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CLR Oral Histories: Loida Maritza Pérez

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Editor’s Note.
Loida Maritza Pérez was born in 1963 in the Dominican Republic; soon afterward her family moved to New York, and she grew up in the Bronx. Her novel Geographies of Home depicts in part the experience of growing up in this neighborhood, experiences in the school system, and the internalized racism and cycle of abuse that impacts the children of such neighborhoods. Critically acclaimed at the time of its arrival, now, more than a generation later, comparisons can be made of her text with Piri Thomas’ influential Down These Mean Streets, first published in 1967. Pérez has not yet received adequate attention or merit (not even Wikipedia includes her), although she continues to publish in New York magazines, teaches creative writing workshops throughout the US, and is currently preparing a new novel, Lamentations. Pérez was interviewed at the DePaul Center for Latino Research in late 1999, by Félix Masud-Piloto, Betty Paugh-Ortiz, and Elsa Saeta. The following is an edited version of that interview, interesting in the context of the articles in this issue, and for her observations at that stage of her career.

DIALOGO: [In terms of your education], would you describe yourself as a science geek?

PEREZ: I think I was just pursuing sciences, I wouldn’t say for legitimacy, no, but I loved science, I did. It still fascinates me, but I don’t know, to answer your question about how one becomes a writer, it’s such a roundabout process I don’t think I can begin to pinpoint it, it’s just like when people say, well, what made you the way you are? You don’t even know how to answer that question.

DIALOGO: Who were some of the writers that did influence you?

PEREZ: I think first and foremost James Baldwin, not even in terms of my becoming a writer because I didn’t know that’s what I was heading towards but in terms of influences, reading him I realized that he also craved what I had been feeling or perceiving for so long but had no language for. I think the man is a genius and I don’t think he’s given enough credit, maybe because he’s gay, or whatever. The man has such fire to his prose. The first person of color I ever read was Ntozake Shange’s “For Colored Girls”, and I read that when was in junior high school because I used to read avidly all the time and would go to the library and would take out books randomly. When I encountered her, I had never read any such thing and it really changed my world. I knew women like that, we all know people like that. Prior to that I’d been reading whatever I got my hands on, but there were never people who looked like me, or sounded like me, or lived like me.

Gabriel García Márquez, the first time I read him I was in college and it was because I was driving my roommate crazy because I couldn’t sleep, and she said, “you know what, this will put you to sleep in a minute: read One Hundred Years of Solitude.” And it kept me up all night! He’s another one, and so it’s gradual in terms of influences and the process of becoming a writer. Prior to that I had been considering writing short stories but I thought, no one is going to be interested in my writing because es una locura, and you know, reading him made me realize there are other people who are as crazy as I am and I guess I can write about whatever I want.

DIALOGO: We were talking about publishers and the politics of publishing, it seems to me that publishers and the media have the need to pigeonhole writers and their work: a Latina writer, an African American writer, a writer of “magical realism”.

PEREZ: Oh that’s another thing I want to say about Márquez and the whole thing about magic realism that drives me crazy, the term drives me crazy. Because you know what, carpets really do fly, life is surreal and that’s one of the things that’s fascinating and I try to address it in writing. Coming to the United States it’s believed that life is logical, linear you know, everything is practical. Coming from Latin America and the Caribbean we know that life is not logical, we know for a fact whether your neighbors have been arrested and taken away for 10 years and you take them for dead, and all of a sudden they reappear and you know they came back from the dead. You start believing that walls have ears. Life is not logical and as people come and live in this country that adds another surreal level because we are presented as being such and such in the media, that we know has nothing to do with our lives. Life is magic and odd and bizarre simultaneously and that is a reality, let’s not give it a diminutive term such as magic realism.

DIALOGO: I think that labeling tends to ghettoize writers; I wondered whether you yourself find your writing and your work subject to labeling and therefore marginalized.

PEREZ: I’m lucky, I’m with a good publishing house, but you know, there were different publishing houses interested
in me and I had the opportunity to speak with the editors. There are some publishing houses I would not have gone with in a million years. I was playing devil’s advocate, I would ask, how am I going to be marketed? And they would say: as the new hot black writer. If I said but I’m Latina, as the new hot Latina writer. If I said I’m a black woman, the same. Why are you trying to pigeonhole me? I am all of these things, don’t try to squeeze me into one little category. You know, labeling is a thing of power, by labeling something you have control over it.

DIALOGO: Talking about the whole idea of pigeonholing, how do you think writers, especially Latinas and women of color, break out of those niches?

PEREZ: I don’t know, that’s a hard question to answer. I really don’t know what makes one person pick up a book versus another.

DIALOGO: It seems Latina writers are still kind of marginalized.

PEREZ: The irony is that even in their own communities, are they read? Does the Chicana housewife read Sandra Cisneros or Ana Castillo? How do we get those books to those people? How do we get this book across to the Dominicans who know the issue that I’m writing about?

DIALOGO: Aurelia was very familiar but having 14 children The New York Times put as “melodrama.”

PEREZ: Oh I’ve been accused so many times, they no longer offend me because I find it amusing. One reviewer said, here’s this man 60-something who juggles two jobs, [how] melodramatic. I know many men in their 70s who juggle three jobs!

DIALOGO: This is the age of la vida loca, everybody is like Ricky Martin.

PEREZ: Yeah, that’s the kind of literature that we’re supposed to be writing. If I’m a Latina writer I’m supposed to be writing some exotic literature that makes you wanna dance or makes you comfortable. In Britain they really got the issue absolutely, but here it’s too close to home. They don’t want me writing about those things, Aurelia, papito. They want a displacement, some magic little scene.

DIALOGO: Do you think that also has to do with a kind of stereotyping that we have here, for example, Dominican migration is the least known, the least studied. They lump us all together as Latinos, we have a lot of similarities, but we are very different cultures. They can not understand that.

PEREZ: I was watching this documentary on PBS about the Dominicans in the US, and they were interviewing all sorts of Dominicans, and for the most part they were all saying “what is Dominican is bailar meringue.” I thought, bueno, I guess I don’t qualify as a Dominican. You see, we do that to ourselves, pigeonholing ourselves, exoticizing ourselves, for the sake of identification. ¿Qué es latino, is it a culture? It’s not a race. Is it a language, no, because Brazilians are considered Latino. What about Aztecs who don’t speak Spanish? So we fall into these neat little categories and embrace them [in order to] not address the issues in our own backyard. It’s so internalized within our own communities.

DIALOGO: Julia Alvarez says about your work it addresses the doctrine at the center of the American Dream. Do you think that the lie of the melting pot is the same doctrine Julia was alluding to?

PEREZ: Yes and no. Look at the “Heart of Darkness” as the American Dream, as the Dominican dream, the Latino or Hispanic dream. Whatever label you want to put to it, this book is about issues in the United States but also the issues at home, whatever that home is. My next book will be a comedy, I promise.

DIALOGO: There’s another question I want to address with you, the friction between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans in New York City, talking about something internalized, that has some detrimental effects on both communities. You live in New York City, how does that affect the community? How does it affect you as a Dominican writer?

PEREZ: These issues are so complicated, in asking me that question you’re not only asking me about the whole history of Dominicans, the Dominican Republic, Dominican-Americans in New York but also the whole history of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in relation to the United States and Puerto Ricans in New York. To put it bluntly, we all carry bullshit, we’ve all inherited so much bullshit because the DR and PR and the rest of the Caribbean are such culturally complex places, not only racially, culturally, and religiously. There’s so much within our own cultures that we ourselves do not acknowledge or confront. When you come to the United States “eres Latino, eres Hispano” and that’s it. How do we fight or exorcise hundreds of years of colonization? Our minds and our cultures have been colonized and we have internalized those things and project them against each other.

DIALOGO: It’s not an easy question, not a fair question.

PEREZ: And I don’t like to give quick little blurbs that sound good pero no dicen nada. I want to get across that we are every single type of person, some of us are stupid, some of us are smart, some of us are evil, but there is no need to present one specific positive image and I am not interested in presenting exclusively the positive because I think our strength results from our complex past.

DIALOGO: Playing off the stereotypes in the novel you have this couple and their 14 children who immigrate to New York and who have to deal with issues like racism, poverty, domestic violence, mental illness, and sexual assault.

PEREZ: Well frankly, the only part in the entire novel that
Deals with racism is in Guyana, because none of the other members are even conscious about it.

DIALOGO: But the reader knows. The question I have is really simple, do you consider yourself a political writer?

Perez: The thing is when I start writing a novel, I start writing because I'm interested in a story. Walking parts of New York City, I swear to god I hear roosters crowing where there are no life stock markets, and I start thinking, where are these sounds coming from, are they pets or whatever. So as a writer, I am interested in storytelling first and foremost, then I start thinking about the characters. Once you are thrust into a story you have to start thinking well who is (the character)? What is her past, does she have family? Are her parents or her siblings similar to her, you know, what was their background, what was their economic background, what color, what culture, what race. You start exploring those issues, then inevitably other issues come out, be they political, social, cultural, etc. But do I write politically?, no. I address issues as they enter the story, and because I am, as a person, aware of those issues, they become present. I think if I approach writing in terms of addressing issues, my writing would sound like a political treatise. It would be dry, it would be boring. So first and foremost is the story.

DIALOGO: Often Latina writers are accused of perpetuating the stereotypes they seek to overcome and this story in the hands of a less talented writer could have easily become melodrama, the characters reduced to caricatures. So how did you avoid falling into that trap?

Perez: I guess let me answer the question a different way, one of the things that fascinates me and always has are the mundane elements of what people deem extraordinary, and the extraordinary elements of what people deem mundane. For example about 5 years ago I was here in Chicago, and I remember hearing a very brief story where a 50 year old woman gets arrested for having lived with her two dead sisters. One had been dead for 2 years, the other for 4 years. That was the story. So everybody was like, "that's crazy", and alarmed and disgusted. I saw her from a completely different point of view: I was fascinated. If one sister was dead 2 years the other 4, that means that the sister who died 2 years ago was also living with her dead sister. First of all, what were these women's perceptions of their own lives? What led them to be able to live with their dead sister? Was it loneliness, was it finances, was it familial? How do I avoid clichés? By allowing each of the characters not only to view themselves but also to allow other characters to view them. For instance, Iliana thinks Violeta is crazy, she judges her as harshly as most of us, but there are things that Iliana doesn't know about Violeta. There are so many levels of misunderstanding on daily interactions. I think that every novel I write will always be written from different perspectives because of the characters I'm interested in presenting. So I think that's how I avoid clichés, because I am presenting no truth, there are no answers. I never answer what is "home", it's different things for different people. What is reality? Here's Marina who's crazy and sees things that aren't really there, but doesn't think that she's crazy. And here's Iliana who sees and hears but is not crazy, so you know, love is blind. I think that's how I manage to avoid clichés.

DIALOGO: To finalize, could you weigh in on the current interest in Latino writers?

Perez: it always comes and goes, there was that period where Julia was getting a lot of attention. You know, a friend of mine used to work at the Asian American Writers Association, and they have a library of all the books published by Asian American writers, and they suffer the same nonsense. One time they did a random survey and started looking at the cover, and it didn't matter if the author was Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese, inevitably the covers had a rice bowl, chopsticks or a kimono. It's the same issue. The reason I like my covers is because they don't show a palm tree.