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Compartiendo con Lorida Maritza Pérez

Lorida Maritza Pérez

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From time to time, a writer bursts on the scene with a compelling novel of such extraordinary power, maturity and insight that it leaves an indelible mark. Such is the case with Loida Maritza Pérez, whose luminous storytelling is both captivating and heartbreaking.

Iliana believed that by attending a college more than five hours from New York City, she could gain independence and escape the watchful eyes of her overprotective, religiously conservative parents. She soon realizes, however, that familial bonds are impossible to break, and that barriers created by time and distance can easily be collapsed. A disembodied voice that Iliana believes is her mother's haunts her nights with disturbing news about her sisters: Marina is careening toward a mental breakdown; Beatriz has disappeared; Rebecca continues in a marriage that has her and her children trapped in a brownstone also populated by hundreds of hens. Convinced she might be of help, Iliana reluctantly returns to New York City. In this dislocating urban environment, far from her native country, the Dominican Republic, she confronts all the contradictions, superstitions, joys, and pains of someone who is caught between two cultures but intent on finding "home."

Narrated in electrifying prose and inhabited by characters who are as boldly imaginative as they are completely believable, Geographies of Home is a stunningly original debut from a major new literary talent.

"Geographies of Home is a powerful, haunting novel, Loida Maritza Pérez is a fierce and talented storyteller who does not flinch when addressing the heart of darkness at the center of the American dream."

- Julia Alvarez, author of How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents and In the Time of the Butterflies

"Geographies of Home plunges the reader into the nightmare of migration where the story of the Caribbean family is told in every gut-wrenching detail, and where the odds of surviving in America take a toll on the human heart."

- Maryse Condé, author of Segú and Crossing the Mangrove

"Loida Maritza Pérez is a bold and graceful novelist. She uses her magnificent narrative powers to shed light on the darkest and most glorious aspects of family, migration, kinship, passion, death, and the human heart. Geographies of Home will leave you feeling both amazingly breathless and wonderfully redeemed."

- Edwidge Danticat, author of Breath, Eyes, Memory and The Farming of Bones
GEORGIES OF HOME

Loida Maritza Pérez spoke at DePaul University on October 6, 1999. During her visit Elsa Saeta, Director of DPU Women’s Center, Betty Paugh Ortiz, and Félix Masud-Piloto both from the DPU Center for Latino Research had the pleasure of conversing with the author. The following are excerpts from that conversation.

ON EARLY INFLUENCES:
I think first and foremost, James Baldwin, not in terms of becoming a writer, but because for a lifetime I did not know that was what I was heading towards. Reading him I realized that he craved things that I had been feeling or perceiving for so long and had no language for. I don’t think he is given enough credit in certain departments, maybe because he’s gay or whatever. The man had such fire to his prose and insight. But the first person of color that I ever read was Ntozake Shange. When I was in junior high school, I used to be in the library all the time. I never read such things. It really changed my work because I knew women like that. We all know people like that, but to have it written in a book!

Prior to that, I had been reading whatever I got my hands on. There were never people who looked like me, or sounded like me, or lived like me, or anything. Gabriel García Márquez, the first time I read him was when I was in college. I was driving my roommate crazy. I couldn’t sleep and she said, “You know what, this will put you to sleep in a minute Rita,” and it kept me up all night. He is another one and so, it’s gradual in terms of influences and the process of becoming a writer. This man was crazy. I say crazy because prior to that I had considered writing short stories but thought maybe people won’t be interested in what I write because es una locura. In reading him [García Márquez] it made me realize there are other people who are as crazy as I am. I guess I can write about whatever I want.

ON WRITING:
It’s the heart of darkness of the American dream, but also in the Dominican dream, in the Latino dream, in the Hispanic dream, whatever label you want to put to it. Because, yes this book is about the issues in the United States but also the issues at home, whatever back home is.

Another thing about being a writer in our communities is that parts of our communities have this desire that we represent the positive and pretty. I am not going to be playing that game. Gone are the days when I needed to be a representation for like, in the 50s and 60s, especially before the civil rights movement, when a Black person had to represent the entire race. You couldn’t laugh too loud because then they would say Blacks laugh too loud. I am going to be me. I want to get across that we are every type of person, some of us are stupid, some of us are evil, some of us are smart. There is no need for us to present one specific positive image. I am not interested in exclusively positive images because I think that our strength is as a result of our complex past. We are capable of the best. And as long as we can acknowledge that, we can possibly achieve the best, if we confront the ugliest in ourselves and that is what I am interested in bringing out.

ON FUTURE WORKS:
When I start writing a novel, I start writing because I am interested in a story. For example, with Geographies of Home, what was the first chapter that I ever wrote? Chapter eight from Rebecca’s perspective, the one that starts with the chicken, was the first chapter. Now, why did I start with that story? Because walking in parts of New York City, I swear to God I heard roosters crying in areas where there is no live-stock market. I started thinking, where are these sounds coming from; are they pets? So as a writer I am interested in storytelling, first and foremost. So I started thinking about this character who lives with hens. Once you enter a story you have to start thinking, well who is she? What was her past? Does she have family? Are her parents or siblings dear to her? What was their background? Why are there economic problems? What color? What culture? What race? You start exploring those issues, inevitably other issues come out, you know, be it political, social, or cultural. Once you start asking questions about race and culture, politics comes in. Do I write politically? No, I address issues as they enter the story. But, if I were to be a political writer, I think I would approach writing in terms of addressing issues. My writing would sound like a political treatise. It would be dry and it would be boring.

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