

The Rio Review

Fall 2009

Interview: Cristina Garcia and Liliana Valenzuela

As a result of ACC's The Big Read, Brynne Harder had the opportunity to speak with Cristina Garcia and Liliana Valenzuela. Cristina has written several novels including *Dreaming in Cuban*, *I Wanna Be Your Shoebox* and *A Handbook to Luck*. She has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Hodder Fellow at Princeton University and a Whiting Writer's Award. A fifth novel, *The Lady Matador's Hotel* and a first book of poetry, *The Lesser Tragedy of Death*, will be published in 2010. Liliana is an Austin-based literary translator and poet. She recently translated both *A Handbook to Luck* and *Bordering Fires: The Vintage Book of Contemporary Mexican and Chicano/a Literature*. She has won awards from the Austin Poetry Society in several categories including The Border/Lines Award and The Spoken Word.

Career choices: Things you love and how they lead to becoming a poet, a literary translator or a novelist.

LV: I think for me it came from the love of language, the love of words and sounds. As a child, I loved hearing stories and hearing poems and playing with language. I think children naturally love to play and experiment and repeat funny phrases or words. I think that if you're able to hold on to that sense of awe and enchantment and fun and bring it into adulthood, it can translate into poetry or art and in a way you're still playing.

When I was going to U.T., studying anthropology, I also took a lot of literature courses. Some of the literature that really spoke to me was by Chicano Latino authors, but particularly the women who I felt were kind of closest to my experiences. They were trying some new, really daring, fun things that I was very excited about. When I started to become a translator and first did some business things people were asking me to do, I thought what I would really like to do was be a literary translator — and I really wanted to translate that literature which had at first excited me so much. I still think they are some of the most innovative and exciting and complex stories that haven't been told yet, and it is my pleasure to bring them into Spanish.

CG: I think I became a writer because it seemed the only authentic way to tell stories. I was a journalist for many years; I grew up in basically a family of very articulate liars and I don't know, I got to a point in my life where journalism and other ways of trying to convey truth seemed insufficient. And I think that's why I became a writer. In part that and in part just because of the love affair with language.

On language:

CG: Years before I even thought about writing fiction or even journalism I was very fascinated by language. I mean I was my mother's first translator at age four just navigating the neighborhood and negotiating her ongoing battles with neighbors — she was very feisty — so I had to find a way to convey to Mrs. Smith across the street what my mother was saying, but deliberately lose something in the translation. For me that was something I was very fascinated by at an early age. My parents sent me to camp when I was 13 to Europe to learn French. That was when it was cheaper to send me to

Switzerland than to the Catskills to just a regular day camp. I got, at a very early age, the opportunity to study another language. I studied French and I studied German and in college I studied some Russian as well. I didn't get particularly good in any of it. At one point I would say I was pretty fluent in French and reasonable enough in German to get a job in Germany. In other words I was always interested in language in one form or another. A lot of what I write takes place in another language, whether it's in Farsi or Spanish or something else. I am always interested in these kinds of borderlands between languages.

On culture:

CG: I have zero didactic agenda when I write. I mean, in fact, people have said to me at readings — it's usually a woman around my mother's age, but there's always this point at which I have to have this discussion where I say: "I am not in public relations for the Cuban community." "Writer's are not Chambers of Commerce for the culture" and whatever it is that they disagreed about, "oh Santeria is not a true religion" or "oh there was no racism in Cuba before the revolution" — you know nonsense stuff that they would say that I was refuting through the work. I'm interested in character, I'm interested in language and I'm interested in the complexity of these cultural experiences that are not reduced to the same old platitudes, the same old black and white conversation. That is infinitely, infinitely compelling to me.

And on the relationship between language and culture:

LV: It was considered that French was kind of the educated language or the culture language. It was kind of cute or fun to draw those words or phrases into conversation, but with Spanish, for a long time, it was seen as a kind of second-class language. Children who spoke Spanish were seen to have a handicap instead of an asset. That's changed a little bit now, I think, with people being aware of globalization and multi-culturalism. I think in ["My Two Tongues"] I say something about my son being aware at a young age that there was such a power difference because at one time, he must have been about four or five, he was refusing to speak Spanish even though that was his first language and I was still addressing him in Spanish. He would answer in English and he said "How come the Spanish people always work for the English people?" That's how he was able to verbalize it, but he knew, he knew.

CG: There was a point my daughter came to me crying one day and said that the neighbor across the street, the girl who was seven and got this from her mother, said that only maids and gardeners spoke Spanish. This was in Los Angeles in 1997. And it was shocking to me. It's still astonishing to me.

Writing is art and art is written:

LV: I just write [poems] from an impulse, either a strong image or a strong emotion or idea, and they come out and then some happen to be well suited to performance and some more just for the page. You don't know until you try them in front of an audience and see what kind of response you get. Sometimes poems that work really well as spoken word poems are not as strong on the page, or people have a harder time getting into it without the performance aspect.

Actually, my great aunt was really good in the Spanish tradition performing oral poetry by other people — even though I think she also wrote poetry, but my uncle still won't let me look at her

notebooks — but she would perform poetry by other people when I was growing up. That impressed me a lot when I was little because she knew them all by heart, sometimes really long poems — her mind was sharp and she could just do it without missing any words. I remember she used to command everyone's attention and everyone was hanging onto every word. And there are a lot of musicians in my family. I think poetry and music are very closely related.

CG: I read the work aloud a fair amount, especially toward the end. I'm assessing things on a musical basis at that point more than even content 'cause I've kind of worked out the content and, hopefully, the structure so at that point I'm literally listening for music. To me it does sing or have to sing. At that point I make decisions purely on a musical basis — this excessive adjective here or does something not work here or is this passage not fitting in, and then I think of it in terms of movements. That is a stage which everything goes through — that reading aloud, that musical assessment process.

A piece of advice: the correct order is horse then cart.

LV: Read a lot and write a lot. If you read in several languages read in several languages and even if you don't it's good to hear poetry in other languages — there's several websites where you can hear that. Write because you learn by doing and taking classes and going to writer's groups and getting help. You just have to write and be strong enough and secure enough in yourself before you show it to other people.

CG: I can't tell you the number of times people come up to me and ask about publishing opportunities and I'll say "what have you done" and "well, I've just started a short story." They haven't even written yet and they're worried about the end. Don't even worry about that. When you get to the point where you have a piece of work that you feel is singing check back with me — they never do. The ones who are really writing are not thinking like that yet.