell what they said and whether they were addressed to a man or to a woman, though in the Spanish original it's quiet clear what she means. Sor Juana could be very raunchy. So I said, "Let's do it in a way that clarifies her position." To me, it's

absolutely clear that some of her poems are love poems to women. I read Octavio Paz's great biographical book on Sor Juana. But in nearly a thousand pages he barely explores Sor Juana's attraction to women.

JH: Also, in her classic essay "Respuesta a Sor Filotea," she defends a woman's right to knowledge and learning during the colonial period in the Américas when most women had no rights at all.

JM: Sor Juana was a fierce, bold, and subtle feminist theologian. She argues her ideas with delicacy, piercing intelligence and great depth. She's one of the most remarkable people who ever lived.

JH: How has living in New York City helped you as a writer, be it inspiration or otherwise?

JM: You can say New York has been a Muse for me. I stayed here because New York gave me the best possible life I could have had as a writer. So, I never left except for short periods. I like my life in New York; it's home for me. I have friends, a bit of a social life, my job. But, I can do my writing without feeling outside pressures. If I were in Colombia, I would probably have many distractions. Here, in New York few people know me, so I'm free to do my work. Also, I can have a private life, which I treasure.

JH: What places have you traveled to that have influenced your writing? In *Cervantes Street*, you mention that you visited Algeria. What was that experience like?

JM: Visiting Algeria was mind-blowing. I was there in 2007. It was my first time in the Arab world. Again, I did not know what to expect. I knew something about the Algerian War of Independence. I had seen *The Battle of Algiers* and read Albert Camus (who was important in my development as a writer). I felt it was like going to North Korea, a place where time had stopped in the 1960s. After the French left there was a civil war for a long time and now there is some kind of dictator/president. You see everywhere these tall buildings that people began to build fifty years ago but were never finished. The poverty of the people is very palpable. And yet, there was enough left of the old Algiers where Cervantes had been a captive that I could imagine what it must have been like over five centuries ago. The casbah has not changed much, especially when you get closer to the summit. It has probably changed little since the time when Cervantes was a prisoner there. It was like traveling in time. I saw doors that were maybe a thousand years old! The casbah

is a dangerous place nowadays. I had to visit it accompanied by the former chief of police of Algiers and a bodyguard.

I also explored the Algerian countryside. I was particularly struck by the Roman ruins. There's a Roman city, Tipaza, that's still almost intact. Few tourists visit Algeria because there are terrorist groups there. We had the ruins all to ourselves. There's a well-preserved cemetery right by the sea where people were buried B.C. It's just astonishingly beautiful. Another memorable experience was visiting the cave where Cervantes hid when he tried to escape Algiers. I don't think I could have written that part of the novel had I not visited this area. Following the trail of Cervantes, I also visited Rome and Greece.

JH: Are there other travel experiences that have had an impact on you?
JM: Going to Sevilla and Córdoba to do research for *Cervantes Street* was also impactful. I should also mention a tour of La Mancha with my friend, the Spanish poet Dionisio Cañas, as my guide. I saw La Cueva de Montesinos, Las Lagunas de Ruidera. It was one of the most beautiful afternoons of my life.

Going to Paita for the Manuela Sáenz novel was like going on an extremely intense pilgrimage. I was fifty years old at that time. Bill Sullivan said to me before I left, "Most people at your age have given up on their big dreams. I think it's great that you can take on such a large project at your age." I will forever be grateful to him for those words. I flew by myself from New York to Lima and from Lima to Piura. Then, I took a taxi to Paita. You have to cross the desert before you finally arrive at the port of Paita. It's a tiny and noisy town on a polluted tiny bay. There are hundreds of motorcycles scuttling up and down its sandy streets making an infernal noise. I found a little house with a plaque on the door that said, "Manuela Sáenz Lived Here." What? I thought to myself. I traveled a thousand miles to come here and this is all there is! That was the beginning of the pilgrimage. I knocked on the door and the people who lived in the house welcomed me in. They had a guest book they asked me to sign. People who have visited from all over the world, and arrived at the house looking for Manuela, signed this guest book. From Tokyo, Argentina, India, Australia, many South American countries. I was so extremely moved. The man who presently owns the house lives in Piura. His son gave me his phone number in Piura. I called him when I returned

to the town and we met. I asked him how come there wasn't at least a statue of Manuela in Paita. He said, "People here still hate her because they consider her a loose woman who left her husband to follow Bolívar and become his mistress!"

JH: In *Cervantes Street* you also modernize the portrayal of this classic literary figure. Could you talk about what inspired you to write this novel based on a historical figure?

JM: I would take many, many pages to answer this question. I would just say that I came to Cervantes out of my love for Don Quixote. Once I became a little acquainted with Cervantes' biography, it became an all-consuming obsession. I had no choice but to write the book.

JH: I notice that Junot Díaz wrote an endorsement for *Cervantes Street*.

JM: Well, we go way back. In the acknowledgments of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, he gives me credit for being the first writer who took him seriously. I met him when he was a graduate student at Cornell. He had read my novel *Latin Moon in Manhattan* and we became friends when I went to give a talk at Cornell. I began to read his unpublished stories and provided feedback. I love Junot and admire him a great deal. He has a lot to deal with, being so famous and all that pressure.

JH: How did you become involved in the collaborations with Tatiana de la Tierra and Mariana Romo-Carmona, two important pioneer Latina lesbian writers and archivists?

JM: I admire Tatiana's poetry. She was a beautiful soul. I saw her once during one of her visits to New York and then once in the Dominican Republic. One poem I wrote is based in a story she told me. It's called "Return to the Country of My Birth." It's about her brother who was kidnapped and killed in Colombia. I was so affected by this story that I had to write a poem. I like her poetry very much. It's wild! I think she was able to write this way because she grew up and lived here in the U.S. Had she lived in Colombia, where there was absolutely no openly lesbian literary tradition, she—almost certainly—would have self-censored herself to avoid becoming a pariah.

Mariana and I have been friends for a long time, over twenty-five years. I met Mariana when I was teaching a course on Latin American gay and

lesbian writings at Eugene Lang College. At the time I had trouble finding Latin American lesbian writers in the United States. Sarah Schulman suggested that I call Mariana because she has a lesbian archive and knows about that history. I invited her to give a talk to my class. Ever since, we have been good friends. She's a thoughtful and valuable writer.

JH: What kinds of achievements and milestones do you think Latina/o gay and lesbian writers have gained since activism began in the 1970s? How have you seen things evolve and change?

JM: When I taught that course on Latin American gay and lesbian writings back in the 1980s, I applied for a grant at the New School, which is where I taught, to spend the summer doing research. The dean was very excited. When I asked around to see if anyone had taught such a course, I could not find anyone. Now I would think that almost every university in the nation has at least one course on gay and lesbian Latino/a and/or Latin American writers. It does not have that sense of novelty that it had back then.

That said, I still think that it is a predominantly heterosexist culture when it comes to recognizing the prominent and famous Latino and Latina writers. Justin Torres wrote *We the Animals* and got a lot of attention, but he's so recent. Sure, we have Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, but I don't think they receive the same attention as other Latina/o writers in the mainstream. María Irene Fornes is an important writer, but as far as I know she never dealt with her lesbianism in her work. Her feminism, yes. Her private life is well known and it is known publicly that she and Susan Sontag were lovers. Now we have Richard Blanco, of Cuban origins, who read for Obama's second inauguration at the White House. And the wonderful writer Rigoberto González. And there's a whole new crop of gay and lesbian Latina/o writers.

Many Latinos still feel uncomfortable about gay and lesbian Latinas/os. Many people in our community are conservative and homophobic. On the other hand, the white establishment still puts up resistance to gay and lesbian people of color. It's too complicated for the mainstream to deal with this phenomenon because it means the white establishment has to embrace two or even three identities of difference. It's too much work for them.

JH: In the end, your mother was accepting of you as a gay man. What about your family in Colombia?

JM: I was very shocked when I went back in 2001. When I was growing up, the relatives on my mother's side would call me, *maricón*. But some of my married cousins have had gay and lesbian children here in the United States and in Colombia. So now I'm not the only *maricón* in the family. My family has evolved with the times. They have to accept the *maricones* and the *machorras* in their midst. They cannot reject a whole new generation. I applaud this new development.

JH: In Mexico City they have a parade celebrating PRIDE. Is there something similar in Bogotá, Colombia?

JM: There's one but I hear it's small. Now you see more gay and lesbian couples in Colombia. When Bill and I left Colombia in 1980, we were the *only* gay couple that was out in the city of Bogotá. All the other gay couples were still in the closet.

JH: I know that Bill Sullivan was your life long partner. What did he mean to you?

JM: Bill was a painter and for several years a publisher. His press was called Painted Leaf. He taught me discipline. For example, when we first started living together, he would say to me, "You have to write all the time not only whenever you feel like it. You get up and you do it every day." Wherever we lived, after he set up his studio, he would create my own space to write. That was really important. He was my first reader of whatever I was working on, whatever I wrote in English. It may have been Bill's love of Manuela Sáenz that led me to write about her. He loved to read history so he would do research for me. He would go to the library and return with twenty books or so and then he would recommend what passages to read and what to skip.

He was also my number one fan. (And I was his number one fan!) He would always say, "You can do it! You are capable of wonderful things." Everybody needs a person like that. He was enormously encouraging. He traveled with me to Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador. Bill died in 2010. I'm just getting over his passing. Writing my new novel has been tough. I didn't know how to write without him.

JH: How do you balance your work schedule, teaching, advising younger writers, and the responsibility to your own writing?

JM: It's not easy. I think it's what it had to be. I don't know how it would have been any different. For a long time I wrote without

making much money. I did not have any recognition or readers to speak of. That was good, actually: nobody bothered me. I could do whatever I wanted. People did not expect anything from me. There was nobody waiting for Jaime Manrique's new book! Well, maybe there was *one* person waiting for it. [Laughs] In any case, being unknown has allowed me to write without feeling the pressures of the market.

JH: Can you share any information about this novel you are working on?

JM: It takes place in Colombia. It's about two priests in their thirties who were lovers. It's based on a real story. One of them had AIDS and decided to kill himself. The other one decided to join him. They had been lovers since they met in the seminary. So, they hired a young assassin to kill both of them. I read the story in the newspapers. That's what I am working on right now; writing about love. I wanted to try to answer the question: What does it mean to be in a relationship with another man for a long time? The novel turned out to have another dimension, a political one, of which I was unaware when I started writing it. It's been the hardest book of all to write.

JH: Do you think one can say there is such a thing as a Colombian literary diaspora in the United States? This is different from what Gabriel García Márquez wrote, of course. I am thinking of Colombian American writers like Patricia Engel and Daisy Hernández, both also from New Jersey and part of this book of interviews.

JM: There's a new generation of Colombian writers, both in the States and in Colombia, that writes about subjects, and in styles, that García Márquez never attempted. That's as it should be, of course. Literary history moves on. As for the writers you mention, I know their names but I haven't read their work yet. I look forward to it, though. The truth is I no longer try to keep up with the new and the fashionable. It's too exhausting. I don't have the energy I used to have. And there's great writing nowadays that it's done exclusively for TV or the Internet. Series like *The Sopranos* and *Madmen*, they are also part of the great writing of our time, and more thrilling—and pertinent—than most contemporary fiction.

JH: How do you view your present experiences in Colombia and the U.S.? What do you admire about each place? Where do you feel at home?

JM: New York City is my home. When I travel to other places, I'm always desperate to return to Manhattan. At this point, I have more roots here than anywhere else. I just came back from Cali and I loved it. Who knows? I might someday return to live in Colombia. When I'm there I enjoy many things about the culture, especially the warmth of the people. Well, of most of the people. But with more frequency I think, "Yeah. I could have more of that."

And New York—if you're not rich—is not such an easy place to live when you get older. Taking the subway becomes harder all the time. Rush hour is unbearable. You have to be in combat mode just not to get crushed by the mob. It would be nice someday to find a gentler place where I can retire. I love the Colombian Caribbean. So who knows!

JH: What places do you recommend to visit in Colombia if one were visiting?

JM: Barranquilla, I would not! There's nothing there. [Laughs] You know I say that just to bug people. I actually think Barranquilla is very beautiful during the months of December, January and February. It's like being in Paradise. Also, at night, when the moon comes out, the city has an embrujo; it's totally bewitching. Barranquilla becomes magical at night. That's probably also true about most places on the Caribbean.

I love going to Cartagena. It's a fascinating city; I could live in the colonial section. I'm also partial to Cali.

JH: What is the relevance of cities in your formation as a writer, traveler, and observer? Do you have a favorite city or admire any city writers?

JM: I've lived most of my life in cities. I love the London of Dickens, the Paris of Balzac, the St. Petersburg of Dostoevsky, the Moscow of Tolstoy, the Buenos Aires of Borges, the New York of Truman Capote, the Barcelona of Carmen Laforet. Need I say more?

JH: What other arts such as films, music, paintings have influenced or inspired you as a writer?

JM: Undoubtedly, the movies! I like the classic as well as many modern ones, anything in the humanist tradition. My favorite filmmaker is Satyajit Ray. He made dozens of films and not a bad one. I never

get tired of watching his Apu trilogy. There's so much wisdom and delicacy in his work. Luis Buñuel is another favorite. He made many masterpieces. In particular, I love *Los Olvidados*, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, *The Exterminating Angel*, *Tristana*, *Diary of a Chambermaid*, and there are many others.

And because of Bill, I became an art lover. Many of my poems are about painters or paintings. My style of writing could be described as painterly. It's certainly image and color-oriented.

JH: Have you seen the film *María Full of Grace* (2004)?

JM: Yes, I really enjoyed it, but many Colombians I know seem to hate it. They say it's not Colombian enough. Maybe it's not Colombian enough, but it's still a good movie.

JH: How do you identify? For example, when do you feel American, Colombian, Afro-Latino, Colombian-American or all of the above?

JM: I don't like to put labels on myself. If other people put labels on me, that's their problem. I'm first and foremost a writer. That's how I see myself.

JH: Why do you sometimes use the term, "South American," in your novels and other works? How do you see it as important?

JM: I was born in South America, so—if people ask me—it's accurate to describe myself as South American. But I've lived in the United States most of my life, so it's also accurate, and appropriate, to call myself a Latino.

JH: Thank you!

A Meditation on Parenting from Syria to Peru to the U.S.: Farid Matuk

Born and raised in Lima, Peru, until the age of six, Farid Matuk spent his formative years in Anaheim, California. His Syrian descent mother and aunt, themselves born in Arequipa, Peru, raised him in the U.S. leaving behind his Peruvian father. Matuk received a Bachelor's degree in Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine, and a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing at the University of Texas, Austin. In addition to chapbooks and contributing translations from Spanish into English to various anthologies, Matuk has published the poetry collections *My Daughter La Chola* (2013) and *This Isa Nice Neighborhood* (2010) which received honorable mention in the Arabic American Book Award, was a finalist for the Norma Farber First Book Award, and recognized in the Poetry Society of America's New American Poets Series. In 2018, his poetry collection *The Real Horse* will be published. He is also the recipient of Ford and Fulbright fellowships.

In 1998, Matuk earned a Fulbright to research at the Pablo Neruda Foundation in Santiago, Chile. This experience proved to be illuminating for two reasons. First, he was inspired in a South American nation to write his own poetry. Secondly, by being affiliated with the Foundation he attended cultural events and met Chilean poets who had never been translated into English. Suddenly, he found his vocation as a poet and translator. As his career took shape in academia, Matuk found his calling in the lyric essay and began to explore critical matters related to the past and the

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present. He makes critical inquiries about power relations, social justice for people of color, and meditates over the future of his child and the choices she will be left with in an increasingly divided and segregated society.

Farid Matuk presently lives in Tucson, Arizona, and teaches as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Arizona. He serves as poetry editor for FENCE and contributing editor for *The Volta*.

Since the spring of 2015, Farid Matuk and I began correspondence over email until we met over Skype to conduct this lively and engaging interview on September 4, 2015. He reflects on how his education made an impact on his decisions to pursue graduate school and choose the vocation of poet and educator.

JH: Could you talk about your growing up years? How did education affect your decision to become a poet?

FM: I grew up in southern California, in Anaheim. I started my education at a state school in Irvine. I did not know what I was getting into. It ended up being this wonderful undergraduate education with a lot of critical theory. I realized quickly that in Comp Lit I could think about culture, society, power, and literature all at once. So, my plan was to grow up and be like my professors because they were the first people who opened for me "a life of the mind," to use that phrase. I did not take poetry very seriously at the time. I did not know its possibilities or its range of forms and styles. Honestly, I had a very stereotypical notion of poets, that they were incredibly self-indulgent. Again, completely out of ignorance, I thought that the real intellectual thinking was happening by scholars, critical and cultural theorists.

I followed my undergraduate education very seriously until I took some graduate courses at Irvine. I felt a little disappointed by the conversations that were happening in those rooms. It seemed like a lot of intellectual posturing on the part of the students, not the faculty. So, I left. I needed to work right away because I came from a poor family. I started to teach bilingual education in an elementary school in Santa Ana, California.

JH: How did you develop an interest in poetry and the essay? Is it easy to switch between them?

FM: I earned a Fulbright Fellowship to study the architecture of Pablo Neruda's houses and the effects on his writing. I had just read *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard so I was excited about that. I learned from a mentor at Irvine who was of Chilean descent that Neruda had designed two of his houses, and had them built to his specs. So, I spent a year down there and my own institutional affiliation was with the Neruda Foundation. I just started to write poems. I was influenced by osmosis and the beauty of Neruda's work. I think what I was looking for was grounding in experience in time and space, an appreciation for being in the world. And Neruda had all of that.

I was still not sure of what poetry could do and be. There was a lot of intellectual momentum, energy, and questions from my undergraduate experiences. Fundamentally, I just wanted to think in some lyric mode but with the intellectual questions that I had developed as an undergraduate. I think what I came to learn in time through graduate school and afterwards is that the poem does not have to be a place where an argument is made but a space where certain dynamics in consciousness can be staged. By dynamics I mean competing desires, competing drives, competing identities that merge, overlap, and contest each other as they move through the world. That is how the mind works. I started to understand that lyric poetry, experimental or conditional, has the possibility to stage or to perform an experience of dynamic consciousness whereas an essay offers different possibilities. You can move through a methodical kind of reasoning. You can read a case study, make claims, and argue. So, I started to segregate the two. As time went on I learned what each form could offer and what each could not.

JH: Which writers, poets, or artists were some of your influences as you began as a poet as well as an essayist? How has that changed now?

FM: My mother had a lot of respect for education but she never finished high school. She was very adamant that I should have an encyclopedia collection. So, I would pour over those when I was little. The only book of poetry I had was a hand-me-down from my older cousin, a bicentennial poetry collection from 1976 that commemorated a traditional version of American poetry. Archibald MacLeish had a poem about a mute boy in this book that left an impression on me. In the poem nurturing is happening in a very restrained

way since the boy takes refuge from his family's mistreatment in the gardener's shed. I was excited about the psychic possibility. This kid could go and find his own space of nurturing, a male space that was also safe. I did not have my father growing up. I think the whole psychological drama of that poem seemed very attractive to me. And the fundamental thing is that I did not have an analysis or meaning, but I had an experience. But I did not start taking literature seriously until college.

I think the first book I really got excited about was *Pensée* by Blaise Pascal, the early modern French philosopher. In Comp Lit we were reading works in translation with faculty coming out of Western post-structuralism. They were really excited about French lit, German lit, and early Greek texts. I ended up developing a minor in Latin American studies and taking more Spanish courses but that was pretty secondary to my Comp Lit experience. In graduate school, they introduced me to the tradition of the observational notebook. One example is Gerard Manley Hopkins' notebooks. Hopkins was a contemplative priest, so he's blending this scientific impulse coming out of Darwin to observe and record with a spiritual intensity. There was also *The Narrow Road to the Interior* by Matsuo Basho, the haiku writer, but he is writing in this mixed form prose travel diaries and haiku. He is on a pilgrimage for a year. You are walking through the world and honing your attention to impressions that can be beyond the senses. The poet's task is to record those senses with the highest economy of language. The poet may have to be a note taker as opposed to a genius or a God. All of this was influential, especially after graduate school. Developing a writing practice and trying to follow those examples was very liberating for me.

JH: When did you begin to work as a translator? Is it primarily translating Spanish into English? Does this endeavor influence your other writings?

FM: It's just Spanish to English. I started when I was on the Fulbright. I was twenty-three. I was affiliated with the Neruda Foundation but there is also the Gabriela Mistral Foundation in Chile and at the time it was hosting a huge conference for poets under forty from all over Latin America. I attended some poetry readings and I was really impressed by the poets and excited to meet them. If I was twenty-three, they were thirty-three. They seemed all grown

up having careers as poets and making their lives as poets. There I met a Peruvian poet Rodrigo Quijano. I loved his chapbook so I started translating it. I also thought translation could be a way to slide into poetry or take a transitional step from theory and critical analysis. I also knew that some of my Comp Lit professors translated. So, I must have told myself this was an activity I was supposed to be doing.

Translation is the closest kind of reading I know how to do. I love how methodical it is. It shows me how a poem in a very stark way is a kind of system. When you alter a word in one line you might gain or lose semantic or musical value. Understanding that the poem is an ecosystem that works with meaning and music and emotional tone and theme. It became easy to see how delicate that ecosystem is through translation in a way that I could not quite see when I was trying to express my ideas or my feelings because I was too close to them. So, I think translation made me a more careful poet or a more responsible poet to all those different registers.

In my teaching, we are exploring how translation can work in a monolingual program where we cannot assume that our students have second language competency. The translator has to be responsible, conscientious and present as a curator of the work you are bringing across languages. Poets in other countries tend to have a life as pubic intellectuals that poets in the U.S. do not really have. This means translating the newspaper articles, essays, manifestos and other writings that will give the poems as much context as possible to be able to understand the poet. So, according to poet and translator Ammiel Alcalay, not only is the translator never invisible in the work they do, but they should be hyper-visible as a curator in bringing in another culture and another set of perspectives into the American literary conversation, perspectives and verse that may not be easily digested by U.S. literatures.

JH: In *This Isa Nice Neighborhood*, for which you have earned many honors, you are in dialogue with multi-media artist, Daniel Joseph Martínez. Could you elaborate on how this collection came to be? How did his artistic endeavor motivate your work?

FM: I knew of Daniel as an undergraduate in the Art Program at U.C. Irvine even though he lived in LA. He used to run a gallery for five years in downtown LA and sometimes we would go there but I never introduced myself. I got a book about his work called

The Things You See When You Are Not Holding a Grenade, a collection of essays. I was really struggling for intellectual models that were politically engaged, Latino, and coming out of urban spaces with a certain amount of political racial and ethnic conflict. My graduate career—as I said I am so grateful for the materials it gave me—but it was a traditional program in the sense that it assumed that everyone was coming from a shared set of literary and intellectual models and that all we needed to talk about was poetic craft. All the examples of literary craft would be white and depoliticized. So, I was very happy when I came across that book about Daniel's work. I read it and set it aside to write poems by blending intellectual questions about social power, racial dissent, and sex with the observational writing that I was excited about. That blend is really at the collection's heart.

JH: In your essay, "The Ungrammatical People: Minstrelsy, Love," you discuss the politics of language, especially formal English versus the vernacular, in the making of this collection. Could you elaborate?

FM: In this essay I talk about how the phrase *This Isa Nice Neighborhood* is part of a conceptual art project Daniel Joseph Martínez designed but never got to execute. In its idiosyncratically compounded verb and article the phrase conjures the correction pen. In the essay I discuss making oneself legible in standard American English so you can have social agency and legibility in normative structures without necessarily questioning those structures. That concept is very familiar to me. Right out of college I remember teaching in a violent, low-income neighborhood of first generation immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Parents brought their kids and taught them to be deferential to teachers in the sense that they wanted their kids to learn English. It did not matter if they knew Spanish, just give them English as a tool to get social power in the new country, which is almost always one of greater economic power and cultural might than the country we left. All of that is there for me in *This Isa Nice Neighborhood*, the politics of that phrase.

I also remember piling into our car when relatives from Peru would visit, all crowded and driving through Bel Air to show them what this ostentatious wealth looked like and saying, "This is a really nice

neighborhood." That pleasure, that weird, displaced pride and lack of critique I find very human and very problematic.

Many poets are interested in ambiguity or indeterminacy because it becomes an aesthetic strategy to simply carry on the modernist tradition as it played out in the U.S. or to write something other than what would end up in *The New Yorker*. They think that to write this way is making them responsible toward literary theory or helping them critique a bourgeois subject. I am interested in indeterminacy because it is a political base. How could you not be at odds with yourself? You suffer from state violence, racial, gender, and sex-based violence. *This Isa Nice Neighborhood* invokes all these things—the policing of language, the ambivalence of our desire for comfort, and the way we vocalize the phrase by projecting whatever accent we think it should carry, signaling the contingent nature of identity.

JH: Even though the departing or inspiring city is Los Angeles in this collection, you also refer to the idea of cities in connection to migrations in the poems, "Maybe Go to the Sea" or "Southside Free". Could you comment?

FM: "Maybe Go to the Sea" is part of my attempt to think through sensory impressions of Lima. I left when I was six. I did not go back until I was in my early twenties, but I still carried strong impressions of the dusty coast, the grey, foggy winters. In that poem Lima appears through these impressions and simultaneously as mediated through Spanish language television, specifically a talk variety show by Dr. Laura (de América), a program in the vein of the U.S. program *The Jerry Springer Show*. My mother and I saw a segment once about vigilante justice carried out in one of the shanty communities on the outskirts of Lima. The poem turns around that incident, but also around the experience of sensationalistic spectatorship to think about the ways that we have access to our pasts and to one another.

Also, I think about my immigrant experience holding multiple places at once that are mediated through television and memory in some kind of psychological or affective cloud. My favorite film, *Sans Soleil* (1981) by Chris Marker, is a meditation on time and different cultural relationships to death. One of the contentions of this film is that seriously entertaining the possibility of a permeable veil between life and death would be so

violent that the only response to that would be to hyper-ritualize it in order to control it in some way.

My mother never finished high school to be able to take of her mother. A long story behind that. My grandmother was a Syrian immigrant mail-order bride who did not really learn Spanish completely. When my grandfather died my mother was in her early teens, leaving her and her sisters to provide for their mother. Even with not finishing high school my mother was able to pick up some secretary skills and work as a clerk in the Ministry of Health. Her sister had a similar job at another Ministry. They were able to borrow money from another relative. They bought their own apartment and they paid the money back. They had a nanny who was taking care of me. I think there is a real racial/ethnic caste system in Peru, so being relatively fair-skinned women who could make their way into the lower-middle class in that economy, they could enjoy an ample supply of domestic labor offered by descendants of indigenous people who had migrated into the capital.

It's a long roundabout way of saying that in retrospect I look at these poems as reflections on the violence of carrying disparate places with you as part of your family stories, as part of your identity, as part of your responsibility moving through racial, gendered, and class power structures. Aside from the specific stories and circumstances that differ across the two poems, they also differ in their proximity to nostalgic and mythic modes, so that's something I find myself curious about often, how to inhabit our nostalgic and myth making modes with some degree of self-awareness.

JH: The poem, "Hollywood," dedicated to Zoila Matuk and the poem, "You're Dead, The Astronaut Corps," dedicated to Hudad Matuk are particularly moving. How did you develop these special odes? Are these relatives?

FM: Zoila was my mother and Hudad was her sister. They both raised me in Peru. As I said, they were a team who were taking care of their mother. They had bought this apartment and were living their lives just fine. My mother got pregnant with me. My father split and they never married. My grandmother died five days before I was born. My Mom and her sister as a team took care of me at that point. The custody arrangement with my father didn't go well. My father hit my mother; my earliest memory is of the brick he threw shattering one of our windows. My mother learned through

one of his relatives that he was planning to kidnap me to Venezuela where he had a job waiting for him. My father's brother was a captain in the police force, so there was this sense that she could not get protection from the police. So, my Mom and my aunt sell the apartment and move to California because their eldest sister had been living there. So, they kidnapped me preemptively and ended up settling in California. Obviously, they don't alert my father that they are taking me. So, my parents growing up were my mother and her sister.

The poet and scholar Fred Moten talks about socializing the mother function and really making it a public function. He has written about an image of Michael Brown's father grieving at the funeral for his son. Brown's father is falling to pieces but he is being touched and held up by eight women. It's interesting to think about what it means to be raised by women, each laying their distinct stakes in the feminine, doing what they have to do to get their people through and kind of inventing their own variations of gender as they go. Those two elegies try to honor the distinct ways these two women did that. They're also, at their core, expressions of grief.

JH: How have Peruvian and Syrian cultures affected you?

FM: I was raised by my mother and her sister who were born in Arequipa of two Syrian parents. By blood they were fully Syrian. But they were fully acculturated to Peru's Latino, mestizo culture. They were never expected to learn Arabic; their parents would speak to each other in Arabic if they needed to keep something private from the kids. Moreover, my grandparents were some form of Christians, orthodox Catholics. That translated easily to a Roman Catholicism. I think they were happy to assimilate. My Mom and my aunt carried a small vocabulary of Arabic with them. One of their favorite words to use was "charmuta" which means whore/prostitute. They loved their mother very much. They were tender toward her. But I think there was a sense that they were white Peruvians. I think that gave them access to have a certain relationship to the maid or the nanny in the house. They were somewhat attractive or exotic, fair-skinned women, who could type. That is very different from a very indigenous-looking woman who could type. Maybe

that gave them access to working as secretaries in administrative health.

I think I was raised by an immigrant culture that was willing to capitalize on its social capital to get what it needed to get. That was my culture. My mother and aunt had respect for Syrian culture but were not in debt to Syrian culture. So, they had this otherness that they could latch onto or capitalize. Maybe that is colonial, working their way through a colonial structure. Whether it's argentino, Ecuadorian, Colombian, or Peruvian I think that the class structure is pretty consistent but they had certain tools to help them navigate that class structure while lacking others. Being unmarried women was a real deficit and made for dangerous experiences vis-à-vis Peruvian men. My mother was seen as sexually available because she had a child out of wedlock. So, I guess I would say I was raised with the culture of colonial immigrant navigators who were resourceful about using certain tools while lacking others.

JH: Your mother and aunt were fluent in Spanish?

FM: That's right. They were educated and fluent in Spanish but my grandparents were more fluent in Arabic than they were in Spanish. My grandfather came to Peru in the early 1910s. He was a door-to-door salesperson and married a Peruvian woman and had five or six kids, started a little shop. And then his Peruvian wife died. He is in his forties and he sends away for a mail-order bride who is in her early twenties from Syria, the old country. Together they have three daughters and my mother was the youngest of those three. So, my mom and aunts were raised in a Syrian Peruvian household in Arequipa.

JH: In this collection, you also address the question of race and refer to African American celebrities such as Richard Pryor as well as public intellectuals like Cornel West. How do you dialogue with these two well-known figures?

FM: I think the initial orientation to look to those figures as sources of knowledge comes from being raised in the United States as a non-black person where black experience was commercialized. I think with hip-hop and MTV that black culture and music reached a larger audience. But then getting to college a lot of the intellectual models I had were brilliant African American studies scholars. The more research I have done the more inescapable it seems that the

black and white dynamic is foundational for understanding race and ethnicity in a lot of different countries even though there are nuances. Latinos often talk about how blackness feels different in the heritage countries than in the U.S.

JH: Returning to *This Isa Nice Neighborhood*, would you say that you are in dialogue with the poetry and/or essays by Carmen Giménez Smith in any way?

FM: I would not call it dialogue because I did not start to read Carmen's work until after *This Isa Nice Neighborhood* was written. The only book I know intimately is *Milk and Filth,* which I have taught. In the last two years I have gotten to know Carmen. We collaborated on a panel and presented at a conference in March. We are constantly texting back and forth about the politics of poetry. Both my books that I sent you were created at a time before I started to read Carmen's work. But I am happy to work with her now and to read her work. Rosa Alcalá of Spanish Iberian descent who grew up in New Jersey and Carmen and my wife, the poet Susan Briante, are all really good friends.

I think the issues about mothering, labor, and the class and work experience of our parents, in particular our mothers, in all of our cases, those concerns are really strong in our work. Just a few weeks ago, Carmen, Susan, and Rosa rented a cabin in New Mexico. They had a long weekend there and they left the babies with the fathers, who are all writers as well. A lot of our early conversations and early bonding happened around trying to understand the experiences of our mothers as transnational people, as migrants, as laborers, as people straddling languages.

I also think all of us are interested in the lyric as a space to be messy in. *Milk and Filth* is all about messiness and a critique of what it means to be in a woman's body. Frankly, I think we are just bored with derivatives of high modernism that privilege form above all else, poets whose work has no social context whatsoever. We will take whatever we can steal from modernism and post-modernism, but we are more interested in exploring social power, complicity, all while testing the possibilities of verse without being boring.

JH: In *My Daughter La Chola*, could you explain how you came up with the title? In Spanish the word *chola* varies from country/

culture to country/culture. In Mexican Spanish, it means something very different from that of Peruvian Spanish.

FM: I was talking to Carmen Giménez Smith a few years ago and she made a similar point in that the use of the word varies. I grew up hearing it purely as a derogatory statement. I can't speak with any authority about how the term is or was used in Peru, but I can say that my mother used it to refer to somebody who was country, uneducated, dirty, poor—all qualities that in this awful racialized logic are supposed to be clearly marked on the body through indigenous features and darker skin.

In terms of the specifics of the book the title references Martina Espinosa who lived in the pueblo of Los Angeles during the second half of the nineteenth century. She was known as la Chola Martina to the ranchers, *los californio*s, and to whites. I am getting all of this from Ken Gonzáles-Day's book *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935* (2006) that looks at the racial violence across California throughout that period. Gonzáles-Day writes about looking at photographic archives of racial violence and not being able to tell who is who. The specifics of those lives were erased by white archivists who were satisfied to simply label each photograph "Mexican." Also, the conventions of photographic portraiture at the time were such that a rich Californian rancher who has commissioned a photograph is dressed and posed in the same way as someone who has been condemned by kangaroo court.

I started writing these poems a few months before my daughter was born and through to about the time she turned three. The experience of looking at this child felt metaphorically like the experience of looking at these archives in the sense of wanting to see more than what's on the surface, wanting to understand who the person is. Part of this project is to reconstruct cultural memory and cultural lineage and what it meant to be Latina or Mexicana in southern California at that time while trying to be responsible to the very specific position of my blended background and to my status as a relatively recent immigrant to California and to its history. So, looking at your child and seeing who they want to become and whom they carry with them became a posture from which I needed to write those poems. Who are the child's parents and grandparents that they are carrying with them? And the child constantly listening and performing. They come with their own stuff.

My Daughter La Chola becomes a way to think about what it means to produce or reproduce certain bodies that inherit social privileges or lack of privileges by virtue of phenotypes they bear. Parenting, race, and gender become interlocked at that point. Anyway, the root of the title, the "chola," it references definitely predates lowrider culture and the youth culture that formed in response to the pressure of police violence and in response to the tensions among black, white, Latinos, and Asian immigrants in California in more recent decades.

JH: The theme of violence against men and women of color is a major concern, especially when you mention lynching in one of your epigraphs. How did you become interested in this issue?

FM: Growing up in suburban Orange County in neighborhoods that were impoverished I saw some physical violence and a lot of psychic violence manifested as various forms of isolation. My Mom and my aunt became smaller being isolated by language, being isolated by freeways, having a very difficult immigrant experience.

By the time I got to college I was curious about what white folks were protecting for themselves, what resources they were hoarding for themselves, what psychic space they are hoarding for themselves. As an undergraduate I was very lucky to have the African-American Studies scholar Lyndon W. Barrett as a mentor and friend; he was the first person to show me how to think critically about the familiar spectacle of violence visited by white folks onto black bodies. Thinking along with him I became interested in spectacle, in how images stay with people and take up residence inside of people. That goes back to the images of cities in my poems. How do certain images from other parts of your life colonize the eco-residence inside of you?

We just saw images circulated this week of the Syrian child washed up on the beach dead. And then the U.K. announces that it will open its borders to thousands of Syrian refugees without exactly saying how many. There is a way in which images can impress themselves so deeply that you can't shake them. The poetic practice of recording images in my notebook without editorializing them too much made me ask in a conscious way how images might discipline us to stay in our places and how we use images to both enact social control and to distract from other forms of social control.

JH: In your essay, "Our Children Will Go to Bed with Our Dream," you critique the U.S.'s role in policing bodies of color. You address the politics of borders in the Israel/Palestine conflict and refer to the U.S./Mexico borderlands question as well. What are your thoughts on these borders at the local and global levels?

FM: There was a time in the 1960s when there was a sense of international coalition or solidarity, a way to think about political struggle in the U.S. as linked to decolonization in other places. Maybe it was communism that was still a viable option in other countries, a kind of mobility that was more radical that organizers could have in other countries.

And now you jump to 2015 when one of the stronger tenets shared between activism and intellectual life is that one should shy from making equivalencies too easily or quickly. It's not Muslim Lives Matter, but Black Lives Matter, for example. If you want to be a conscientious thinker and activist of social justice, you respect the differences of each struggle and you don't co-opt the formulations of one struggle to represent your own.

That tension between coalition and discretion is really interesting to me and I haven't finished thinking about it. The occupation of Palestinian land and the population management strategy of separating Palestinian neighborhoods or refugee communities from one another by creating highways and sponsoring settler communities in between them is a very specific dynamic that I don't think is analogous to the militarization of the border between the U.S. and Mexico. What is consistent about both is that you can talk about corporate profiting and privatizing of border policing even though each client, Israel on the one hand and the U.S. on the other, has a specific project. The same service provider or "solution" provider can tailor the solutions for each client and profit along the way. That is the superstructure across the specificities of each border. We live in Tucson.

JH: That's what I was going to point out. You practically live on the border in Tucson.

FM: Young air force pilots train to land and take off again every day above my house. They train in airplanes that McCain wants to keep in production but the air force does not want. We see big carriers circle above our heads. Rather than see that as my neighborhood as getting policed, what I see is a reminder that my neighborhood is

> not getting bombed because of that military might. It's a kind of international awareness that is flying over my head all the time. Most people who can, choose comfort and safety first. What does it mean to be so politicized and so marginalized that one would consider using one's body as a suicide weapon?

Again, as a parent or if we are taking seriously what it means to socialize the mother function in caretaking across families or communities, I have to ask, what does it mean to be so marginalized in your community? I try to put myself in that experience in the imagination of a poet. What would it mean for my daughter twenty-five years from now to conceive becoming a suicide bomber? There is a deep visceral reaction of wanting to vomit when I think about that possibility. I think that visceral reaction comes from *not* being marginalized to that degree. To think about international borders becomes a way to think about complicity in international violence in a way while also thinking of ways to be a force of resistance inside of empire.

JH: Could you explain how you identify? When do you feel American, Peruvian, Latino, Arab American, South American or all of the above?

FM: As a poet, I am grateful for that multiplicity and that difference in my biography because it helps me be attentive to distinct senses of time, of nation, of language, etc. that could live simultaneously in your own body or consciousness. Maybe the poem is a ritual for making that simultaneity less violent.

I think identity is contextual, contingent, but no less powerful or seemingly total for that. In fact, part of what I have gained in studying Daniel Joseph Martínez's work is an awareness of language in context, which is another way to say rhetoric. Your language becomes relational, not absolute. I do think of those different identities as being activated by some context. The older I get the more suspicious or leery I am of those identities becoming social or academic capital, ways to be made legible in shorthand to reviewers or to hiring committees to editors or reading curators or conference organizers who want to diversify their projects by having folks who are easily identified by one or another category. I don't know quite what to do about that dynamic other than to write toward the complexity of my cross-cultural position. This is part of the difficulty in having

a relationship to whiteness, white letters, white culture, white country, white friends, white lovers. That may be a way to think about identity.

JH: Have you sometimes used or heard the term, "South American"? How do you see it as important?

FM: When I grew up my Mom would use the term "South American" to distinguish us from mexicano or Central Americans who were moving into the poor neighborhood we were living in Anaheim. I think she may have gone so far as to say that we were speaking Castilian and not Spanish. In my growing up it was used with the anxiety to differentiate from this context we were living in. We were living with immigrants just as poor as us but slightly darker and coming from different colonial positions. My Mom would say, "We are not that. We are not cholos and we don't speak Spanish, but Castilian." I should say that my mother really deconstructed her racism later in her life when she was isolated and on disability. Her Filipina, Mexican American and Central American co-workers would come to visit her and sit with her and bring her twelve packs of Pepsi, leave her with some money because they were socializing the mother function. So, my mother in a beautiful way unraveled some of that racism from herself toward the end of her life because she became dependent and appreciative of those relationships.

JH: Have you lived much in cities? Are you an aficionado of them? Do you have a favorite?

FM: Thinking of the current slang use of the word basic, I am very basic in my sense of romance from certain cities. I could hang out in Paris all the time. I have been lucky enough to visit it a couple of times. I have a cousin who has lived there for a long time so I have that contact. I was moved to tears. Before we had our child my wife and I traveled there and walked around the foot bridge stretching over the river by the Louvre. It is a multi-generational space. People are hanging out drinking wine and eating cheese and playing music. There are families, children, teenagers, lovers, and the sun is setting. Such a sucker, so basic.

When I was younger I would go with friends to San Francisco and hang out in the Mission. I also remember becoming aware of the peculiar sense of intimate public space one feels as a habitual bus rider when I lived in Santiago, Chile, for a year after college. And Lima is a big sprawl much like

LA, right? And there is surfing on the coast, which I love. We visited Mexico City a few years ago, but the pollution is very hard. Santiago also has some pollution because some very high mountains surround it. I did not even realize that I could see the Andes from my apartment until a certain season in the year. It was very intense there. In each of those cases, though, I love the distinct ways the cities bring people together, to see and be seen.

JH: How have your travels affected your philosophy of cities?

FM: As a very young person, I visited Portland, Oregon, to follow a girl. That was the first time I navigated public transportation and I was on my own in the city. I went to Powell's Bookstore. The first poetry book I bought was Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. I took it on the bus and read it. When I did a reading in New York I stayed at the Chelsea Hotel because other poets had stayed there. Musicians lived there as well.

When you are very young and taken out of your social routine, you can start to imagine yourself a bit differently and the romance of moving through space in a bus, and reading poetry to myself for the first time started to help me make myself into the young adult I wanted to be. It was very formative. It's not that I'm a travelogue poet or a constant traveler. But I think I developed an appreciation in how your attention gets heightened when you are out of your routine and being moved by some big machine like a bus or a train. You can see the world but not without a light dizziness.

JH: Do you have any thoughts on the writings by the Peruvian diaspora in the United States such as Daniel Alarcón, Carmen Giménez Smith, or Marie Arana, all part of this collection as well?

FM: I know Carmen and teach her work. She introduced me to the beautiful Peruvian Eduardo Chirinos just weeks before he died. We were in a group reading with him. Chirinos had lived in the U.S. for twenty years. I think it would be fascinating to read his work and the work of other diasporic Peruvian writers against the fiction and poetry that would have been around from our parents' generation. I'm thinking of texts like Alfredo Bryce Echenique's *Un mundo para Julius*, for example, that in its commitment to

critiquing class structure in Lima in the 1960s and 1970s feels so bound by its contemporary circumstance.

JH: Which writers or other artists do you admire these days?

FM: I read everything I can by Fred Moten, the poet and theorist I mentioned earlier. We started corresponding a few years ago when I found that we were both friends with Lindon Barrett. I watch every lecture of Fred's that I can find on YouTube and take notes. He's a brilliant thinker and poet who's constantly exploring what he calls the improvisational relations between people, ghosts, music, violence, and love.

JH: Where do you see contemporary poetry going? Any thoughts on U.S. Latina/o poetry?

FM: I don't know, but I can say I'm not so interested in telling a progressive or evolutionary story about any one poetry, like I'm not too interested in thinking of poetry as necessarily discovering new forms. Poets make machines for various types of pleasures (even for pleasures that are not always nice). Poems and readers who share affinities for certain pleasures find each other. I do hope, though, that U.S. Latino poetry continues to play in that broad improvisation Fred Moten talks about, to exchange broad systemic as well as idiosyncratic and esoteric ways of keeping the imagination vagrant and free.

JH: Which writers or poets are you currently reading for fun or for teaching?

FM: I'm reading everything I can get my hands on from a brilliant micropress based in Phoenix, AZ, called Cardboard House Press. Readers can (and should) visit them at http://cardboardhousepress.org. It's run by the Peruvian poet, curator and editor Giancarlo Huapaya and his American-born partner Maggie Messerschmidt. They're savvy and committed publishers who work with contemporary translators to put out bilingual Spanish/English editions of the most exciting twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry from throughout the Spanish-speaking world. At a time when publications of literary translations seem to be at an all-time low in the U.S., Giancarlo and Maggie are expanding our shelves with socially committed and formally innovative poetries from Spain and Latin America that go far beyond the big names U.S. readers tend to associate Spanish language poetry such as Vallejo, Paz, and Neruda. Through their work I'm coming to read

Nestor Perlongher, Magdalena Chocano, Kin Taniya, and many others.

JH: Could you talk a bit about *The Real Horse*?

FM: While *The Real Horse* began as a continuation of the poems I'd written for *My Daughter La Chola*, it quickly evolved, both formally and thematically.

Thematically, the first stage in that evolution was to study the work of nineteenth century stage performers of color who used their bodies to both play to and resist the racial and gendered codes that were projected onto them by white and male viewers. I wanted to expand my early questions about how my daughter would be read by various orders of power to explore case studies, as it were, of marginalized people who found a way to experience some agency.

Thinking of my culture as one that's less discreetly ethnic or national and more one of immigrant navigators moving through various colonized spaces, for example, became core to this book. In fact, the book's dedication now reads: "For a daughter, among the navigators, among the names."

From Dirty Wars in Argentina and Latvia to Listening to Music: Julie Sophia Paegle

Born in Salt Lake City in 1971, Julie Sophia Paegle was raised by an Argentine mother and a Latvian father. During her formative years, she spent many summers and several winter breaks in Buenos Aires, and in Catamarca, a northwestern Andean province of Argentina. She received both her Master of Fine Arts degree and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Poetry at the University of Utah. In addition to contributing to many anthologies and literary journals, Paegle is known for her poetry collection *torch song tango choir* (2010), selected by *Poets & Writers* as one of the premiere debuts of that year. *torch song* also won recognition in the International Latino Book Awards (Best Poetry in English), in the Utah Book Awards, and elsewhere. Her most recent book, *Twelve Clocks* (2015), has received generous reviews and has been nominated by University of Arizona Press for the Pulitzer Prize. She has also advanced work on three poetry collections: *Sky Island*, *flashmob*, *Afterthoughts for Thanatos*, and her prose/verse memoir *How We Die in the North*.

Since she was a young girl, Paegle developed an appreciation for the arts, music, literature, and the environment from her cultural heritages. Influenced by the musical talent on both sides of her family, she became interested in Argentine tango and folk music, in Latvian folk music, and in classical music. In later years, she participated in alternative musical forms such as the underground punk rock movement in Salt Lake City (1980s–90s) and considers herself a child of eighties' bands and films. Rather than

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dance and sing, she expresses herself best through poetry and, then, the essay. Paegle takes the best examples of South American literature among others to use as models to write her own *ars poetica*. While she pays homage to the memory of her Argentine and Latvian relatives through musical references in her poetry, especially during moments of political turmoil, she also resuscitates historical and political female figures like Katherine of Aragón and Eva Perón. Having lived in Alaska many years as well as traveled to many world cities such as Barcelona and Rome, Paegle claims that civilization can also be found in the natural wild. Moreover, she is deeply concerned with the future of spatial justice, be it urban or natural.

Paegle lives in the mountains of San Bernardino, California. She is Professor of English and directs the Creative Writing M.F.A. program at California State University, San Bernardino. She has served as poetry editor for *Quarterly West*, as managing editor for the Agha Shahid Ali Memorial Prize (for a poetry collection); as consulting editor for *Badlands* and other journals, and as a poet on the selection committee for the prestigious Pen West awards. She is perhaps most proud of the prize-winning collections and awards her graduate and undergraduate students have garnered over the years.

Since the spring of 2015, Paegle and I began correspondence over email until we met up for lunch consisting of delicious Argentine food and tango music to conduct this interview on September 17, 2015, in Los Angeles. She begins by remembering fondly Miraflores, Catamarca, in the Andean region of Argentina, as a child.

JH: Could you talk about your growing up years? You were born in Utah, but spent some time in Argentina? How did traveling back and forth between the U.S. and Argentina affect you?

JP: I love this question! I first visited Argentina when I was only three years old. My parents traveled with me and my newborn baby sister from LAX. They often joked that they had practically boarded the plane before they realized I was sleeping in the car. That's how crazy their international lives were. My earliest vivid memory was of shaking fireflies out of the enormous curtains that protected the courtyard in my family's retreat in Miraflores, Catamarca. A cruel goat who scared the three-year-old me away from the ranch's top dog still charges, cavorts, and head-butts his way through my nightmares. Though my family traveled widely, Miraflores and the Utah wilds will always be home for me. If I were independently wealthy,

I would move my growing family to Miraflores. I adored the foothills of the Andes, the upside-down deserts of Catamarca, riding free on horses. Ranch life still patterns my daily rhythms. But as the family started to disperse and my grandparents' generation began to fade and to pass, we spent time with them in closer proximity to medical care than the wilds of Miraflores, which remains remote and poor. I last visited Argentina in 2005, shortly before my grandmother passed. We called her Churita, and she was very dear to me. I wanted our first son, Jan Connor, to meet her; his first birthday was celebrated in Buenos Aires. Shortly after their first encounter, he started walking. I write about the strange ways in which becoming a parent utterly changed for me the familiar streets of Buenos Aires—as it changed for me almost everything—in *Twelve Clocks.*

I feel very profoundly Argentinean. Spanish and English were both early languages for me, but now my *castellano* is limited. I studied one semester at the University of Puerto Rico in Cayey, and with practice or better yet, immersion, Spanish resurfaces.

JH: Have you been to Latvia? If so, what has that experience meant to you? You end *torch song tango choir* with the poem, "Latvian Boys' Choir."

JP: Thank you for those perceptive questions. To answer them is to remember this bleak period in the country's history. When the Nazis and Soviets divided up Europe in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Latvia fell on the border separating the Nazi influence from the Soviet spheres. Hitler broke this pact in 1941 and invaded and occupied Latvia until the war's end in 1944. More than 200,000 Latvians died during this period. Having expelled the Nazis in 1944, the Russians reoccupied Latvia until after Latvian Independence and did not withdraw all its troops until 1994. The sequence of protests and rallies held by Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians beginning in 1988 contributed significantly to Latvian Independence in 1991. These rallies were collectively called the Singing Revolution for the prominent role of folk songs suppressed under the Soviets.

These folk songs have since gained global recognition thanks to the Latvian Boys' Choir, which toured the world after independence. I first

heard the choir perform in Salt Lake City in 2000, just after I accompanied my Latvian born father on his first return trip to Latvia since his family fled in 1944. After my paternal grandfather joined the Latvian Resistance, my grandmother walked from Latvia to Germany, carrying with her my two-year-old-father and his newborn sister. The family spent five years in Displaced Persons camps throughout Germany until 1950, when they immigrated to California, thanks to sponsorship from the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood. I'll never forget the boys' beatific singing, and how their voices opened the low ceiling of their Temple Square performance space, as if to the loft and arc of the Riga Dome, or of the sky.

JH: Which writers, poets, or artists have influenced you? Did you read Latin American poets of the vanguard period in the 1920s and 1930s such as César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda, and even the early Jorge Luis Borges?

JP: My earliest influences were musical. My father's Aunt Milda made her living as an opera singer in Riga even after Soviet occupation—no mean feat. Relatives on my mother's side include many who could tango, who could play the old folks songs, and who were accomplished pianists and singers (Churita and her brother Chofito especially). I love music. In fact, my cousin Paloma studied in Vienna and she is a world famous symphonic conductor. I envy them—all their wonderful, seemingly easy, musicality. I can hear when something is off key, but I have a lousy singing voice. I tried to learn tango for my *quinceañera* and ended up on crutches for a month or two afterwards. I always felt a bit of a misfit in such a talented family. I probably started dictating poetry before I could fluently read English.

Once I realized that poetry could duet with singing or partner with dance I became influenced by all kinds of books, many more than I can think here: Borges's *El Aleph*; Neruda's *Canto General*, the works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz; folk remedies (*sana, sana, colita de rana, si no sanas hoy, sanarás mañana*); love charms; old ghost stories. I first encountered L.M. Montgomery, H.G. Wells, and Edgar Rice Burroughs in my mother's Spanish editions! Roberto Juarroz, the *porteño* who wrote *Poesía vertical*, first inspired me to attempt contemporary epic poems. I love Shakespeare, Homer, and Ovid. My paternal grandmother Antonia Dinne,

at 101 years of age, is my only remaining grandparent. She introduced me to Oscar Wilde very, very early; this love in turn prepared me to read Keri Hulme's Booker Prize winning novel *The Bone People*, which since 1985 has been writing me. I thank my grandmothers for some of my early radical notions. I feel very blessed that global literature was always readily available growing up.

JH: How has that changed now?

JP: For me the biggest change came when I read *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, the great Chilean novelist. When I read that novel, I thought *this* is home. This is the part of homeless apparent in Salt Lake, Utah. This notion that the ghost is playing chess and it's all normal or agitating through your third eye. My Argentine great aunt Nanette would make pilgrimages to Aura (no kidding) ville in Africa; my Argentine uncle Jorge is a faith healer and an eco-activist and social justice advocate. And while my relatives have their own spiritualities, they are also very scientific, very realistic and quite empirical about experience. That term, magical realism, I feel is a little too tamed. When I discovered Isabel Allende, I realized I need not hide my writing any more than bumblebees should not fly simply because we don't understand how they do. I could write about the world's magic and secrecies, I could publicly praise its mysteries and miseries and all that remains unexplainable under this or that theory, but which nonetheless is. So, *The House of the Spirits* was a massive turning point. If Allende has found the courage to write about how the CIA backed coup that brought Pinochet to power in her native Chile, I can similarly write about the effects of Peronism, of World War II ethnic cleansing, on my family.

JH: In your poetry collection *torch song tango choir*, for which you have earned many honors, music in many forms (i.e. tango, torch song, choir) in the actual title becomes an important theme. How did you develop this idea?

JP: The kernel of this book was my M.F.A. thesis. The final double sonnet crown came later. But the central idea of writing about tango as a homage to my Argentine family, many of whom were near their times of passing, seized me, all the more so during visits to Argentina in 2002 and in 2000. Early poems for the book were very private. My upbringing, which in retrospect modeled one set of immigrant values (decorum, restraint, professionalism, achievement), predis-

> posed me against writing my own confessional poetry. You don't confess in art—you write stuff that earns the readers' time in some way. But I thought, "These are stories that belong to the whole family. If I don't write them down, who will?" Churita wrote voluminously before she passed, in order to preserve the family's incredible history; she also translated the original manuscript of *torch song tango choir* (then entitled *A Media Luz*) into Spanish. Her faith in the book, the loving encouragement and endorsement that accompanied her translation, were great gifts. They gave me permission to bring some version of the book to a greater life in the world than merely in the University of Utah archives (though they are brilliant archives).

In terms of the title under which the collection is published, it pays loose homage to the 1998 film *Torch Song Trilogy*, beloved by my father and me. The film eloquently expresses the struggles of fringe artists. For all our differences, fringe/experimental/radical artists share a parlance composed of poignant and signifying silences. As for the title's "choir," I have always been interested in pilgrimage sites. I am a Catholic committed to her lapse, though Pope Francis has given me new hope…mostly, I love how indigenous and "pagan" religions form the heart of living Catholicism, particularly in Utah. Mass is where you go to see all the old gods masquerading or passing as saints. I have a decades-old wish to mountain bike the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage; I've never made it to Santiago myself. I have made pilgrimages to many holy sites, churches, and cathedrals, including: the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Cathedral (a mausoleum to General San Martín, credited with having freed South America from the Spanish Empire); the great war scarred cathedral in Cologne, Germany; St. Peter's in Rome; La Cuerva, La Virgen de Catamarca; of course the incredible Sagrada Familia in Barcelona; St. John the Divine in Manhattan; the Temppeliaukio, a rock-hewn church in Helsinki; Montserrat in Catalonia, Spain…more than I can enumerate here. Most recently, I have made the pilgrimage to the Virgin of Los Angeles in Costa Rica. These days my pilgrimages are to and in wilderness sites, many aglow in pictographs and petroglyphs. A major personal goal is to remember each day as a step on life's pilgrimage; and to live each day, each hour, each moment, as fully as I possibly can.

JH: The photograph on the cover of this collection captures the essence of the tango liso that you describe as one in vogue in the 1940s and 1950s. Would you agree?

JP: The incredible Leigh McDonald got permission to use Elena Valderas F.'s photograph "The Tango Lesson" for the first book; Leigh designed both book covers. I wanted a fresh image of tango on the cover, without clichés of red and black; or of the man overpowering the woman. I wanted to partake of the tradition while broadening the notion of what the tango is—a spontaneous dance between partners composed of a vocabulary of set steps. I wanted green, shadows, bodies in motion but not the stern faces (tango is: happy feet). I also love, about the cover photograph, that one sees both the incredible elegance and virtuosity of tango alongside its smoldering eroticism and violent origins.

JH: At various moments, you refer to classic tango songs, "A media luz" and "La cumparsita." In your poem, "La Primera Nieve," you say, "La Cumparsita, most beloved of all tangos, makes of death a kind of love, a masked parade, of miseria a tango, a song—how else to survive in Buenos Aires?" Would you say the poetic voice heals its voice in the city with the melody of this musical genre?

JP: Yes, yes. Yes! Part of me wants to refute the therapeutic thrust in much academic artistic process, even as the alchemical healing in artistic process and in the best art is luminously undeniable. I've never believed that poets are somehow special, chosen people. Everybody is a special poet. I chose Cal State San Bernardino for my first tenure-line teaching gig because I love the region's gorgeous geography and its diverse peoples. This enormous physical region is even more epic and more expansive in its stories, its arts, its many very resilient voices and generous hearts. We may not all naturally express our inner voices or visions poetically but poetry is very democratic. We all speak languages(s), and language is wrought of a dance between light and sound—and that dance is itself magic. Poetry's first gift allows poets to face what scares or shames us, and to give that expression, which in turn can free us from our own worst impulses. But! But. This healing is only the first step of a lifelong-poetic practice, discipline, or privilege. Audre Lorde famously claims that "Poems Are Not Luxuries." I agree that poetry is essential; but to be able to pursue it in that way *is* enormously privileged. If we are honest with ourselves and with our cultures, if

we release our shame, if we apologize when we should and stand firm when we must, we expand our sense of possibility, which in turn lessens internalized hegemony. When we try to relinquish our own complicity in oppressive cycles, when we honor whatever privilege we have toward doing good, life-affirming work, then we become trustworthy, for ourselves, our loved ones, our communities, our ecosystem. My own families had to be censored, not only in their speech but in where they lived, in what my generation knew. When we were children, there were still very real dangers to both sides. Publishing my books has been healing for me, but even more, the fact that they can be published shows that the disease of oppression is finally waning, a sign that we are coming into better health, into a freer conversation. I am so grateful that before my grandparents passed, they all in their own voices told me, my sisters and my cousins, their versions of "This is how you got to be here." It has been profoundly healing for me. I hope other first generation Americans also receive this gift.

JH: Memory and genealogy, exemplified in the poems you dedicate to different members of your family, seem to go very well together and speak to various historical contexts, such as migrating to a new homeland. Could you comment on these themes?

JP: My adolescence passed (to the extent that it has) in the blood and the blur of most people-pleasing rebels. I itched to break decorum even as I longed for approval from authority or tradition. I'm sure I unfairly scapegoated the undeserving throughout my adolescence, described sardonically by my husband Stephen Lehigh as my donning the role of "a newly self-appointed emissary of the absolute." While rebelling was (and still is) healthy, I hope I have found more productive ways to channel my critical, observant and naming instincts. I found a real refuge in my graduate programs, which gave me hope that I could join my public and private labors. All my education—I've always been the geek in love with fragrant erasers and reverse-notation calculators. I took notes in Study Skills.

I came of age in the time of *Footloose* and *Flashdance*, so dance was in the airwaves outside the house everywhere. Yes, I wore leg-warmers through the 80s and yes, I wanted to be that great hero Kevin Bacon. My parents were legal immigrants, both hold doctorates and multiple awards in their academic professions; they modeled the importance of a life of the

mind that would contribute meaningfully to the world. Simply put, they modeled what so many immigrants do to their children: *Work harder. Keep climbing. We've given you choices; it's up to you to exercise them.*

JH: Your references to places, especially cities and particular neighborhoods, seem vital in this collection as well. Why mention Buenos Aires, Barcelona, New York City, and Los Angeles, even Hollywood? You also cite urban historian Mike Davis in one of your poems.

JP: Yes, I cite his *City of Quartz* as a homage to the growing pains of Los Angeles. While I have lived in and loved many cities, my young adult life was dedicated to finding and inhabiting the rural, or better still, the wilderness, or even perhaps the wild. We must be in touch with the wild, not only with our romanticized notions of our relationship with non-human nature, but also with the radically other, the great planet (m)other, within ourselves, and without which we cannot survive. If only we can find the wild places in ourselves as a species…perhaps we can restore and respect better the remaining wild earth.

In my late teens, I had a scientific internship based at Columbia University in Manhattan, a city I adored—my culture shock upon returning to Salt Lake still haunts me. But Salt Lake City is a wonderful place to live and raise a family. But when I was growing up there, I felt an oppressive, often fear-based provincialism (think *Footloose*). Ah, the liberation of Buenos Aires, Los Angeles, Las Vegas! Growing up and entering metropolis, the symbiosis of anonymity and acceptance, for most city dwellers, was palpable; a breeze between high rises; a warm or cold air mass walking alongside one. There is a sweet spot in metropolis population density where anonymity and acceptance flourish.

When I, at 12, first read the story of Troy, that city more famous for its fall than its flourishing, I could not stop seeing apocalypse everywhere. Cities: ancient and new, chaotic and charactered, containing within their growth and unequal prosperity, their doom. I am fascinated by that ever-present mortality.

I do not want to romanticize or commodify urban or rural poverty and blight. We too easily accept problems when we confront them daily; we too easily forget problems when we are beyond their poisons…For me cities are emblematic of the human condition, human adaptability—our greatest strength and arguably our undoing—and human mortality. I have

great love and respect for cities, but fear them mightily also. In Western as well as indigenous cultures, you see that a great city comes to its height and then: apocalypse. Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Ciudad Juárez, you can feel that underbelly of death right with daily city life.

JH: In this collection, you refer to female figures such as Katharine of Aragón and Eva Perón in history and politics. What are you trying to achieve with these references?

JP: My mother and grandmothers were such strong women, in public and at home, supporting their often more…visibly successful male relatives. The women in my family have always held their own in every frontier facing them. I think anyone who does not identify as a feminist has not just thought triply enough, right? I have always been interested in female figures who changed history, deliberately or not. I admire Katharine of Aragón. And who is not taken by Evita? My own closest relatives are the anti-*peronistas*. Some were terribly treated and tortured as threatening professionals—doctors, lawyers, mathematicians. Their suffering is unimaginable. But Evita is such a prominent figure. Before I wrote *torch song*, I'd not seen the play nor the film (though I trembled through "Don't Cry for Me Argentina," plunked by Churita on her phone-booked piano bench from a young age). *torch song* went to press, I saw *Evita*, and I immediately rued several Evita poems as hopelessly cliché.

How do cultural truths or essences court, influence or manipulate their own images? I wanted, if only in imagination, to visit the more private struggles and moments of powerful women.

JH: In *Twelve Clocks*, your poetry shifts physically and stylistically. What were you trying to accomplish in this collection? What does the title mean?

JP: This was a very structured project. The poem that gave the project the figure of the clock ("In the Dark" in the book), is a broken sonnet about a clock we inherited from my family in Buenos Aires. I remember the clock in the apartment where my grandparents, followed by my uncle and his family, have lived. The clock was intended for elaborate display in a shop window. I have always been fascinated by time, by the yawning gap between experienced and measured time. I have long felt out of sync with the industrial

world's diurnal rhythms. I want to be professional, and I feel I owe others the respect of showing up on time, but my rich (overburdened?) life means I am always late. Later than late. I am always out of synch. My biological clock dictates that my best hours are between one and three a.m. I wake up at one in the morning—that witching hour—no matter when I go to sleep and I can't go back to bed before sunrise. Daily, my whole system yawns and craves its siesta between one and three p.m.—on which fact I will blame my inarticulate answers. I feel like time is so fundamental to our experience and perspective and yet, so deeply mysterious. As an immigrant, it fascinates me—to envision a lifetime as a sojourn across the strange new continent of time.

Also, my first Bachelor's degree is in Environmental Earth Science, with a focus on Geochronology. That degree informs almost every poem in *Twelve Clocks.*

JH: In this collection, the poetic voice says, "so our city will end before your memory begins but you've always been most within the city/ that will always be/the innermost remembrance of all subsequent cities" and "so a city holds itself in all cities"? Why do you continue to meditate on the idea of cities?

JP: The story of Troy is a warning the "developed" countries must heed. How can we create a sustainable collective future? How can we build and honor a civilization largely constituted, not by war and violence, but by the delicate arts of peace—poetry, music, dance, self-affirmation, harmonious chord? How can we defend ourselves without enabling aggressors? Even Troy, which in my idealization shines with well-distributed prosperity, has always (as have pre-Soviet-occupied Latvia and pre-Dirty War Argentina) already fallen. You think of Troy, and you think Trojan Horse, you think treachery, you think destruction. We seem to only do metropolis through excess. When a baby is born we might say, "Here is your birthday and your death day." When I am in urban areas, though I love them, my bones moan this is apocalypse. These cities—cities I love, cities for which I am always grateful—are not sustainable. For me, Troy is timeless because of its mortality. Sadly, we follow more readily the Pied Pipers of its destruction than the prophets that would sustain it through restraint, which is always facilitated first

and foremost by praise of what we already have, all around us. The beauty!

JH: Do you have a favorite city or cities? Do you have model city poets, for example?

JP: Of course, I fell in love with Manhattan as so many poets do. I love the New York School. I love Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara; I have loved the Beats and San Francisco since at least thirteen years old, most especially Allen Ginsberg and the Kerouac of *Mexico City Blues.* In college, I was introduced to Louise Erdrich, whom I consider one of the greatest living poets, alongside Sherman Alexie and Junot Díaz. I absolutely adore Zadie Smith, David Mitchell, and half Maori New Zealand poet Keri Hulme (novelists who are poets all). I loved Wanda Coleman as I love the Los Angeles of my youth. I love the place on Hyperion Avenue between Sunset and Santa Monica where I learned to read (*Meet Sam*). LA will forever be magical to me as where I got the keys to that kingdom. I love Anchorage, Fairbanks, Salt Lake City and (though it's a stretch to call it a city) Castle Valley, Utah. I am learning to love all the different cities that make up this crazy stretch called the Inland Empire and the High Deserts. I love my mountain town of fewer than 200 year-round residents. And that's just in the U.S.—I could go on and on: Barcelona, San Sadurni, Rome, Helsinki, Buenos Aires, Xalapa…

JH: When you refer to characters from Greek mythology, Calliope, Cassandra, and Astyanax, you also seem to be alluding to family relationships and their complexities.

JP: Cassandra is a prophet of the near future, read simply as the consequence of the present. More importantly, Cassandra, like the muse Calliope, reads *history*, not just jingoistic fictions of the powerful, but all the silences and sacrifices inherent in epic's critique of its heroes, of its culture. Calliope, that muse of epic poetry, demands "Control yourself!" *You don't need all this excess to live on this planet.* Cassandra is that child prophet who says, "Stop, Mom and Dad, with our pillaged prosperity."

Now, I loved Homer before I became a mother, before I met my husband Steve. When our first son, Jan Connor, was born, he brought with him a roaring reminder of the exquisite preciousness of life. Just before Connor's birth, I'd been extensively studying Homer for my doctoral

qualifying exams. Gigantically pregnant, I was haunted by the baby prince Astyanax's inevitable death. I felt almost crushed by the intense responsibility of parenthood, not only in its daily labors, but also to ensure our children a future worth having.

JH: What is your literary affinity with Borges? In this collection, you dialogue with an important essay, "Borges and I," from *Dreamtigers (El hacedor)*. You also use an epigraph from the poem "Adrogué" to introduce the theme of time.

JP: Borges is a truly international writer. He deals with great questions even as his poetry celebrates daily magic. Getting stuck in traffic or losing your dog on a hike; or deciding which fork to take in a path-strewn garden; or seeing the whole world shimmering *en el sótano*. Poetry should dignify what we think of as mundane but it should also reach for what we think of as the divine.

When I first read *El aleph* in Puerto Rico (I was 18), I thought there is something so timeless and so embodied, so sensory, about Borges. Wherever he writes, I recognize as home. I never knew him, but his art is great and sustaining.

JH: You are also preoccupied with contemporary Buenos Aires and some of its challenges. For example, you mention the economic crisis at the turn of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.

JP: Yes, that recession hit my family very hard, and they were relatively insulated, able to move if necessary. Several cousins joined what global media termed an "intelligence drain," as young educated professionals fled the country from 1998 to 2002. My uncles carried currencies in different places for different street robbers to avoid being cut. Bribery and hunger eyeing each other on every block. I would like a civilization that is less barbaric and less power hungry. For me, for all college-educated lucky ducks, I hope we see luxury, not as the ability to accumulate goods and services, not, what can I buy? But rather, what am I worth? What can I do? What can my kids learn? How can I, with gratitude, begin to thank whatever deserves thanking (the earth and my family for starters) for winning this birth lottery, born with such freedoms, in such health, with so many possibilities and privileges?

JH: To what literary tradition would you say your poetry belongs?

JP: I wish I could one day claim a place in the traditions of Keri Hulme, Isabel Allende, Sherman Alexie, Heather McHugh, Amy Clampitt, Kay Ryan, Jorge Luis Borges, W.S. Merlin, John Ashbery, David Mitchell, or Carmen Giménez Smith. I think my most consistently favorite poet of the moment is Rigoberto González. I usually agree with critics who claim the most important English language novel of the century as Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. I will always carry the flame for Lucy Grealy, for Craig Arnold, for Wanda Coleman, for Agha Shahid Ali, for Mark Strand. I will always owe an enormous debt to the Creative Writing graduate programs at the University of Utah, including Karen Brennan, Jacqueline Osherow, Katherine Coles, Mark Doty, Donald Revell, Agha Shahid Ali, and Barry Weller, Tom Stillinger, Disa Gambera, and Kathryn Stockton. I will always thank Howard Horwitz for first trying to recruit me as an English major in 1990, and then trying to talk me out of it circa 1994. Forgive me, all those of you who are not named here.

JH: How do you identify? When do you feel American, Argentine, Latina, Latvian, South American or all of the above?

JP: It's such a hard question. Could I just say my identity is a work in progress? I most would like to identify not only as human, but as animal. I finally feel like I can identify as a poet; I now sense that being a poet is an attitude toward life; one of affirmation and attentiveness. I guess an identity epithet might go something like: Argentine-Latvian-Utah Girl/*Mujer del Bosque* (Woman of the Forest). Most of those terms have been given to me by family and friends who know me well. So perhaps they are relevant? Though I always feel like an imposter the moment I name myself—as if I have not fully earned the identity.

JH: Do you sometimes use the term, "South American," in your poetry or other works? How do you see it as important?

JP: I think that at least regionally, Central American influences are much more dominant here in Southern California. Also, I have spent time as a poet in Puerto Rico and in Costa Rica in ways that I have not been able to recently spend time in South America. But there is room for all the Latin Americas! What makes us unique, we can contribute to and receive from other cultures.

JH: You have described your collection in progress *How We Die in the North*, which is more prosaic poetry, as a memoir. How did this work evolve?

JP: I escaped to Alaska during my late adolescence because I had a very painful break-up. We were just kids when we met and we spent years together through adolescence and young adulthood. The tale of woe is commonplace: he left me for my best friend when she broke her engagement to his best friend. I felt I could not go on. I did not eat, I did not sleep, I spiraled into some self-destructiveness, which alarmed my patient, baffled, terrified family and my closer friends, including Gwen Holdmann. She and I had met two years earlier during my first trip to Alaska, at a summer internship at the Geophysical Institute. She was studying to be a rocket scientist by day, all the while plotting her transformation into a competitive dog musher. She stayed in Alaska and once I returned to Utah we talked on the phone frequently; she invited me to return to Alaska to help her build her cabin and run her dogs. She claimed I could not afford all this leisurely Keatsian suffering (though Keats of course, suffered infinitely more, and truly). I did not like hearing that—it was a Gwen gauntlet, thrown down. My parents were against my return north. But Gwen's tough love approach was exactly what I needed. *Get with it*. I'd wake up in my mummy bag bruised from shivering in a cabin at twenty below zero. I used a weed-burner to start a car; an axe to pour water; food to make and save body heat. I got back to essentials. Between 1994 and 2002 I spent seasons or longer there, between Gwen and my ex-husband, who prophetically foretold, "You know, it won't all be sex, snow, and poetry." Eventually, we divorced and I turned full-time to academia.

JH: Could you elaborate on eco-poetry and do you see yourself participating in this movement?

JP: My first degree was in Environmental Earth Sciences. My parents are atmospheric scientists. They believed very much in pure math and physics that I loved because they seemed like universal languages. But then…I am ashamed to admit this, but it's true…the most "othered" I have felt, was at the University of Utah as a physics major. I was the first seemingly Anglo female physics major the department remembered having, and it was challenging—my teaching assistants were trying to date me; study groups would fall silent when I approached. There was no malice at all behind it, but I just

> felt so exposed in Physics…I could not hide, and I was not smart enough to master the later material without help. So, I "retreated" into Environmental Earth Sciences, in the Geology and Geophysics department.

I'd planned to use my two Bachelor's degrees to pursue Environmental Law; specifically, I wanted to work with indigenous folks, in the Southwest and abroad, to protect their water rights and sources. But a fortuitous workshop with Mark Doty changed all that. For a long time, I felt guilty that I'd abandoned a potentially good-doing profession and my considerable (undergraduate) leisure was spent hiking, pilgrimaging, animal observing and then writing poems about it all. I'd been reared to see poetry as the stuff of luxury; as excess; as non-essential; elitist; exclusive.

Having taught poetry for close to twenty years, in all kinds of contexts, including to communities deep in economic blight, the cliché that poetry is a luxury has been revised. I still admit that certain incarnations of poetry may betray and proceed from problematic privilege. Of course, writing can indulge problematic and ultimately problematic navel gazing. And in its relationship to academia, often poetry is the stuff of luxury—but arguably so is higher education. These are among the worthiest forms of luxury. *However.* Poetry has literally saved my own life at least a half dozen times (I write about these near-death experiences in *Afterthoughts for Thanatos*). Much more importantly, though, I have seen poetry transform students from so many backgrounds, literacies, cultures, convictions, ages, classes, and ambitions, I now feel deeply that poetry is essential. Poetry restores us to our humanity, from which many have been profoundly alienated. Poetry restores us to our ability to empathize with the other, to honor the mysterious and the unknown. Poetry humbles us. Poetry alchemically transforms us, makes us better people. Poetry reminds us that there is much beauty in the world to which we are blind. Poetry calls us to love, which calls us to protecting and nourishing the creatures of the world. The wild in us eats poetry. I hope all my books include elements of praising the natural world, of considering our unsustainable civilizations.

JH: Could you comment on the status of contemporary poetry, be it in the U.S. or other traditions? Women poets? U.S. Latina/o poets? Where do you see the direction of current poetry going?

JP: Contemporary poetry is at once becoming more regional and more global; more modestly specified and thus ultimately, I hope, more

universal—not in the hegemonic sense of universal, but in the shared sense of being alive all together. In San Bernardino, in the poorer desert communities, eco-activism and by extension post-pastoral poetry, are seen as privilege. You are for the wilderness, not migrant fruit pickers. But I think that's a false dilemma. If I could tell people to read one poet, it would be Rigoberto González, whom I have never met in person, but whose poetry I have taught over the years. His work affirms the beauty of the Americas in their natural state and the way people can *be* in that natural state. I don't think he identifies as an eco-poet. But to me, that is the perfect eco-poet. I also love W.S. Merwin. He has sort of fallen out of favor, but his poem, "For the Anniversary of My Death," was one of the very early poems that memorized me on a first reading (at 18, I think).

Great artists/poets do not only appeal to their contemporary worlds, or to language itself. The great poets master their traditions, their discourses, their forms, and then they abandon them and go beyond them into the wild, they form new languages, new ways of seeing, and more generous ways of being. That place of expansive heart and open eyes and wild witness is where I think we as a species need to go. The civilized direction is into the natural wild. I really believe that with all my heart.

JH: Do you have any thoughts on the writings by the Argentine diaspora in the United States such as Julia Amante, Sergio Waisman, and in part, Carolina De Robertis? Could you consider yourself part of this group of writers?

JP: If they would have me, yes, I would be thrilled! Argentines can have this uneasy relationship with global culture; they/we can have a sense of superiority, that Buenos Aires is the most European (ergo, the implication goes, the most civilized) of Latin American cities. I think that the *porteños* at least have this real understanding of themselves as profoundly privileged, not least because privilege seems to distance the lucky from the absolute horror of the Dirty War. Arguably, the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance hold their own with Trujillo and Hitler for state sponsored atrocities committed against their own citizenries. Argentina is one potent warning. Because we are remarkably privileged materially, and remarkably impoverished spiritually. The real luxury should be the arts, the real luxury should be a future worth having.

JH: Which musicians and other artists do you admire these days? Favorite music or song?

JP: Since we are here in L.A. I have to mention this great local band, The Airborne Toxic Event, named after a phrase/character in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*. I adored their first album. I have an abiding love for Patti Smith as the Da Vinci of antinomian art; I love *M Train* as an album. As an awesome-eighties kid, I can't help but love Michael Jackson, Prince, the Eurythmics, Duran Duran, Yazz, Depeche Mode, The Cure, Madonna, Boy George, Stevie Nicks (loved Fleetwood Mac first); my favorite from the 80s of course is "white man's reggae," The Police. 90s? C+C Music Factory, Snap!, Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch (I know, I know), Throwing Muses, Dee-lite, Dead Can Dance, Green Day, Bikini Kill, The Sex Pistols, Social Distortion, The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisey, Crass, Crass, and more Crass, early Chumbawamba… Post-2000 Lady Gaga. My favorite classical composer is Mozart though Bach is a close second. I love the Catalonian band Guarana. I went through a Gypsy Kings phase (cringe). Right now discs in the car include Rodrigo y Gabriella, Bob Dylan, Mercedes Sosa, Mozart, Nina Simone, The Inland Empire Strikes Back (from Tristan Acker's band West Coast Avengers) and Swipe Out (from Bolin Jue). Both Tristan and Bolin are CSUSB M.F.A. poets. I blame my high word count on all the great music out there!

JH: What is your next project?

JP: *Sky Island*, and/or *Afterthoughts for Thanatos. Sky Island* is eco-activist in a very particular sense: it focuses on the changing fire regimes resulting from the worst drought in California's history. The book so far has no humans in it beyond the narrating voice, and even that voice attempts to attend closely and utterly, without preconceptions or assumptions, to the wild. I hope the book and my role as a regional poet might help raise awareness so that, for instance, Redlands and Palm Springs residents better meet the water use restrictions; so that protected desert lands remain protected. Lofty goals, I know, but consciousness raising is real.

JH: Any other comments you care to add?

JP: Thank you so much, Juanita, for having this terrific idea, for your careful attention to my work, your insightful and probing questions, and for inviting me to be in this mighty company. I am humbled and honored.

Writing the Chilena NuYorker Experience: Mariana Romo-Carmona

Born in Santiago, Chile, Mariana Romo-Carmona moved with her family to Hartford, Connecticut, as a teenager in the mid-1960s straddling the dual cultures of Chile and the U.S. She received a Bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, CT, and a Master of Arts degree in Spanish and Latin American Literature at City College of New York City, (CUNY). She has co-edited collections such as *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (1983), and *Queer City* (1992). In 2002, she won a Lambda Book Award for *Conversaciones: relatos por padres y madres de hijas lesbianas e hijos gay* (2001), a first collection of its kind originally written in Spanish. She has also published a novel, *Living at Night* (1997) and mixed genre collections of fiction and poetry, *Sobrevivir y Otros Complejos: Narrative Poems in Englillano* (1999, 2011) and *Speaking Like an Immigrant: A Collection* (2010). She has served as a bilingual editor of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press (1981–1985), formed part of the editorial board of *Conditions: Feminist Literary Journal* (1988–1992), and inaugurated with other activists the journalistic publication *Colorlife: The Lesbian, Gay, Two Spirit, Bisexual, People of Color* (1992–1994).

Before delving into the world of creative writing, editing, and teaching, Romo-Carmona takes us on a journey of growing up in an artistic household in Santiago, Chile, and serving as a translator for her Chilean immigrant parents in snowy Connecticut winters. She also captures the transition from early motherhood to the drastic turn of events when she

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was denied custodial rights to her only child as she developed her social and political consciousness as a Latina lesbian feminist activist fighting for the rights of LGBTQ communities of color in the U.S. These endeavors have resulted in housing her activist work at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York.

Romo-Carmona's fiction, essays, and poetry reflect a growing awareness of the South American presence in American literature and a deep connection with the LGBTQ writers of color in the U.S. and in Chile. As a collaborator and editor to numerous collections, she has established herself as a pioneer author of the literary vanguard of Latina lesbianism for over thirty years. She presently lives in New York City, where she teaches, translates, and is completing her dissertation at CUNY.

In April of 2013, Mariana Romo-Carmona and I met over lunch in her neighborhood Harlem in New York City to conduct a milestone interview on the thirtieth anniversary of the pioneer collection *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas*. She begins by remembering the early years of her family's move to the U.S.

JH: Could you talk about the departure from Chile that you and your family experienced? When did you arrive in the U.S.? How did you and your family view the U.S. at the time?

MRC: We were a family from Santiago. My parents had traveled north looking for work in 1963, painting portraits, teaching, making connections with people, until my father became a topographer in municipal works and we moved from Santiago to Calama, a city in the north in the province of Antofagasta which is next to the copper mining town of Chuquicamata. In 1965 my father traveled to the U.S. looking for a job and he found one in Connecticut. He later went back to get my mother, my sister, and me. We were able to obtain visas and come to the U.S. in 1966. It was during a time not of political upheaval but for the lower and working classes it was an ongoing struggle economically. So, we were very fortunate that my father was able to get a job first in the north of Chile and then abroad. Education was very important to them and respected, but with a family, there was no opportunity to follow a career. My parents were really auto-didactic. My father knew everything from drafting to architectural drawing to topography. Amazingly enough he got a drafting job at a company in West Hartford.

It was a very strange crossing, I would say in 1966. I was fourteen, my sister was five. At school in Calama, I had just started to learn English in the eighth grade, yet I was telling my girlfriends how exciting this was, even though we had no idea where we'd end up. They said, "Great. You get to meet The Beatles!" Once we got here it was very alienating. There was one Peruvian family who lived a couple of blocks away. We eventually learned that there was a Puerto Rican community in Hartford, which was not too far away, but not at the time that we were there. My father read and spoke enough English for work but we didn't. So, when I went to ninth grade in West Hartford, I basically had been in the U.S. for two weeks. The alienation we felt as immigrants was typical, due to the xenophobic way of thinking then. Once people realized we were from South America it became a racist issue but one that we did not know how to face.

Two weeks after we arrived there was an IQ test scheduled at school. I said that I needed a dictionary because I didn't speak English, but it was not allowed. Based on that test, the next two years of high school I was in track C for all my classes. I had no idea the tracking system existed, until I returned a book to my English teacher and asked her if she had something else I could read, and she switched me. Being the older daughter I became the translator for the family which is an anxiety-producing situation that a lot of immigrant children face. My sister learned English very quickly and she read the labels for my mother at the supermarket. I think it was an easier transition for her, since she was younger.

JH: Did your family wish to return to Chile? What was the country undergoing at the time?

MRC: What I can tell you is what it was like for us. I was very conscious that we lived in a hierarchy of the working class, the middle class and the wealthy that affected all aspects of life. No one we knew was employed very well. Most people were underemployed, scrambling, and going through patches of joblessness, getting a job and losing it. The economy was very difficult for most people who were not part of the class where you had a place to fall back on. You were really marginalized. You just hoped you did not get sick or had to go to the hospital. Resources were scarce, but the unions and the political movement connected to Salvador Allende had not really taken off at that time.

When we first encountered the New England winter, it lasted seven months. I remember that it was exciting in a lot of ways to be in a new place and learning new things. But, it was also really difficult because my mother was trapped in the house while my father went to work. There was no public transportation to speak of. She could not speak to anyone. She was a painter and very active but all of a sudden her intellectual outlets were cut off. So, she only spoke to my sister and me. My father was exhausted from work. We had never been in a situation where there were no cultural outlets. Even when you were very poor in Santiago, museums were still free. You could go somewhere. My parents had both studied in Bellas Artes for free. Even though they did not finish high school, they were able to educate themselves in Santiago. That's how things were. You could audit a class at the university without being enrolled. Naturally the library was free, and used bookshops were everywhere.

Both my parents missed Chile, but what they were planning was to do something for their children. A year later my brother was born. We have spoken about this over the years, and I understood that for them it was a journey of no return. As an adolescent I was in a kind of depressive mode. I did have a lot of nostalgia about Chile as I got older. The older I got the farther my country receded in my memory and the more impossible it was to consider returning because it was extremely expensive. Once Pinochet was the dictator, there was no way that you could consider going back. It was very dangerous. I think the love for my country and the identification with Chile was stronger and stronger as I got older. I was able to rethink certain things. At the age of fourteen you are still kind of a little kid.

JH: In your introduction to *Conversaciones: relatos de padres y madres de hijas lesbianas e hijos gay*, for which you won a Lambda Award, you mention that the civil rights movement was underway in the U.S. How did you feel about the overthrow of Salvador Allende in 1973 compared to what was happening in the U.S. in the 1960s? Was your social or political consciousness forming at the time?

MRC: Precisely. I knew that my grandfather had been a communist but then it skips a generation. My parents were not conservative but they did not see themselves as communists. But then I thought that I wanted to grow up to be a communist, of course! They were definitely left wing and political, but did not belong to a party. My consciousness as a Latin/a American and a non-white

person was forged in the late 1960s and early 1970s and as a feminist when I attended the University of Connecticut. But at the same time, I experienced a great sense of loss for my country. Even though I was only fourteen when we left, I was very aware of the class divisions in Chile. I think the class divisions affected people probably more than race but the two are connected. As I saw the difficulties that Allende's presidency was undergoing, it was heartbreaking because it was not receiving the kind of internal support that it needed. At the same time, there was so much done to work against it by the U.S. There was that collusion between the CIA and the oligarchy in Chile that sabotaged Allende's government. I remember hating Kissinger at the time, not even knowing half of what he had been responsible for.

As I got to be older the idea of writing started to emerge. This was coupled with a deep sense of alienation but also trying to find a place of writing as explaining, understanding, and making some sense of the world. It made real some of the musings that I'd only scribbled in my diary as a child, undirected angst. But I think it was that political awareness that gave direction to the projects in which I would become involved.

JH: When did you know that you wished to become a writer? How does that tie to your identity?

MRC: I think it's everything. I think I had certain points of breaking or disruption in my life. Immigration, being tracked in high school, my family's isolation—events that removed the idea that I had access to education. It was only because of my own obstinacy that I got to school. My parents did not know how the system worked so they could not help me with school. But, I remember classmates saying that everyone was applying to colleges. So, I went to the guidance counselor when I was a senior in high school, and told him I was interested in applying to the University of Connecticut. Instead, he encouraged me to apply to a community college, even though I had reached the top 5% of my class. So clearly, this was based on who I was as a South American in the U.S. He tried to discourage me and I'm sure I wasn't the only one. When I went home I told my mother that it cost ten dollars to apply and she thought it was important to do this.

Anyway, I got to the University of Connecticut, yet in my sense of disconnection I think I was always trying to get somewhere on my own. A year later I married a friend from school, a very easy-going young man whose idealism I shared. I had my son Christian (and now he and his wife have two little boys, my grandsons Jack and Charlie). But, it was a life of economic hardship, and it meant I withdrew from school for several years. I tried to make sense of what my place was as a young mother in U.S. society. There really was no place for me. I soon felt the kind of frustration that my mother had felt earlier—intellectually not being able to connect or feel nourished. I think it delayed my ability to really develop myself as a writer. It was not until after the loss of my son in my divorce that I began to work with feminist writers, people of color, and lesbians. I felt committed to writing but mostly for political reasons, creating a space for people of color to write, creating a space for Latina lesbians to write. I did not devote myself at first as a creative writer, but as a political writer.

JH: I find it quite interesting that we meet and conduct this interview on the thirtieth anniversary of *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* which was published in 1983. A milestone! How do you feel being one of the pioneer co-editors of this anthology? In the introduction, the editors speak of creating a space for Latina writers in the U.S. As we know the 1980s was a watershed decade for several Latina writers emerging. I see that Helena María Viramontes also contributed to this collection.

MRC: At that time there were very few Latin American writers writing in Spanish or English in the U.S. but there was a growing number of Latinas writing short stories whose work consciously identified with a Latino community. Kitchen Table Press was just publishing the first anthologies by African American and women of color writers (*Home Girls*, *This Bridge*, *Zami*) and *Cuentos* was next in the continuum. When the book first came out, it was a bridge. It was a way to create a space that was more solid for writers that had not existed. Also, we decided we would write in English and Spanish, would not italicize or put Spanish words in quotes within an English text. It was an experiment to let the reader receive the texts with a glossary. I identified as a Latina writer even though my writing did not come out as Latina. The story in *Cuentos* is about Chile. And the next story in *Compañeras* is about Chile, too. The location and setting in my writing is

about Chile. However, I identify as a Latina writer because that is where our community was. See *The Telling of Cuentos* by Ibis Gómez-Vega.

JH: Which pioneer writers, Latina lesbians or otherwise, did you connect with at the time? Tatiana de la Tierra? What kinds of collaborations did you have with them? I wish I could have met Tatiana who passed away in 2012.

MRC: I think I connected more with Gloria Anzaldúa, politically and artistically, and her friendship was very dear to me. She was more central to my own writing as a mixed-genre writer because she combined poetry and fiction. Sometimes I thought my writing was not going anywhere. But, when I looked at her writing, I thought it was possible to break traditional forms and conventions. I also connected with Audre Lorde who was one of the founders of the press and very crucial for me. Audre let me into her process as a writer and we connected as mothers—she encouraged us with *Cuentos* and worked with me when I produced *A Comrade Is as Precious as a Rice Seedling*, by Mila Aguilar.

I met Tatiana de la Tierra in the 1980s. I thought about my younger sister, Claudia, who died before she was fifty, because they were closer in age. My sister was born in 1960 and Tatiana was born in 1961. I had a very sisterly and supportive friendship with Tatiana. I think of her as belonging to a younger generation after the previous one to which I belong. She broke ground with a lot of different things, especially in her erotic work. The way that she made room to write about sex was integral to her writing, and she created new forms. She also founded the magazine *Esto no tiene nombre* (1991–1994) which is incredibly significant. She was connecting with Latina writers and artists in Miami which had not been done before in that way. She put in *un eslabón*, another link in the chain. Very, very significant. I reviewed her book *Para las duras* (2002) for a literary review and I also wrote an introduction for Anel Flores' book, *Empanada*, where I mention Tatiana's work as a leader of a generation where their agency is erotic, self-defining, and not confined by gender roles. Consider for example, Joan Nestle who has written about the femme identity when the only other option was the butch identity in the 1950s. We talk about that in the collection *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians* edited by Juanita Ramos. Well, here are women like Tatiana who redefined themselves in a strong and independent way. They are taking control of their

voices and their bodies. Through Juanita Ramos, Tatiana and I met in New York City and then, we all met up in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in 1987 at the First Latin American and Caribbean Lesbian Encuentro.

JH: In *Speaking Like an Immigrant* you represent specifically a South American identity in your short fiction. Could you elaborate further on what that entails? It seems quite different from Caribbean and Central American identities in the U.S., for instance. Actually, you use this term throughout several of your works.

MRC: Being a Latina lesbian, it was very important to identify where the Latina lesbian feminist discourse was in the U.S. I was very aware of my connections with Puerto Rican lesbians and how their community was a lifeline for me as a South American lesbian, a Chilean lesbian. That connection was illuminating and positive. But it also demonstrated how national and political divisions could be so damaging. Outside of a political community, the rest of my experience was such that there was a disconnection between Latino ethnic groups. For example, you had Cubans and Dominicans being at odds with each other up until the late 1990s when there are other Latino groups coming in. By that time Dominicans had completely redefined New York. On the West Coast, salvadoreños were making their presence strong along with Chicanos. But while there is a vibrant collaboration, racist policies against immigrants and undocumented create animosity and limit resources, as we know. What that does for children, for example, is that it adds one more oppression to your sense of self, one more reason for alienation, of being divided or not being wanted, of being excluded because you don't talk like the other Latinos, you don't look like the other Latinos. Rather than having a positive encounter with another group, it comes as a source of conflict. You end up losing parts of yourself rather than enriching yourself. My work is about repairing those rifts, even in small ways.

For example, in the late 1970s when I became politically active, I started a radio program in Spanish as part of feminist programming on WHUS at UConn, that had a Latina-lesbian-feminist perspective and was very inclusive. I was very connected to the Puerto Rican community but I also noticed that we had differences such as certain words we use in

Spanish. To avoid any misunderstanding, I would not use as many South American expressions in Spanish. So, one may end up losing a bit of oneself in the process. In order not to forget who I am, I wanted to express that South American identity of being Latina through Spanish in my writing, not in a conflicting way but rather in an assertive manner.

JH: Why was there a second edition written? How do they differ?

MRC: When the first edition was published, it was not a finished product in a sense. It was finished but I felt that it needed revision, more substance. I still feel that it is unbalanced. I think I would have liked to have a more equal distribution of English and Spanish. But that is also a representation of what was happening at the time so that is valid as well.

JH: In this same collection you develop characters with Chilean, Ecuadorian, and Peruvian backgrounds. I have not seen too many of these characters mentioned by these particular nationalities in American literature in English. What motivated you to include them?

MRC: When I was talking about the discourse, where the Latino discourse is, I think it varies, it shifts, and one has to recognize it. In the 1990s when I was writing *Living at Night* it was clear to me that the protagonist would be Puerto Rican because that is the predominant group in the 1970s in Connecticut. If you wanted to know where the prevalent Latinidad was, it was Puerto Ricans. I felt it was important to represent that. Erica García is a Puerto Rican lesbian and she is working-class. She represents part of the Puerto Rican diaspora. It's part of a sociopolitical consciousness, but it also emerges unconsciously as a writer.

The collection came after *Living at Night,* so it is more contemporary and represents my experience of New York City. South American characters represent the writers, workers, artists, who have been part of New York for a long time—Mistral, Parra, Valenzuela, Roffé, Barrientos, —in the 1980s, during the most repressive periods, many exiled South Americans lived in the Elmhurst area of Queens, from Argentina, Chile, Perú, Uruguay, Colombia. Also the old Upper West Side of Manhattan, Harlem, El Barrio, Washington Heights, these are places where communities are still very diverse.

JH: At the same time, you refer to specific streets and neighborhoods in *Speaking Like an Immigrant,* especially in New York City and Santiago. Do you consider yourself an urban writer as well?

MRC: I am glad that you mention that now and in your email. As a writer, one really does not become conscious of the landscape of imagery until afterwards. It is a reflection of the experiences of how a particular setting can do justice or express what you need to express. I have lived in New York more permanently since July 1984. But I would say that I became a New Yorker the moment I got here in 1981. I started coming to New York from Boston when Kitchen Table Press was founded. I would come once a month to meet with the press members because everyone else was already in New York and I lived in Boston.

When I came out as a lesbian, I lost custody of my son. I write about this in *Compañeras.* I lived near my ex-husband and his wife to be near my son for several years but when they moved to Massachusetts, I moved to Boston to be near my son. I was still fighting in the courts to see him on a regular basis and was not allowed to bring him home for weekends or holidays for fear I might expose him to LGBT people and activities. So I could only see him during the day. After my son turned ten, I needed to get a better job. I moved to New York City to work and be able to travel to see my son. When he was nineteen, my son left his father's house and lived with my partner and me for two years. In 2000, I realized that my son was a young man and he was finally safe, able to make his own future.

Even though I was very active in terms of civil rights, working with Latina lesbians and gay Latinos, I still was not able to bring what was happening to my own family into a public discourse. We kind of skipped over that whole era when children were taken away from lesbians routinely to a time when marriage equality became a priority. I'm kind of an anarchist-Marxist about that: universal health care and abolish marriage hierarchy! I am glad that the landscape has changed enough that things are not so hard anymore. But there was no room for that particular struggle. So painful for me.

JH: Do you feel an affinity with any neighborhood or have a sense of community here in New York City? What has made you remain here and not move to a quieter place, for instance?

MRC: I think that I was very fortunate that I met my life partner and spouse, June, while I was working with Kitchen Table Press here in New York. Both of us were doing the same kind of work. She is an Asian American lesbian and I am a Latina lesbian. She was born and raised in New York City like her younger siblings. It is a large New York Chinese family. When I moved to New York, she brought me home to live with them. That became my second family and it was a peaceful, enjoyable time. We lived in Chinatown, in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and I remember that was the first neighborhood where I really became comfortable. It was also a Latino area. Even though I was a light-skinned Latina and did not look like a "typical" Latina, it was a joy to be recognized and have people speak in Spanish to me. I started connecting with the Latino community. I was home and that was amazing. In 1988 June and I were fortunate enough to find housing here in Harlem. In the 1970s this neighborhood had gone through the wars and had not received support from the city. Gentrification was in motion.

JH: Speaking of the city and LGBTQ identity, you co-edited a collection called *Queer City* with Harold Robinson, Ira Silverberg, and Jacqueline Woodson. How did this project emerge?

MRC: That project was part of a collection called *The Lower Eastside*. They would invite guest editors to produce an issue. I am glad we did this. You don't see *The New Yorker* put out a Latino issue, or a Queer issue, which would look like ghettoizing writers—on the other hand, I recently heard Junot Díaz talk about how *New Yorker* editors wanted to italicize Spanish in his English text—thirty years after *Cuentos*! At any rate, in 1992 it made sense putting out this kind of issue in *The Lower Eastside* series. It changes the perception of who writes, who speaks, who reads. Since then, there has been a lot of important urban gay writing that is defining and setting the pace. It was a great experience to do that. The same thing happened in *Conditions*, which had produced *Conditions 5: the Black Women's Issue* in the 1980s, and eventually the editorial board changed to be very diverse in terms of race as well as age and life experience. I was invited to be part of the board by Cheryl Clarke, who had previously asked me to translate some poetry into English.

JH: Who have been your influences in your English and Spanish writings?

MRC: I think primarily of American writers like James Baldwin. His prose is beautiful, provocative and it makes you work. I think Cortázar does that in Spanish. African American writers and modernist poets in English have been important to me, from William Carlos Williams to Audre Lorde. Unlike most people, I do not like Faulkner. In Spanish, José Donoso, Marta Brunet, Borges, Cristina Peri Rossi, Bolaño, and I love Lina Meruane. In English, Jacqueline Woodson, Agha Shahid Ali, Alexander Chee.

JH: You mentioned that you had some pauses in your writing because you were involved in social activism. Could you discuss the activism you have been involved in?

MRC: It was about changing the status quo in several spheres. For example, founding magazines like *Colorlife!* LGBT people of color, including Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans created a critical journalistic body that could speak at a time when people of color were excluded in the gay community in New York City. That was the point—establish a journal where people could write editorials and what was happening. This was in 1992. The spirit of it had been coming from the 1980s but the other part of it was to establish a physical space, for example the Lesbian and Gay Center, and the Pride March that could attract people of color. It was important to march and be seen.

Compared to *Cuentos* where we were trying to create a literary space, I worked with a group of women who were concerned with creating a space for people to exist, to have a place where a Latina or Latin American can go and be with a community and not feel alienated, not feel like she did not exist. It takes an ongoing kind of activism—creating spaces.

I also supported legislation that could make changes and, initially, that could improve the quality of lives for LGBT people of color. I began this work from 1983 until the mid-1990s when I focused more on writing and teaching. Now I consider myself a retired activist but in my teaching I consider education a form of activism.

JH: In your introduction to *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians* edited by Juanita Ramos, it reads like a manifesto very similar to the introduction of *This Bridge Called My Back* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. Would you agree?

MRC: You know that is interesting. You are right. It is a kind of manifesto! When I was writing that introduction, I was not only writing it for a book by Juanita Ramos but I was also giving insight into the work that she had done in terms of documentation of community. I remember that it was very necessary to show many aspects of the lives of Latina lesbians. It's not just one way of looking at identity. It's broad and all-encompassing. That was my contribution. I enjoyed that. In showing something that I thought was a very existential aspect, I think it was important for me to write about the fact that we are formed in our families and it is they who shape us. We are all of our families. We are not separated. They are part of us.

JH: What achievements and setbacks do you see in your activism that brought social justice to the forefront for people of color, multiethnic America, gay, and lesbian rights?

MRC: One aspect is about the networks writing creates. In 1980 when I had just moved to Boston, when several black women had been murdered, I met Barbara Smith who was part of the Combahee River Collective, the group who brought visibility to the violence. She connected me to Felice Newman and Frédérique Delacoste who started Cleis Press in San Francisco. Felice and I started a correspondence and I submitted a piece to an anthology that they were compiling called *Fight Back! Feminist Resistance to Male Oppression*. I remember writing about the violence against women in urban areas, and the need for solidarity. My thought was that "the struggle belongs to those who recognize it exists". Our correspondence lasted several years talking about these issues. At the time I had been working at The Massachusetts Coalition of Battered Women Groups doing public education. I think that it shaped my consciousness about that sense of responsibility, about working to educate the courts and the police departments to be aware of domestic violence and how it affected women and children. Even if it was a small gesture, the idea of community education was to ask, *What am I going to do to change something?*

JH: Likewise, in *Conversaciones: relatos de padres y madres de hijas lesbianas e hijos gay*, you detail the urgency in your introduction to open avenues of communication regarding homophobia between the generations. How did this project come about?

MRC: Felice Newman, from Cleis, asked me about taking it on. I wanted to contribute to this project because this was going to be in Spanish. Unfortunately, it's the kind of project that you need way more money just for traveling to do interviews and the time it takes to transcribe and edit them. It should have had a much broader scope, but I did the compilation almost entirely by word of mouth. I think this particular collection had much to do with immigration because a new generation of queer Latina/o (and Latin American and Chicana/o) people was coming of age to immigrant families as well as Americans of Hispanic descent. It had to be in Spanish because it makes a connection with all the parents. Unfortunately, Cleis Press does not distribute very widely, but the book is getting read outside the U.S. through blogs and so forth.

JH: In *Sobrevivir y otros complejos: Narrative Poems in Englillano*, you deliberately cross languages, cultures and break all kinds of barriers forming a hybrid poetic persona. Even in the word "Englillano," you play with the word "castellano" which is a term used in South America more so than "español." What goals did you have in mind with this collection?

MRC: I wanted to write a book that came from a very deep place intellectually and personally. They are not fun poems, nor erotic poems to perform at a poetry reading. They are not in-your-face activism. They are not celebratory poems. The form is really informed by the content and the content is about existential points of connection. I think we don't change unless we make a compromise. Between an intellectual process and an existence there is a meeting point, a flash. I was trying to figure this out in my writing. I think this has to do with living and surviving. I am asking why am I living, how am I able to do this, what is the meaning, and how long can I do this for? All of those questions.

JH: Why did you choose the title of surviving in this collection?

MRC: For me the experiences that have affected me deeply are losing my son, and how immigration had a deleterious effect on my family. That's another reason to write about surviving. Going back in 1996, I recovered a part of me in Chile that was really important. I have written two novels since that I have not published, one in Spanish that has a lot to do with immigration, exile,

and homophobia, and the other in English about U.S. Latina/o identities. That was transforming, that journey going back. It was something that I needed to do to find out who I am.

I think teaching has been less intense and less acute. Recognizing myself as a teacher has given me a balance. In terms of returning to school for graduate work, I have discovered the value of scholarship and how teaching is part of that. When you are that kind of a person, a person who teaches, it is very close to a person who writes. I think it's a cool identity to have!

JH: Do you travel and what places have affected you?

MRC: Not so much anymore. When my spouse and I used to go to conferences, we made a point of traveling. I think in 2000 we visited Italy which was wonderful. We went to Barcelona a couple of times. One time to promote *Sobrevivir* and the other time to promote a collection of poems *La muchacha de los ojos tristes* by a Barcelonian poet that I translated into English. We were there for the Sant Jordi Book Festival. It's a book party, really, in Barcelona where thousands and thousands of people are buying books. It's the most amazing thing. We went for that and we got to travel around. Any place I get to go by the ocean is life-changing and just really fulfills me in a way that a city cannot. June and I have talked about how we really need to live in a city that is near the water because otherwise, we feel cut off from the rest of the world.

JH: What is your current relationship with Chile or South America in general?

MRC: I think it's becoming closer again because of the work that I am doing. I am reading Latin American literature and going further into the twenty-first century in a deeper way. Also, I have started to research scholarly work on surrealism and poetry in Chile in the 1930s. I am reading the work of Carlos de Rokha who was actually my cousin. His father, the poet Pablo de Rokha, was my great uncle, who committed suicide in 1968. Two of his sons were also poets. Carlos, who was born in 1920, committed suicide in 1962 and his brother Pablo killed himself in 1968. I want to recover some of that work. It's more than likely that the two brothers were gay. I am especially writing about Carlos

because he lived during a time of great artistic innovation, political activity and state repression. There were a lot of progressive changes in Chile in the 1930s and at the same time, persecution and repression of homosexuals. The other poet I'm reading is Mahfoud Massís, Chilean son of Palestinian immigrants.

JH: How did you find out about these poets who seem somewhat obscure?

MRC: In part, through family history. Pablo de Rokha was a contemporary of Vicente Huidobro and Pablo Neruda. He went into obscurity for a very long time. He has been rediscovered and there are now scholarly articles about his work that are phenomenal and quite extensive all over the world. But the poetry of his son Carlos, the one who died in 1962, is completely surrealist in nature, but not reviewed critically at all. It's fascinating to me. Of course, I feel a deep connection. It also brings me to a connection with other gay writers who have committed suicide and trying to understand living at that time with that reality of repression.

In particular, if we look at the rise of fascism in the 1930s there are currents that are emerging in Latin America, yet one finds a strong progressive strain politically, such as the Frente Popular in 1938. On the one hand, one speaks of liberation of the working class. Women make great strides. But at the same time, there are sharp political divisions and it is the right wing that establishes its power.

JH: Are you taking other arts into consideration during this period of surrealism?

MRC: In my research, I have to consider the circles of creative people who were part of that family group that included my grandfather, the painter José Romo (Pablo de Rokha's brother-in-law), both my parents, Juan José Romo and Adriana Carmona de Romo, and several others. It was really important to understand the writers because up until the time that I started to read Carlos's work there was no other writer in my family of my generation. Now I have met another cousin, Verónica Tagle de Rokha. In terms of understanding and visualizing what the connections are, the writers and the painters seem to hang out together. In this case, they most certainly did.

JH: This is also the period of the Latin American vanguard in the 1920s and 1930s when important poets such as the Peruvian César Vallejo and Chilean Pablo Neruda among others also became known.

MRC: In fact, during the vanguardia, Latin American surrealism came after European surrealism, and broadened and developed its own strains. Carlos was part of the Chilean surrealist group called *La Mandrágora*.

JH: What do you think of Chilean novelist María Luisa Bombal who is also erotic, surreal, and poetic in the language of her fiction and published during this time in the 1930s but never received credit like her male contemporaries?

MRC: Phenomenal. Her work was a departure for women novelists in her portrayals of women, mostly upper class. Marta Brunet broke through in her characterization of rural and working class women. I am also reading the Cuban novelist, Ena Lucía Portela, and the Catalonian writer Esther Tusquets. Portela's narratives have so many alternatives. It's not calcified at all.

JH: What writers do you read for pleasure these days?

MRC: The strange thing is that I find it difficult to read fiction in English because I become impatient—it lacks relevance for me, at least for now. So I read much more in Spanish, from Alejandra Pizarnik and Pedro Lemebel to Diamela Eltit, Lina Meruane, Juan José Saer, Ricardo Piglia, Daniel Sada, Roberto Bolaño—and translations of Brazilian writers João Guimarães Rosa, Nélida Piñón, Machado de Assis. But I'm not really up to date, because there is not enough time. You have to read and reread to teach, as well!

JH: Which of the arts inspire you as a writer and as a human being?

MRC: Interestingly enough, primarily painting and the visual arts are probably closer to me because of the family connection, but sometimes, in terms of what I connect with on a craft level I would say film. This is the other part of the dialogue that I have with narrative. I had the opportunity to study with film and television critical author, Paul Julian Smith here at the Graduate Center, and his introduction to such films as *Mil nubes de paz* and *Voy a explotar*, by Mexican filmmakers, opened up another way to tell a story.

Through a film festival curator I was able to see *The Battle of Chile* many years ago. That kind of filmmaking and documentary narrative shifts what we think of as history and fiction. An old film by Antonioni based on a story by Cortázar, "Las babas del diablo," was a way of cutting distances, artificial distances of existence, a theme that has always felt provocative to me. More recently, the film *Tres instantes: un grito*, by Cecilia Barriga that she did on social protest was very revealing about the power of voices, the way we cut through barriers with communication. Even as a very poor student of film, I think film shifted narrative in my life, or perhaps, film has rewritten narrative.

JH: Do you see differences between exile and immigrant experiences?

MRC: I think they are both the same. I connect with the work of Cristina Peri Rossi when she was an exile from Uruguay in Barcelona. More than exile, I would say I look at it in terms of *destierro*. That is the same as what Gabriela Mistral, Chilean poet who won the Nobel Prize, experienced because she was a lesbian. It's a long way to getting to that core, homophobia. Loss of self. I see a kind of ache, longing, and pain.

JH: What I am hearing is that the writers from Latin America seem to be as important as those from the U.S. or Spain. Can we speak perhaps of a Chilean American or even South American Latina identity in the U.S.?

MRC: Perhaps a Pan-Latin American sensibility. Bolaño's work has certainly changed twenty-first-century narrative, and he also had a huge impact by becoming so identified with Barcelona—so, what are the limits of being Latin American? I think it is a positive step to move away from nationalist definitions—or limitations. I think I was trying to understand how that could be in the book *Sobrevivir*. That is why I have part of the title as *Englillano*. That is why I have chileno-riqueña or nuyorkchilena or chilena nuyorker as an identity. I think there is that urban connection between New York and Santiago for me that would make sense. But I also lived in the semi-rural area of the U.S. Perhaps I have a typical way of going in the other direction. Even though it's easier to imagine an immigrant in the U.S. in an urban setting, there are the unknown others who pass unnoticed in the rural environment.

JH: Why was it important to donate your activism work to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn? When did you do this?

MRC: Both June and I donated our papers to the LHA in the early nineties. When Asian American Lesbians of the East Coast started in 1983, they went to the Archives and found almost nothing about Asian American lesbians. They changed all that. The same was true for Latinas. *Las Buenas Amigas* started in 1986, but there had already been so many Latina and African American activists in the city whose lives were not reflected anywhere. Our contribution was a way to change the map of our existence. What we can now find online is because some marvelous librarian thought to scan it, right?

JH: What are you working on now? Can you share?

MRC: I'm working on translations of some of the poets I have mentioned, and a critical essay on the short fiction of Marta Brunet. I do post my own short fiction on my blog http://marianaromocar.wordpress.com occasionally, but most of my work is now academic, not creative.

JH: Would you care to add anything else?

MRC: Thank you for your work.

Returning to the Fervor of Buenos Aires from the U.S.: Sergio Waisman

Born in New York City in 1967 to Argentine parents, Sergio Waisman spent the first ten years of his childhood moving with his family between Argentina, France, and the United States before the onset of the Argentine dictatorship in 1976. He received a Master of Arts degree in Creative Writing in English at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Hispanic Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Berkeley. He published his novel *Leaving* (2004) and translated it into Spanish as *Irse* (2010). He is the author of the critical work *Borges and Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery* (2005), which has been translated into Spanish and Italian. He has also translated many works of Latin American literature. In 2000, he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts in Translation for his English translation of the novel *The Absent City* (2000) from the Spanish, *La ciudad ausente*, by the renowned Argentine author, Ricardo Piglia. His latest book is *Target in the Night* (2015), a translation of Ricardo Piglia's *Blanco nocturno*.

Although Waisman has undertaken the role of translator of languages since he was a youngster, it was not until he began his graduate work that he became a literary translator. Encouraged by a couple of professors at the University of Colorado, Boulder, he began to translate new literature by Argentine authors. Around the same time, he realized that his archive of notes and tape recordings of his grandparents regarding their immigrant

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experiences from Poland to Argentina in the 1930s before the Holocaust, merited attention. He saw a parallel between his grandparents' leavings, and those of his parents, who left Argentina after military coup d'états in 1966 and 1976. He became especially interested in learning about his ancestors' encounter with anti-Semitism before they made the long and courageous journey to the Americas. In this process, he realized that history and fiction, in the telling of his family stories, appeared to be two sides of the same coin. Rather than record oral history, he looks at how storytelling functions as different versions of history, especially once told across multiple linguistic registers. This experience became the topic of his first novel, *Leaving* (*Irse*).

Waisman currently lives in the Washington D.C. area and takes regular trips to Buenos Aires. He is a Professor of Spanish and Latin American Literature at the George Washington University.

Since December of 2014, Sergio Waisman and I began correspondence over email until we met for a personal interview at his office at George Washington University on April 10, 2015, and completed a second part over Skype on June 14, 2015. He begins by talking about how he started to write fiction, working and taking creative writing classes in San Francisco.

JH: When did you begin to write fiction? Who motivated you to write fiction?

SW: Toward the end of college. But I was a science major. After college, I worked for a couple of years doing social work in San Francisco, and I also took some literature and creative writing classes at San Francisco State University. Then I went to do a Master's in Creative Writing in Colorado. Eventually I got my PhD and continued in academia. The key, for me, was that from the beginning, writing was connected to translation. I did a Master's in Creative Writing in English, but much of what I was reading at the time was in Spanish. I was lucky. I had a great professor, Sidney Goldfarb, a fascinating writer, an avant-garde poet and playwright, who said, "Wait a second. You are reading Latin American literature in Spanish, but you are writing in English. Why don't you try translation?" I also worked with Raymond Williams who helped me come up with a list of half a dozen contemporary writers from Argentina who had not been translated yet, or who were just starting to be translated into English. At that point, I realized that I had actually

been translating for most of my life, and that there was something there to pursue.

That's when I started writing the vignettes that would be the main parts of *Leaving*. At the same time, I was doing translation exercises, on my own, in the library at Boulder. There is a lot about translation and changing languages in *Leaving*. That is the origin of the project and the origin of my desire to write fiction and to be a literary translator, both at the same time.

JH: What were you reading at the time? What were your influences in literature or other arts in writing your novel *Leaving*?

SW: I remember reading a lot of Cortázar in Spanish, and a lot of Virginia Woolf in English. Their styles were inspiring. I was drawn to a certain kind of prose, free-flowing sentences that could drift in and out of different characters and points of view. And the role of the narrator. At that point, I read Ricardo Piglia, Juan José Saer, Roberto Arlt, Manuel Puig, and I was hooked. I also read Borges quite a bit. I started following the references. Who were these writers? What were they talking about? It opened up from there. There was a whole universe to explore. I thought that if some of these extraordinary writers from Latin America were not available in English, I could try to translate them, make them available for an English-speaking audience.

Saul Bellow was important at the beginning, too. Certain connections to a Jewish tradition, and translation, something about second or third generation of immigrants. Saul Bellow grows up in a very Yiddish neighborhood in Chicago, and he's very conscious of wanting to be an American writer in English. The grandparents speak in Yiddish, the parents understand, but the children tell the stories in a new language, one of the languages of the Americas. I feel an affinity towards Bellow, Henry Roth, and other Jewish writers, like Bashevis Singer. Now I love Rivka Golchen. And other writers who are children of immigrants, like Alexander Hemon, and of course, the U.S. Latino writers who I love.

I was also reading a lot of poetry in English when I started *Leaving*. Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop. Langston Hughes, others. Writing *Leaving*, at the level of the language, I was reading a lot of American

poetry, paying as much attention to the crafting of each sentence as possible.

JH: Why did you decide to write *Leaving* in English first and then translate it into Spanish?

SW: When I started *Leaving*, I had notes in both English and Spanish. As the vignettes started taking shape, I realized that a large part of the project of *Leaving* had to do with trying to tell a series of family stories that had taken place in other languages (mainly in Spanish, or Yiddish, some in French), my parents' stories, my grandparents' stories, a series of leavings leading eventually to me, or the main narrator in the novel. All of those leavings led to a certain arrival, if you will, in English. I was trying to understand those family stories and memories now that I was living in the U.S. in English and had new and meaningful relationships with people with whom I spoke in English. It was a way to arrive in the U.S. but at the same time, I was very conscious that I was telling stories, family memories, trying to reconstruct all these family travels taking place in other languages.

So, that's where I think translation is very much at the core of that project for me. My first impulse was to write *Leaving* in English even though I did include parts in Spanish and some words and phrases in French and Yiddish, various languages that are part of those family stories. *Leaving* was a way for me to find a place in English, but it was also very much about the leaving from Argentina. The most important readings and connections, for me, in storytelling had to do with Argentine history and Argentine literature. Right after *Leaving* came out English, I wanted it to be published in Spanish in Argentina. It took me a while to figure out if I wanted to translate the novel myself, or hire a translator in Argentina, especially because there are some really outstanding translators there.

Finally, I decided to do the translation myself. That was a very enriching process for me, as a reader, in exploring how to tell the same stories, but now in Spanish. Writing the stories in English, I had been very conscious that the stories, or family memories, had originally happened in other languages, and that *Leaving* in English was, in a way, already written in translation. In translating *Leaving* into *Irse* in Spanish I felt as if I was returning to an imagined origin, of the stories, on the one hand, and an imagined origin in my own life, on the other. It was a very meaningful

experience to do the translation myself even though it did feel a little self-involved to write the same book two times. In the process of translating, rewriting, and reconstructing these different histories in *Irse*, I thought you could see the levels of mediation in the language, itself, in the narrative.

JH: Speaking of translation, what was the experience like of translating the works of Ricardo Piglia, Argentina's great novelist? He has also commented on your novels.

SW: I feel extremely fortunate to be one of Piglia's translators. I started translating his works over twenty years ago, and we have maintained correspondence throughout. First, it was faxes and letters, then emails. I have a lot of material which I hope to put together into a book soon.

In many ways translating Ricardo Piglia has been the most important literary formation imaginable, both as a translator and as a writer, but probably most as a reader. When I translated Piglia's first book, *Nombre falso* (*Assumed Name*), I found and had to figure out what to do with all of the historical and literary references in the text. To be able to translate and understand that book I needed to be a researcher and really investigate the references. Follow the textual clues in and outside the book. It became a tremendous process of learning through reading. At the same time, I don't know if it was already in the cards or if it was fortuitous, but translation is in fact very important to Piglia in his own work. *Nombre falso* is a homage to the Argentine writer Roberto Arlt, written as if it were literary criticism but it is actually fiction. Piglia works with the Borgesian technique of crossing essay and fiction, but with new twists. *Nombre falso* includes a short story entitled "Luba" which is attributed by Piglia to Roberto Arlt but it's not written by Arlt. It is written by Piglia as a mistranslation of a Russian short story, by Andreiev. Piglia has a very sophisticated take on authorship, a kind of Borgesian play with a found manuscript, attributed to someone else, but actually misattributed and mistranslated along the way. When I translated *Nombre falso* into English, I had a feeling, from the beginning, that I was one of the false authors of the book. I felt that I was implicated. I would soon be adding my name in the translation to a series of authors who were not the real authors of a book about something else.

JH: How are memory and genealogy important in both *Leaving* and *Irse*?

SW: One of the main sources of storytelling that went into *Leaving*, and then *Irse* are the stories that I heard my grandparents tell when I was growing up, and especially one of my grandmothers in particular, Bube Cata. Since I was little, I was very aware that I was different linguistically and culturally than my surroundings. But inside the family, my grandparents were different than everyone else in the family who spoke Argentine Spanish, because my grandparents were born in Poland and their first language was Yiddish. My grandfather on my mother's side, Zeide Pedro, was seventeen when he left Poland for Argentina. He spoke Spanish with an accent. My Mom and her generation were the last ones in our family to speak Yiddish. When I was little I would hear my grandparents and my great aunts and uncles speaking in Yiddish around the kitchen table in their apartment in Buenos Aires. I was always curious about what they were saying. It seemed that they did not want the kids to understand what they were talking about. So, naturally I assumed that someone had done something wrong, or that they were talking about sex. Yiddish was the language of secrets.

On a family trip, I once asked my grandparents what life was like when they were little. They seemed so happy that someone was asking this, and what they had to say was so fascinating, that I repeated the exercise of asking them about their childhoods from then on, every time I saw them. At one point, when I was in college I recorded one of those conversations, and then continued recording them whenever I'd see them. And some of these made it into *Leaving*. But I did not end up including their stories verbatim, as if it were an oral history, because I was interested not just in the stories themselves, some of which were great, but in the ways that memory works, in the importance of storytelling in families, and in how family stories are reconstructed in the telling, and who in the family gets to tell the story, and how all of this material becomes the fabric of the family and its genealogy.

I really wanted to hear my maternal grandfather's story because he was seventeen when he left Poland, he had already lived half a life before he left the Old World for Argentina. My other grandparents were five or six when they arrived in Argentina. But my grandfather, Zeide Pedro, would have memories of what it was like to be Jewish in Poland before the Holocaust.

He lived in a completely different world, and I figured he must have memories he could recount. And he did, or so it seemed. What happened was that Zeide Pedro would start to tell the story in his broken Spanish, and it would be hard to understand, and hard to follow. So, my grandmother, Bube Cata, would interrupt and correct him and tell the story for him. She remembered all the details, the names of everyone in the family, the names of the streets where Pedro lived in Warsaw as a little kid, the story of his father (my great-grandfather) who'd been a prisoner of war in the First World War and had later left Poland, leaving his family behind, to look for his long-lost brother in Philadelphia. Bube Cata had a tremendous memory, it was a great story. But she was not there, she was telling Pedro's story as if she had lived it, as if they were her memories, but she had not been there. They met years later, in Argentina, they did not know each other in Poland. That's when I became interested in the reworking of memory, in how stories are told and passed on as if they were true.

In the case of my grandmother, Bube Cata was terrific, she was the keeper of the family memory. If someone told a story and it did not correspond to her version of it, she would correct them, whether she had been there or not. Once she told the story, it became hers. I was interested in that process of who in the family tells the stories, how the versions change, why some things are told and others are kept secret. Also, when my grandfather tried to tell the stories, he would always get to points when he would switch to Yiddish. But I did not understand Yiddish, so I depended on my grandmother to translate into Spanish. By then I realized that her translations were part of her version of the stories. It was a bit frustrating, but it was great, how she handled their memories. I have always been impressed by my Bube Cata. I tried to put as much of this in *Leaving* as I could.

JH: Could you expand on why you wished to learn about your grandfather's connection to Poland?

SW: I really wanted to understand what that world must have been like. My grandfather left Poland in 1929, before the Nazis came into power in Germany. But Poland was always a difficult place for Jews and yet there were three million Jews there. Also, my grandfather leaves at seventeen because he does not want to be recruited into the Polish army. Poland was always fighting the Russians or the Germans, always in the middle of battles. My understanding is that no matter who was in power in Poland, the Jews were never in

good shape. They were in different degrees of bad shape because of the long history of pogroms and anti-Semitism. I really wanted to try to imagine and hear what it was like to live in that world and what their idea was of the Americas when they finally decided to take a boat and cross the Atlantic, never to return, without knowing where they are going, without knowing the language of where they were going. There was something incredibly brave and adventurous about all of that. They were desperate, they had to make a move, and they got on ships that brought them to a new world, without knowing anything about where they were going. It's incredible, really.

JH: Are you familiar with the films of Argentine director Daniel Burman who produced *Esperando al Mesiah* (2000), *El abrazo partido* (2004), and *Derecho de familia* (2006)? These films are representative of his genealogy and take place in the neighborhood of Once in Buenos Aires.

SW: Yes, I definitely like his movies. The Jewish community in Buenos Aires is big and diverse enough so that you have a whole, separate subculture in the neighborhood Once and I think Burman captures that very well. There are many scenes of the family relationships in his work that ring true to me. I think that especially *El abrazo partido* works well at different levels, particularly that desire for an embrace that could somehow reunite a family and recover missing elements of one's identity. In my own personal experience, my parents left a community like that one in Argentina, and I think that leaving, having left, gives our family story a different twist from what you see in Burman's movies. Then there is the next immigrant experience, in the U.S., carrying as much of the baggage as we could carry with us, but leaving much behind. Leaving again and again, one more time to another language, another land, another country. Argentina and the U.S. are both countries of immigrants, in that sense.

JH: You also mention other neighborhoods in your novel like Villa Crespo and Belgrano. Are these places that you and your family lived in?

SW: Villa Crespo, like Once, is a Jewish neighborhood in Buenos Aires. My parents lived there when they were kids, and as teenagers. When I was little in Buenos Aires, we lived in Belgrano. Villa Crespo and Once used to be very well-established Jewish

neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, and they were both very important in the lives of my grandparents and my parents. Villa Crespo and Belgrano figure prominently in my life, too, the years I lived in Buenos Aires as a child, and they are there in *Leaving* as well. That was home for me once, and it still feels like that, in a way, every time I go there. Even though it's been decades.

JH: In your novel, you refer a few times to music such as jazz, specifically Duke Ellington and Nina Simone on the American side, and then Carlos Gardel, the father of tango *canción*, on the Argentine side. What do these figures mean to you?

SW: On the one hand, the references to American jazz and Argentine tango are very literally what I was listening to while I was writing the novel, and those names and sounds became part of the conversations in *Leaving*. Much of the novel is told in second person to an American interlocutor, my fiancée at the time, Maureen, my wife now. Those North American musical references were part of the new vocabulary that I was finding in common with her, and with my friends in the U.S. They helped explain certain emotions for me, they were like the soundtrack to my new life in the U.S. as I was finding it, with Maureen, from Providence, to Boulder, to San Francisco. The references to tango like Carlos Gardel and singers like Mercedes Sosa, that's music that I used to hear on the radio in Argentina, and I always liked them. That music also represents, for me, a direct connection to my parents and what they listened to when they were younger. So, for me, the American musical references represented something new, even if that music had a very long and rich tradition, which of course it does. The Argentine musical references, on the other hand, had a different emotional weight for me, more connected with family stories and the memories surrounding my parents and their generation. The American jazz references were part of a new vocabulary, for me, new sounds and images very much related the impetus I felt to write *Leaving* in English. I was looking for what that language was going to be, and the music was part of that search.

JH: Is fútbol (soccer) a form of religion for you, so to speak? Your best friend in your novel is named Diego which reminds me of legendary Argentine player Diego Maradona. You also refer to Argentine players of the 1970s period.

SW: I think in many ways fútbol is a form of religion, from the point of view that there is a belief there. Also, something tribal, guttural. These deep-rooted feelings that you don't know where they come from, and they come out when you watch a game, especially if it's the national team. And all the rituals associated with the game, on and off the field. I'm still a big fan and I still play, twice a week if I can. It's terrific to see people get so passionate about the sport, but it can be pretty scary, too. The actions on the field can mean different things to different people. And then, there is this weird way that soccer functions to express national passions, even if you don't realize that they are there. Living in the U.S., in English, I still feel that there is a part of my identity that is very much Argentine and weirdly enough, seldom is that part of me expressed as intensely as when I watch, or play fútbol. But my American wife really loves it, too. And my daughter, I think.

JH: Could you discuss the transition in moving from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to the United States in 1976 in the larger social and historical contexts? Where did you and your family settle? What were some of the challenges and rewards?

SW: We left Argentina right after the military coup in 1976, at the start of the most recent dictatorship. We left in a bit of a rush. Right after the coup my father was fired from his work at the INTI (National Institute of Industrial Technology) for his political beliefs. Although my parents were not personally threatened, they knew a number of people who were threatened and many were leaving Argentina as quickly as they could. My father had done his Ph.D. in New York in the sixties and in 1976 his doctoral advisor helped open a postdoc for him so he could get a visa and bring the family with him back to New York. We moved that spring, early summer 1976. First, to New York and then my father got a one-year position at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. We lived in Illinois for a year and then finally, my parents found more permanent work in San Diego, California, where they settled for the next thirty years or so.

The challenges were many. My sister and I did not know English. As a family, we did not want to leave Argentina. It was a particular kind of immigrant experience. My parents worked very hard and they definitely valued the opportunities they found in the U.S., but there was constantly

an ongoing discourse about everything we had left behind, even though there was a dictatorship at the time. I think especially my mother, and my father to a lesser degree, were very nostalgic of the Argentina they had left behind. I grew up in the U.S. trying to learn English and trying to understand my new environment here. At home my Mom recreated, in the U.S. or wherever we lived, an Argentine house, a certain kind of secular Jewish Argentine home, except that home wasn't in Argentina, from 1978 on it happened to be in California. It was a little schizophrenic, living in one language (Spanish) and in one culture (Argentine) at home, and in another language (English) and a completely different culture (American) as soon as I walked out the front door. The nostalgia for Argentine culture, in Spanish at home and, outside junior high and then high school in Southern California, trying to adapt and integrate into an American environment, in English.

JH: Could you explain what you mean by secular Jewish Argentine culture?

SW: Sure. Being Jewish has always been an important part of my life, but it's never been easy to explain what this means, because I grew up not practicing any religious customs or rituals from Judaism. When I was little this was very confusing. My parents always insisted, they always reminded us that we were Jewish, but we didn't go to synagogue, I didn't do a bar mitzvah, we didn't celebrate even the high holidays, so it wasn't clear what it meant. Something vague about the importance of books and family, and a tradition left behind, and also this sense that there were people in the world that were out to get us, that there had been times in history when Jews got killed for being Jews, whether they believed and practiced their religion or not. And also, something about the language, the Yiddish that my grandparents and great aunts and uncles spoke in Argentina. It wasn't a religious identity in any way. So, what I mean by secular is that there is something cultural and historical that was actively passed on by my parents to my sister and me, which had to do with the history of a certain culture and tradition, and history of persecution.

JH: How do you identify? When do you feel American, Argentine, Jewish, Latino or all of the above?

SW: It's such a complicated question for me. I have tried for years to come up with a good answer. It's interesting because the question seems to mean something different for everybody, it's even asked differently in the U.S. and in other parts of the world. In the U.S. I think there is this pressure to try to fit yourself into a specific category. In principle, difference is valued in the U.S. But it can be pretty constraining to try to fit into certain categories. You want to acknowledge your difference, that's key, it's who you are, but what if you don't fit into any of the boxes on the form? For me, one of the best things about the U.S. is that there is that opportunity to express your difference. So, in the U.S. I am a Jewish Latino. But in Argentina, Latino does not mean anything really. People there think that "Latino" is a U.S. invention and maybe, at best, they think of it as a political position. I'm from both, from Argentina and from the U.S, and in both I feel like an outsider. When I was little this was a great cause of anxiety for me, feeling out of place where I was living in the U.S., but also feeling that I wasn't really from Argentina whenever I went there. Now I realize I'm not the only one.

JH: Why do you sometimes use the term, "South American," in your novels and other works? How do you see it as important?

SW: I guess I do. I was just saying that I thought that categories can be limiting, and now I find myself using categories. Culturally and historically, from the point of view of the language, clearly there are many differences within South America too. But there are even more differences between South America, and Mexico and Central America, and the Caribbean, and North America. So, I guess that's how I tend to organize the Americas in my mind. Also, when I was little and we first came to the U.S., South America felt very far from where we were living in North America. Now because of globalization and technology you can open up a computer and boom you have an image of South America. But I had just been to school in Argentina, and learned about the rivers and the provinces and the mountains and the neighboring countries in South America in our geography class. In the U.S., when I was little, I would say that I was from Argentina and the kids at school couldn't put it on a map. So, I started saying that I was from South America, I thought that would help, and kids thought I was from Mexico. [laughs] Sometimes it depends on where you are in the U.S. as well.

JH: Where do you find a sense of the Argentine community in the U.S.? Is it southern California, places such as San Diego, Burbank, or Glendale? Maybe NYC or DC?

SW: I think that for my parents, when they first arrived in the U.S., finding Argentine friends was crucial. For me, even though Argentina is such a huge part of who I am, whether I'm speaking in Spanish or not, throughout my life only a handful of my friends have been Argentine. That's just the way it happened. I haven't necessarily looked for such a community, I don't know why. I mostly stay connected to Argentina by reading and, if I can, by going there every year.

JH: In *Leaving* you have the recurring symbol of the golondrinas (swallows) that has to do with the idea of returning home. I can't help but think of the Spanish romantic poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer and one of his famous poems in *Rimas* which has the memorable verses, "Volverán las oscuras golondrinas/en tu balcón sus nidos a colgar…"? The swallows will return home. Is the narrator (or Sergio Waisman) able to return home?

SW: I really like this question. My parents, especially my Mom, worked very hard to bring home with us as we moved. So, home was a little Argentine island that she recreated for us wherever we lived, even though we were no longer at home, from the point of view of not living in Argentina any more. Writing *Leaving*, even reading and translating to a certain extent, the desire, the yearning to return home was very much a part of it. But I was also aware that it might be an illusion. I can travel to Argentina, but the reality is that it wasn't ever possible to return home. Home wasn't there anymore, even when I was a little kid, home was always somewhere else. But wanting to go home is a feeling that never leaves, and it's always been associated with language, and with reading, for me, and later with writing and translating.

Translating *Leaving* into Spanish was an exercise in returning. Regardless of whether return is actually possible. For starters, you can't go back in time, but it's not just that. There were so many leavings and departures in my life, I have always wondered what my life might have been like if we had taken a different road. Especially, what might my life would have been like if we had stayed in Argentina in 1976 and I had grown up there. One possibility, of course, is that we could have had a tragic end. I don't

regret that we left. But for a long time I fantasized with imagining what it would have been like. I feel like I have a split persona, in English and in Spanish, Argentine and American. The Jewish is in both, but always secular. And because of the split, and all the different leavings, the parts don't seem to make up a whole. Still, it's this recurring fantasy for me. What would have happened if one of the two halves were allowed to become whole? I think translating *Leaving* into *Irse* was an exercise in imagining that plenitude of one part of myself.

JH: What is the relevance of cities in your formation as a writer, traveler, or observer? In *Leaving*, the narrator says, "… a city where my ghost enters and focuses on me." In reference to Buenos Aires, he continues, "The city is the same but I am different, the city is mine but I am a foreigner." What does this mean? Do you have a favorite city?

SW: I grew up in cities. Whenever I have lived in a place that is not a city, I have felt very foreign there. I realize that this, in part, is a byproduct of growing up in cities. The diversity, the movement, the life of cities. In New York is where I learned that there were other kids who spoke Spanish and looked nothing like me, and that was a great revelation. But my favorite city is San Francisco. Or maybe Buenos Aires, I'm not sure. I have a recurring dream that I'm in a city, but in the dream I don't know where I am, which city, and I'm trying to get back home. I often confuse home with the house in which I live. Part of *Leaving* is an effort to track all the different places where I've lived, where my parents and grandparents lived. When I close my eyes they all get confused again. I wish there was a way to keep them sorted, but I also like the feeling of having them all scrambled in there.

I have always felt the most at home in cities, especially Buenos Aires when I was little. In my mind, my home is in Spanish, even though I feel just as comfortable in English now—or is it the other way around? And when I step outside, I'm in a city. I can take the city bus. I can go to the park and play soccer with my friends after school. In my mind, home is not just the house in which I live, or even the house in which I lived as a kid, but when I step outside, I'm in the streets in the neighborhood of Buenos Aires where I grew up. Or in San Francisco where Maureen [my wife] and I first lived together. This seeps into my writing all the time, and it's there

in *Leaving* for sure. In that city that I find myself in, in my dream, I feel both at home and a stranger at the same time and for a moment, at least in the dream, it's okay.

JH: In Jorge Luis Borges' *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) the poetic voice holds onto a nostalgic vision of his streets, his neighborhood, and his city that are as much about urban patriotism as his nationality. Is that true for you? How do you feel when you return to Buenos Aires currently?

SW: I love *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. It's true that there is a certain nostalgia in those verses by Borges, and that I might share the feeling, but my growing up was so different from that, always moving, always leaving. Still, there is something interesting when a poetic voice can express so much nostalgic feeling for a place. In some of those poems, specifically when the poet is walking at sunset through the outskirts of Buenos Aires, the longing is so palpable. Not just the city, this or that neighborhood or certain streets, it's also a certain angle of the light, a reddish rose tint as if drawn on the walls. A certain feel of a certain time of day, full of pathos. There is so much emotion expressed, but at the same time there is something active there, in the speaking of the poem, that creates the place. Voicing the geography of the outskirts of the city, in the case of Borges, almost as if they would not exist if it were not for the poem that speaks Buenos Aires. I think that is the fervor that Borges describes and creates in that book.

JH: Do you have model writers who represent cities with all their complexities (i.e. Orhan Pamuk's memoir of Istanbul, Murakami's treatment of Tokyo in his novels)?

SW: For me, the model writer, the best combination of voice and body that I know in a city, where the language of the subject and the language of the city best come together, is James Joyce and his Dublin. I'm a huge fan, even though I've never been there. I remember one anecdote that's great. Joyce is exiled from Ireland, he does his most important writing from exile. At one point somebody asks him, "You left Dublin so many years ago. How can you still write about Dublin and create the feeling that you are in Dublin in your books?" I don't know if the interviewer was thinking of *Ulysses* or *Portrait of an Artist*. "In your books," the interviewer asks Joyce, "how do you create the feeling that you are in Dublin,

with all the details and the names of the streets and the characters and the sounds and smells of the city, when you haven't lived there for years?" I think that at this point Joyce had been living outside of Ireland, and hadn't returned, for twenty years or so. And Joyce says, "What do you mean? I never left Dublin." I think that's what it's like. If you grow up in a city, you can leave it, sometimes you have to leave it, but in a way you always take it with you.

JH: Do you hold any literary or cultural affinity to transnational literature by U.S. Latinas/os in the twenty-first century such as Junot Díaz, Daniel Alarcón, or Sandra Cisneros?

SW: Junot Díaz is one of my favorite writers, in any language. It's interesting, the writers you mention. I think there's this huge responsibility to explain where you're from, it's as if the writer was imagining a reader who might not know where you're from, but they're right there with you. But it's very hard to tell good stories when you're explaining things. The best U.S. Latino writers find a way to do this very well. To give a sense of place and a sense of displacement at the same time. That's really hard to do.

JH: In your critical book *Borges and Translation* (2005), you refer to Borges' well-known essay, "El escritor argentino y la tradición." You say, "To innovate from the margins-to reread, to rewrite, to mistranslate-is to challenge center-periphery dichotomies by remapping accepted cultural and political relationships." How do you view this critical paradigm in the case of U.S. Latina/o literature?

SW: I believe you can definitely apply this positioning to U.S. Latino literature. Borges identifies being on the margins, in the periphery, in the outskirts, as a privileged site from which to innovate and to question the center. For Borges, the margins (*las orillas*) is a place where you can play, challenge, or reimagine tradition in a way that you may not be able to if you were in the center with the pressure and historical weight of the canon on you. And some of that minor element is definitely present in the best U.S. Latino literature, writers working in English with some Spanish, writing in the language of imperialism and colonialism and trying to take advantage of its minor place in order to innovate and rethink the canon and the tradition. I think there is definitely a parallel that can be drawn there. You could draw a map of different minor literatures with what Borges proposes in "El escritor argentino y la tradición." When he makes an analogy between Argentine, Irish and Jewish

literatures, it's like he is creating these alliances of minor literatures, a new cartography of insider-outsider writing. Without a doubt you can add Latino literature, in its tense and complicated relationship to U.S. literature, in the remapping suggested by Borges and mis-translation.

JH: What are you reading these days? Do you have any more fiction for publication in the works?

SW: There are several writers from Argentina who I really like, especially Sergio Chefec, Alan Pauls, Samantha Schweblin, and Hernán Rosino. Last summer I finished reading David Foster Wallace, who's simply amazing, and a couple of novels by Jonathan Letham from Brooklyn, not new but new for me. *The Fortress of Solitude* I really liked. And I recently read Vera Fogwill's debut novel, and thought it was great, crazy and rambling and very imaginative and a lot of fun. Worth translating.

As far as what I'm writing, I've been working on a novel in Spanish that I'm getting close to finishing. From the beginning I thought I could write it in English or Spanish. I wrote the first draft in English, in fact. And when I returned to it, I started rewriting it in Spanish. Now I'm trying to finish it, in Spanish, I think I'm close. It's called *La caja húngara* (*The Hungarian Box*). The storyline involves both languages and cultures. The protagonist is a character from the U.S. who has to travel unexpectedly to Argentina, to deliver a small box, for his father, to a woman he doesn't know, in the city of La Plata. Part of it takes place in Spanish, part in English, part of it is about going back and forth, but it's all narrated in one language. Mostly. Hopefully I'll have more to report about *La caja húngara* soon.

JH: Interesting title. Are you able to comment on it?

SW: The protagonist, Ivan, is estranged from his father, and one day he gets a phone call telling him that his father has been found dead. His father has left him a small, locked box and a letter, asking him to take the box to Argentina to deliver it, unopened, to a woman in La Plata. Ivan's father was Hungarian, and Ivan travels to Argentina with the Hungarian box in his backpack. Even though Ivan hasn't ever really been close to his father, and he had an unusual childhood, his father has left something for him, this little box, and the mysterious task of delivering it to Madame Budapest in South

America. All of this comes out in the novel eventually. After talking to his sister, Ivan decides to follow his father's posthumous request. In Argentina, Ivan takes the wrong train out of Constitución in Buenos Aires and finds himself heading to Adrogué instead of La Plata. On the wrong train he meets an older man, an Argentine writer, who's heading home for his cousin's funeral. The two start talking on the train to Adrogué. The novel goes from there.

JH: How do you choose your translation projects?

SW: If I can, I select projects that seem meaningful, important somehow. For me personally, and also from the point of view of there being a need for that writer and that work to be translated into English in the U.S. I think of it in terms of finding lacks, or lacunae, that I didn't realize were there until I read the writer in question. In many ways it's a labor of love. Currently, I'm translating a poet from Argentina who I really like, Yaki Setton. And I'm still enthusiastically working with Ricardo Piglia, who I started translating over twenty years ago. I've had a personal interest in translating Latin American literature for many years, independent of whether it makes any money, which basically it never has, unfortunately. Translation is a strange form of writing; it takes up a lot of time, it feels urgent and communal even though it is undertaken in extreme solitude and, at the end of the day, you sign someone else's name to it. It's the writer you've translated in your version, with your words, but it's theirs, not yours. Or not just yours, in any case. In that sense, it seems to illustrate what always happens in literature, but from a more acute perspective. Ever since I first read Piglia, I was drawn to the voice, the storylines and the construction of the narrative in his work. I remember thinking: I want to write like that. And that's how I decided I wanted to translate his books, to write like him.

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