

# An Interview with Marjorie Agosín

By Cecelia Rodríguez Milanés

I first met Marjorie Agosín at a Feministas Unidas-sponsored MLA panel in Washington, D.C., in 1989. She, Julia Alvarez, and I were presenting on the topic of U.S. Latina Writers. At the time I was a doctoral student, six months pregnant, and in awe. Both were incredibly kind and so encouraging; I never forgot their warmth and friendship. Afterward I eagerly sought out their work and when I started teaching, assigned their books.

Spanish was my first language, though I came to literacy through English, and while I am bilingual, I appreciated finding Marjorie Agosín's works in face-en-face editions. I could savor the lyrical music in her original Spanish and compare the translator's rendering of her language and ideas. At first it was a risk on my part to teach Marjorie's works. I

*you feel that your mother deferred her dreams so that you and your sibling(s) could achieve and succeed here in the United States?*

**Marjorie Agosín:** I think that when a woman becomes a refugee, an immigrant, [or] an exile, gender plays a huge role. Usually, the man goes out into the new community and the woman stays home, often inside the house, often living through the experience of her husband and children because she's lacking language. So I think that the experience of immigrant women is really an experience of confinement. And I do believe that when we left Chile my mother really gave up who she was.

That revives my guilt. I have to justify my experience and say that I come from a highly intellectual, educated family.

"I think that when a woman becomes a refugee, an immigrant, [or] an exile, gender plays a huge role. Usually, the man goes out into the new community and the woman stays home, often inside the house, often living through the experience of her husband and children because she's lacking language."

had to justify teaching a writer "in translation" in graduate American literature classes. My explanation was that her birth in Baltimore made her, technically, an American—besides the fact that she was educated in the United States and has lived, worked, and written here for over forty years. The other reason was because her poems dealt with many "American" issues, experiences, and concerns, particularly in relation to women. Many students from very different backgrounds had powerfully positive responses to Agosín's work, and so her place in my canon of U.S. Latina writers was confirmed.

This interview was conducted on March 3, 2004, at the University of Central Florida.

**Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés:** *In the documentary A Woman's Place by Amy Serrano, you talked about the need for positive role models for Latina women in the United States. I was struck by your comment that many women defer their dreams by coming to the United States, and then they continue to do so for their families, especially their children.*

*I was thinking of the women you described in A Cross and a Star, and I wondered if your mother had the same experience. Did*

When we came to America my father had a job, and we had a house. We were not starving, and I didn't have a brutal experience with poverty. But my mother gave up everything she was to raise us. She gave up her family. Most of what my mother gave up was her identity as a Chilean woman. In this country she lost all contact with her identity, and she was alone at home. We didn't speak a word of English, so with the little English she knew, she was trying to help us with school. And also my experience of Georgia was quite brutal because we were thrown into a class and told, "Hey, learn English," and that's what we had to do.

*Sink or swim.*

Exactly. And I had teachers who used to tell me that the Hispanic was the worst kind of immigrant this country could ever receive. So all the very brutal experiences of racism, I experienced them. And here I was coming from a country that also had such violent turmoil. But if I had to decide which one was more violent, coming to America was more violent than Chile.

“Race doesn’t manifest itself only through the color of your skin but also in the rhythm of your accent, the clothes you wear, and the way you choose to live.”

*Did your mother have a profession in Chile?*

No. My mother never had a profession. She never had formal education. She finished high school and had one year of university. My father, though he was a liberal thinker and intellectual, was very machista when it came to my mother, and he wanted to have his wife at home. And my mother was accepted to university but she never was allowed to go. And this is a story that my father speaks very little about. I think he’s ashamed. My mother was denied the privilege of a formal education.

*The idea of exile and Diaspora is very common, of course, to all immigrants, and Latino literature is no exception. Puerto Rican poet Víctor Hernández Cruz has said that we are all exiles from somewhere else. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about that.*

*Since you were very young when you were exiled, did you feel that your dreams were deferred? You had an idea of who you were in Chile as a teenager and an idea about the future, how your life was going to be, and then it was not like that at all.*

In a way I’m glad I left Chile, because I became the writer I am. All my life has been to trying to reconstruct a shattered world. It’s almost like gluing back together a vase—a beautiful vase that has been broken and you know that once things are broken you can never reconstruct them again. In Chile I felt that even though we were outsiders because we were Jewish, we had a different political stance, much more to the left than a lot of the people that surrounded us; I had such a secure identity. Chile gave me the world of poetry, the capacity to name things. Chile is such a beautiful country that you are forced in some way to become a poet to describe it. Even the way people fix their homes and paint them colors—there’s vibrancy to it. In Chile I was happy.

Of course we experience pain in adolescence, but I always felt that I had many people who loved me. When I left Chile, I knew I was never going to be loved in the same way.

Coming to America was like purgatory. A friend of mine said that for countries to have a hell they have to have passion and she said that America doesn’t; it’s not good enough for hell. I thought it was a great thing she said. I feel this was purgatory. And on top of it I didn’t speak English.

*Although people would have expected you to. They looked at you and . . .*

Race doesn’t manifest itself only through the color of your skin but also in the rhythm of your accent, the clothes you wear, and the way you choose to live. I always chose to live

in America as if I were still in Chile.

*And even in your own family now you speak Spanish to your children and they have a sense of being Latin American?*

Very much so. In a way, the price of success in America was assimilation, and I didn’t want that.

*I think a lot of earlier immigrants felt that they had to do it. They had no choice, whereas lots of Latinos are now finding that, you know what, we can acculturate. We can take the good things and we can leave the bad.*

And my mother always said that we were lucky because we had the good of both worlds. The Latino world and the American world.

*When I first encountered your work I was amazed that a Latin American woman could eloquently articulate so many American problems that I discerned as a U.S. Latina. Even though you were writing in Spanish, I always needed the face-en-face books in order to confirm that I had truly gotten your meanings. I felt an immediate and powerful connection to your poetry. I actually read you before I read Neruda, so that I read him in light of you. And I thought to myself, it must be a Chilean sensibility that is so lyrical and ethereal, that I feel that quality in your work and in his work. And reading other writers from Chile, María Luisa Bombal, Gabriela Mistral, I realized there’s a national cultural influence. How could you not be influenced by that geography? But while your insights were as keen as Neruda’s, there was an extra inviting layer, your feminine and feminist touch. So the questions that follow will be drawn from the literary influences and perhaps lead to a discussion of feminism from a Latin American and Latina perspective.*

*What literature had you read and were familiar with before being exiled from Chile?*

In reference to what you said about Neruda—I don’t think I could ever equal him, but if my work brought you closer to him, that is a great honor. I was taught to read the great Latin American masters. And I call them masters because I want to use the word master as teacher (maestro). So, as a young elementary school student I grew up with the poetry of Gabriela Mistral. The heroes of our society were not football players or MTV pop culture figures. The hero was the poet Gabriela Mistral. I read María Luisa Bombal when I was eight years old, and I remember in school discussing her stories. The great thing about growing up in Chile is that literature was so important and so real and we explained the world through words and we didn’t separate fact from

fiction. I think that that allowed me as a young girl to believe in imagination.

So I read Mistral, I read Neruda, I read Borges, I read Lezama Lima, Alejo Carpentier. We also read the great Spanish poetry, the generation of '27. And also, you know, in that little country with very limited resources, compared to the United States, we read literature in translation—Czech poetry, Hebrew poetry, German poetry, Italian poetry. We were connected to the world of letters much more than an average U.S. student.

*You come from a family of great storytellers. This is clear from your memoirs, listening to the stories through the voice of your mother (A Cross and a Star), your father (Always from Somewhere Else), and your own (An Alphabet in My Hands). Tell me who was the best storyteller (or story with-holder) and why this person had an impact on you.*

I think that the storyteller is my mother. My mother has always really believed that you must tell stories because they're a part of a responsibility of keeping memory alive. The saga of a family makes sure that this family will continue existing. She used to tell me stories about how her mother came to Chile, and they're very picturesque stories. And the wonderful thing about them is that they're all true—my grandmother arrived in Chile on a mule, the border official couldn't pronounce her name, my grandfather escaped the life of a cabaret dancer in Vienna and took a boat to the last ship of the last port of the world. And my mother told everybody the stories, but I was the only one who listened, because my siblings could care less. My mother allowed me to believe in myth and to believe, and when you really think about it, all that one has is one's story. That's almost like your passport to the world. My mother was really a wonderful conveyer of the family saga, and the one who withdrew the most was my father. But when my mother's book appeared, he felt that he also had to contribute.

*So when you published A Cross and a Star, he said, "I have a story too"?*

I couldn't believe it, because my father is painfully shy.

*It's conveyed in your book. It really has a masculine sensibility to it. I can tell that your father is un hombre formal.*

Yes, formal, exacto.

*There is a difference between personality and tone in A Cross and a Star and Always from Somewhere Else; they are distinct people. So when did it become evident to you that adults actually had stories that would be of interest to you? You said you of your siblings were the one who listened, so were you just naturally drawn to the stories?*

Well, I think that you are born a writer just like you are

born a painter or a musician. It was in me to write or to tell. I became aware that the world of storytelling was a way of freedom, that you were not so constrained by the rituals of daily life. You could almost see beyond the people. It was a good way to gossip about family or even tell lies, but not in a dangerous way. Such storytelling was a way of freedom and of being whimsical about the world around you.

I really thought I could write this down 13 years ago, when I was pregnant with my daughter. That's when I wrote *A Cross and a Star* and when the relationship to my Jewish world and to the Holocaust opened up.

*I know in places you describe yourself as a Latina because of your affiliation to a sort of North American sensibility. When did you notice that there was this thing called Latina, that you were not just Latin American but you were also Latina?*

I am still struggling with what it means to be a Latin American and what it means to be a Latina. And I can tell you, Cecilia, that this country has so many labels, so many classifications that

even we have to take a course.

In my early years of immigration I was a Latin American. My culture, my sensibilities were Latin American, but then the more I lived here, the only way that I could connect and love this country, love it profoundly, was creating alliances with other immigrant groups. It is almost like I saw the mirror of myself. Maybe we arrived in different conditions, maybe the history of a person that escaped Pinochet was very different from a person who escaped Cuba, but the feeling of survival as an immigrant, the feeling of alienation, was mutual.

*Women figure very prominently in your works. Talk to me about feminism in Chile then (when you were growing up) and now. You have returned and done much activist work in Chile. When did you understand what feminism was?*

I understood what feminism was from a very early age, when I used to go with my mother, like all girls do, to the open market to buy food. I saw that 30-year-old women looked much older than 30-year-old men. These women had three or four kids and had lost two. Feminism was real to me.

We had maids in the house. It was very much a part of the middle class/upper middle class. I never want to deny that, but I saw that they had children of their own. Other women were taking care of their children so they could take care of us. I equated the life stories of women with the lives of poverty and constraint and lack of education. As a young girl I used to always tell everyone that I was a feminist. I didn't know then if I even knew the power of the word. And I think that the belief in women is the belief in human rights—and the most important revolutions in history, in the twentieth century and the twenty-first century, have been

**“My mother has always really believed that you must tell stories because they're a part of a responsibility of keeping memory alive.”**

done through women.

*When you came to the United States, you studied at Indiana University and at the University of Georgia. Did you study feminism?*

At Georgia I studied philosophy. It was very abstract, very theoretical, but I've always wanted answers. And I wanted to understand. So I never studied feminism, but when I went to graduate school I only wanted to write. I never took a formal women's studies class in my life, and yet all my work has been on women.

When I started, I wanted to write about the Chilean folk singer Violeta Parra, and all my male professors said don't do it. I wanted to write about another woman; they said don't do it. The only one they accepted was Maria Luisa Bombal, because she was more "official." I realized how dominant the male voice was everywhere in society, especially the academy. I suffered a lot when my female teachers told me that I had to write like a male scholar.

*It's a bitter pill to swallow when your female professors tell you that you should behave, think, and write like a man.*

I had hardly had any female mentors. I had more male mentors. But when we went to graduate school in the seventies, it was very hard. I think that a lot of women felt that they had paid their dues and they had to make the young generation pay. I swore to be the opposite. If people were ungenerous, I was going to show almost boundless generosity. If people had no compassion, my life was going to be dedicated to compassion.

*Now do you read any feminist philosophy or theory?*

Most of my readings now are books written by women. I'm very involved in women's and human rights. And I do read feminist philosophy, although more than the theory of feminism, I'm more interested in the practice of feminism. I'm interested in reading what activists have done. I want for people to actually get out and do things.

*In conjunction with your visit and your public lecture tonight, you have loaned UCF your collection of arpilleras. I first learned of this art/craft form about 10 years ago when a student gave me one as a gift; it has a schoolhouse scene with the children learning the vowels, and I was delighted by all the vibrant colors and touched*

*by her gift. As a Caribbean person born in New Jersey, I had no idea about this art/craft form.*

*In the Caribbean, women expressed their creativity through needlework such as needlepoint (bordar), crochet, and even knitting and sewing—decidedly European traditions. When I first read Alice Walker's wonderful essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" and her much anthologized story, "Everyday Use," I wondered what art Latin American/Latina women left as a legacy. Talk to me about your engagement with the arpilleras and the arpilleristas.*

**"In my early years of immigration I was a Latin American. My culture, my sensibilities were Latin American, but then the more I lived here, the only way that I could connect and love this country, love it profoundly, was creating alliances with other immigrant groups."**

The arpilleras represent women using domestic tools like needle, thread, and embroidery to become subversives. These mothers were searching for their missing children, and the way in which they wanted to tell the story was not through words but through tapestries. The experience was collective. Each woman worked alone on the arpillera, but it was a collective experience of knitting and sewing together. Then they were sent abroad, because it was easier to defy censorship through these apparently naive tapestries. They were a way for the women

to overcome sorrow, to bring their grief into a public story.

*Poetry figures prominently in your life. Do you read poetry every day?*

Every day and every night. Like some people read the Bible or pray, for me, poetry is a place where spirituality and faith and daily-ness connect.

*That's a wonderful way to think about it. I was going to ask you about genre. The genre that you prefer to read, obviously, is poetry.*

Yes. Now, for example, my son wants to get a driver's permit. He says, "Mom, take me to get it." I say, "I don't know where you can get a driver's permit. Joseph, I'm a poet, I'm not supposed to know these things." And he understands. So, it's like the poet is busy with other things, which should be as valued as much as knowing where you can get a permit. The problem is, everyone values knowing where to go to get a permit but not the reading of poetry.

*We've talked about how many women writers who are mothers write early in the morning or late at night. I used to wake at 5:00 a.m. and work for a precious two hours before my household came to life. So when do you write? How much time a day? Do you do it on a computer or notepad?*

I try as much as possible to write every single day. I write in the mornings when my kids are asleep or when, after 8:30, most of them are in school and we are quite free of kids. I'm very disciplined and I've learned to guard my time in a precious way. I wrote a poem called "I don't do lunch." I'm going to read it tonight.

*When do you know the poem/essay/story is done?*

With the essay it's more difficult, because it's a more elaborate process, but the poem is almost like giving birth. You don't know exactly when that baby is going to come out, but the body tells you. With a poem, all of sudden, the creativity tells you it's done. I've learned from my translators to take a break from the poem and revisit it. But the intensity of knowing when the poem is finished, it happens by itself.

*I'm going to go to the question about translation. I like being able to read you in two languages. In my class, we have read and discussed the works of writers working between Spanish and English, such as the Nuyorican poets. My students are intrigued, as I am, about your working relationship with a given translator. How closely do you work with your translators?*

When we do a work of poetry, it's extremely close, because with poetry, every single word contains a universe. I agonize over the words. But with prose it's simpler.

*So you can relinquish a lot of your vigilance when you are having prose translated?*

Yes. I think I'm lucky because I speak English. I can suggest better words, better ways of saying things. When we did *A Cross and a Star*, I paid a lot of attention because that was a work of poetry, but a lot of the essays are easier.

*Do you have any power to choose a translator?*

Usually when I do a special project.

*So you approach a translator and then approach the publisher?*

Yes. I have a lot of people willing to translate what I do and want to do it. I feel lucky.

*The last set of questions is related to the canon of Latina/o literature and finding a place for your work in it. Yesterday we started to talk about the dearth of criticism, especially in English, about your work but also about Latino/a literature in general. There isn't a lot of criticism. This scarcity is especially evident when the writer writes in Spanish or Spanglish, or creates seamlessly bilingual texts, as does Tato Laviera.*

*Speaking as a writer, what do you feel is the role of literary criticism in general and specifically for the emerging field of Latino/a Studies?*

I think literary criticism is very important. It has to move from indoctrinating people to believe that this is the canon. I think Latino literary criticism should be, by its nature, revolutionary, open, almost what feminist theory was in the


sixties and seventies. And it should really take into account so many issues like the issue of language displacement. It should be able to unite culture with theory, human affection with analysis. So if we are to create a generation of young critics, the whole understanding of Latino literature could be one of the most important tools to understand the future of ethnic literature in this country, minority writings that will no longer be minority.

*You were saying earlier that it is a global literature. It's not a literature that belongs in one place.*

No; in fact, anticipating your next question, which I read and know that it is coming: Who do I write for? I want to be considered a writer for a universal audience. And that's ambitious, but I also think that human experience is universal. And I think that I've been able to touch people from the Middle East, from Latin America, from Pakistan, people who have been expelled.

*One of the things I always say to students is that for me, the idea of universalism has been one of elitism. The ones that are almost always considered universal are the most elitist writers. For me, the most specific is the universal.*

Absolutely. I think that's one of the wonders about being an immigrant. In a way you lose a sense of place, but the whole world becomes your home.

**Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés** was born in New Jersey to Cuban parents. She went to high school and college in Miami, earned her doctorate at the State University of New York at Albany, and is an associate professor of Latino/a Literature and writing at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. 



**CRIZMAC**

Celebrate the mask-making carnivals of Puerto Rico and much more with the one-of-a-kind **CRIZMAC Interdisciplinary Curriculum**

**BOBBIQUÉN— Then and Now, The Art and Culture of Puerto Rico**

Includes: 122 pp. Teacher's Guide and Seven Full-color Art Prints

To order or request a free catalog call **1-800-913-8555**, or visit **www.crizmac.com**.

Other Puerto Rican resources include:  
▼ slides ▼ books ▼ music ▼

CRIZMAC Art & Cultural Education Materials, Inc.  
P.O. Box 65928, Tucson, AZ 85728  
Fax 520.323.5194