

"Multi-hyphenated identities on the road": An Interview with Cristina García

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Cuban American novelist and poet Cristina García composes poignant, meandering, and wonderfully absurd stories of families forced from their homelands by war or circumstance. Her characters are often adrift, left placeless in a world she envisions as treacherous as it is magical, seeking an ever elusive "home." Her fascination with the subsequent identity crises her unrooted characters face stems from her own wayward wanderings, as her family was among the first wave of migrants to abandon Cuba after Fidel Castro's rise to power. While her family settled in New York City, they nonetheless drifted between predominantly Irish, Italian, and Jewish neighborhoods. It is no wonder that so much of García's early work is committed to chronicling the difficulties of establishing a stable sense of selfhood or community for the families of the Cuban diaspora. However, her later work explores characters that she refers to as "multi-hyphenated," individuals that collect, compound, or shed their identities as often as they move across countries, borders, and oceans. She often credits her multi-hyphenated daughter, Pilar—part Cuban, part Japanese, part American—for the inspiration to write such characters. Drawing on these personal experiences, García crafts stories rife with contradiction—worlds grounded in history and touched by magic, populated with believable characters born of impossible circumstance to face absurd adversities and whose lives induce tears, laughter, and joy in her readers.

García's work has been translated into fourteen languages, reflective of the global nature of her oeuvre. Among her many accolades, she has been awarded a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, a Whiting Writers' Award, a Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University, the Northern California Book Award, and a National Endowment for the Arts grant. She achieved immediate literary recognition for her debut novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), which was a finalist for the National Book Award. This celebrated novel explores the drama of the Del Pino family, divided geographically by the Cuban revolution and ideologically by competing political allegiances to Fidel Castro or life in the United States. García continued to explore the psychological and cultural violence enacted on such divided families in her follow-up novel, *The Agüero Sisters* (1997), which won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize. Her third novel, *Monkey Hunting* (2003), expands her

vision of Cuban history as she follows the family of a former indentured Chinese servant in Cuba across four generations and three continents. This expanded scope has in many ways transformed her work, and her two subsequent novels take on a decidedly more global perspective. The first, *A Handbook to Luck* (2007), focuses on three teenagers cast away from Cuba, El Salvador, and Iran, whose lives are thrown together by war, disillusionment, love, and chance. *The Lady Matador's Hotel* (2010) brings together in an unnamed Central American capital characters with multi-hyphenated identities from such places as Germany, Korea, Mexico, Japan, Cuba, and the United States. Against the backdrop of violent political upheaval, García's cosmic tale wrestles with gender, politics, revolution, and passion—all entangled with a need for vengeance. Her latest novel, *King of Cuba* (2013), returns to her native country to tell a wry and absurd tale of an aging Fidel Castro and an exiled Cuban patriarch still plotting his revenge. García satirizes a generations-old feud, where each side clings to life in order to outlive the other.

Aside from her novels, García has also written three well-received children's books and *The Lesser Tragedy of Death* (2010), a collection of original poetry. In 2008, she staged a reading of her play *From the Black Root* in Hartford, Connecticut. She has also edited collections on contemporary Cuban literature and contemporary Mexican and Chicana/o literature. She is a committed creative writing professor, having held positions at the University of Texas at Austin, Texas State University, Texas Tech University, the University of Miami, and four different University of California campuses, to name just a few. Beginning her writing career as a correspondent for *Time* magazine, García continues her journalistic endeavors by contributing fiction, features, essays, and travel writing to *The Washington Post Magazine*, *BOMB*, *Islands Magazine*, *Latina Magazine*, *Cigar Aficionado*, and other publications.

I conducted this interview with Cristina García on the telephone on 29 July 2015, supplemented with email correspondence in February 2016. We first met in Athens, Georgia, when she gave the plenary address at the MELUS conference in March 2015. She graciously agreed to an interview despite her busy teaching schedule that summer. Our conversation focuses on her novels, particularly *Monkey Hunting*, *Handbook to Luck*, and *King of Cuba*. My interest in her work began in the classroom, as I used *Dreaming in Cuban* to discuss both trauma theory and the literatures of Latin American diasporas. Recently, I have grown particularly interested in her explorations of the connections between Asia and Latin America, a recurrent theme in her later novels. Our discussion begins with these subjects before transitioning to questions about larger motifs in her work, such as humor and absurdity, and her career as a professor of creative writing. We close with a brief discussion of her current project, tentatively titled *Dear Visitor*, which takes place in Berlin, Germany. García's captivation with the multiple possibilities for reinvention brought about by the traumas of exile for those cast out of their

home countries by revolution, economic despair, or wanderlust permeates our entire conversation, either consciously or as subtext. The interview has been edited for concision and clarity.

Jorge Santos: I know you have probably fielded many questions about *Dreaming in Cuban*. I am very eager to discuss your later work, but we should start at the top. *Dreaming in Cuban*, as you well know, was very successful for a first novel, with numerous accolades and reprints. How would you say that your early success affected your writing moving forward, if at all?

Cristina García: It actually paralyzed me for a while. The same year it came out I also had a daughter, so I was in that wind tunnel of early motherhood. I didn't realize how tough it would be to come back from that. So when I surfaced from that and started working on something else I was frozen for a time. I ended up working on a novel that I never published, a character of which survived into *The Agüero Sisters*. It was really my one and only stretch of writer's block and it lasted about two years. Thanks, *Dreaming in Cuban* [laughs].

JS: Pilar is the name of your daughter and the main character of *Dreaming in Cuban*. Which came first?

CG: Actually, her dad and I had the name "Pilar" picked out for a future daughter years before the character. So I actually asked [him] if I could borrow our future daughter's name for the book. Before that, the character was named "Natalia" until the last two drafts. They both debuted in 1992.

JS: The same year? How cosmic! That's so appropriate, considering how much you write about the interplay of magic, fate, and chance. I almost do not believe you.

CG: It's true, it's true, I swear!

JS: Since we brought up your daughter, you have mentioned in other interviews that you think of her as having an identity with multiple hyphens.¹ What insights do you think you have developed through the writing of characters with compound identities?

CG: I think what interests me is how multi-hyphenated identities differ from people who might see themselves as having a single identity. For example, I always think of myself as Cuban American even though my father is technically Guatemalan with just the one hyphen. This is very different for someone like my daughter managing three or four hyphens. What I found is that she has a bit of a smorgasbord approach. My daughter, depending on whose she's with, will lean more heavily towards one hyphen or the other, which she balances with all

the other things she also is: a musician, an anthropologist, a traveler. What I've learned is that when you are less heavily immersed with negotiating the other side of the hyphen, you have a much more fluid sense of identity.

JS: In regard to these fluid relationships, I want to ask you about *Monkey Hunting*. In that novel, you explore the historical and cultural connections between China and Cuba, and you make other connections between Asia and Latin America, such as the character Suki from *Lady Matador Hotel*. I was wondering if you could comment on what draws you to connect characters of Asian descent to those of Latin American or Latina/o backgrounds.

CG: From a very early age, I was fascinated by Asian culture. As a girl, I always clamored to go to Chinatown, and I loved going to Chinese Cuban restaurants. It took me a very long time to finally get to Asia. It was intimidating—I didn't know any of the languages! But I felt an "at homeness" in the literature, and I don't know where that comes from. It's something subterranean. I read everything in translation, of course, from Japanese literature to ancient Chinese poetry. Geographically, it's as far away as you can get from Cuba. Yet, when I was trying to find my way in the world, the Cuban part of me felt so heavy. But the farther I got from Cuba, through literature or friendships, the more intrigued I became in this "at homeness." It doesn't surprise me that I now have a half-Japanese daughter.

JS: I am intrigued by the word "subterranean." I think there is something to that, this ineffable something that I have never thought about until I encountered your work. I love Asian and Asian American literature, but it is an interest I never really think about so deliberately as when I encounter your work.

CG: Cool [laughs]. I admit I do follow obsessions wherever they lead, and that has certainly been a consistent one for me for a long, long time. When I was researching for *Monkey Hunting*, it was the shortest book that took me the longest to write because of that research. So I joined a multidisciplinary working group at UCLA—from history, economics, psychology, and sociology—that kept me honest. This group looked specifically at Asians in the Americas from their various fields and at what accommodations and expectations those migrations had to negotiate. What fascinates me is the constant opportunities for reinvention offered by these migrations or transmigrations. This is certainly something I discussed particularly in *Handbook to Luck*.

JS: Since you mentioned migration and reinvention, I want to ask about movement across countries, something many of your novels are very interested in. Many of your characters often have a sense of restlessness, even placelessness, and they all respond differently. Obviously, some are part of a diaspora, but other

characters yearn for the freedom that comes with not being tied to a place. In contrast, other characters seemed trapped by their loyalty to their homelands. How does place or placelessness shape the human stories in your writing?

CG: That's such an interesting question. Personally, I was marked by my parents' dislocation after they left Cuba, so I think on some cellular level I carry the nostalgia of so many other Cuban exiles. I spent my entire childhood downwind from the torch carried by the exiles, and it affected me deeply. It just became part of what I inhale and what I exhale. But I also feel that this is a borrowed nostalgia, fed not by actual memory. It's a nostalgia distorted by longing, distorted by loss, distorted beyond any semblance of reality. So this notion of "home"—I think it's very illusive and elusive. I have had a longing for home, but I've never felt like I really had one. It's almost like longing for a theoretical family as opposed to an actual family—especially not my mother or my family [laughs]. But there is a gap, a chronic sense of displacement. You are never at home *at home*. But for me, "home" is not what I am after. What I am after is a sequential and refracted and complicated understanding as I move through the world. So maybe that's why my characters are all on the run or yearn for places they can't have.

JS: In regards to *The Lady Matador Hotel* specifically, the characters do not only yearn for places they cannot have. Your cast of world travelers also thirst for various forms of vengeance.

CG: There's one character, an ex-guerrilla now working as a waitress in the hotel's coffee shop, who is definitely out for a very specific, bloody revenge. But I think the other characters' personal and political quests are subtler, more quixotic, illusive and elusive both. I'm not sure any of them can ever fully make things right, perhaps *especially* if they were ever to achieve their goals.

JS: That leads to my next question. Your early work was very invested in mapping the psyche of the Cuban diaspora. However, *Lady Matador Hotel* and *Handbook to Luck* move well beyond the United States and Cuba. We might even refer to them as global novels. While Cuba always appears a sort of pivot point in your work, is it fair to say that your vision has expanded in these later two novels?

CG: I always thought of those first three novels as a sort of loose trilogy that explored the various facets of the Cuban experience. After *Dreaming in Cuban*, I wanted to expand past the revolution to a fuller sense of Cuban history that didn't begin and end with Fidel Castro and exile. I wanted to go back in time and look at the Chinese in Cuba in *Monkey Hunting* or the denaturing or the deforestation of the island in *The Agüero Sisters*. I needed different prisms to look at Cuba. These aren't the only ones, of course, but they were three that really interested me. But after living in LA for twenty years, I felt ready to tackle

different kinds of migrations and reinventions, different diasporas and dislocations. So for *The Lady Matador's Hotel*, I thought, "Why not take these multi-hyphenated identities on the road?" All the characters are in this temporally liminal space since the novel essentially takes place over the course of a week in a single luxury hotel. In a way, all the characters are doubly deracinated—not at home while having to navigate various temporalities on top of that. It puts pressure on them in a way that elucidates the extenuating pressures on individual immigrants already dealing with issues of identity.

JS: I have to say, "Why not take these multi-hyphenated identities on the road?" sounds like an awesome mixtape.

CG: [Laughs] Oh, I'll be waiting for you to send me that!

JS: You say you want to take these characters on the road, but in your latest novel, that road brought you back to Havana. What inspired your return to the island in *King of Cuba*?

CG: What inspired me was the fact that my parents' generation is on its last legs. I wondered if anyone, aside from their own self-aggrandizing, had really chronicled them or done them justice in fiction. Of course, I couldn't help skewering and parodying them a little—it was too irresistible; I'm only human. But it was time. They are disappearing from the planet, and I wanted to get them in the last throes—chronicle what they were doing in their last days, their last obsessions. For they will pass, and the generations behind them will write their own histories. I also wanted to give a more nuanced voice to the sixty-year shouting match between Cuba and its exiles. I couldn't write El Comandante [Fidel Castro] in *Dreaming in Cuban*, but I could in *King of Cuba* because of the perspective that I have earned. It's something that I had to grow into. In a way, it bookends nicely with *Dreaming in Cuban* since that novel was female dominated and this one is so "macho."

JS: Now that diplomatic relationships between Cuba and the United States are beginning to normalize, how do you think that will affect your work moving forward?

CG: Well, I honestly don't know. I am tempted to go back, but I am working on something else entirely right now. Mostly, I feel like I am watching from my balcony like an observer, but I don't feel the urge to chronicle this change. There are so many new and younger writers right now, and I think maybe this will be their turf. I encourage all my students to go to Cuba. And I'll be waving a white handkerchief from the shore, shouting, "Good luck! Good Luck!"

JS: You mentioned how you parodied El Comandante in *King of Cuba*, so I want to ask how you use humor to texture all the human dramas in your novels. At times,

the character's individual traumas are, well, traumatizing to read. Yet, other times, they seem to reach such a level of absurdity that I actually find myself laughing out loud. I am thinking specifically of the scene in *King of Cuba* where Castro tempts the hunger strikers with a banquet, which is simultaneously disturbing and darkly hilarious. Am I wrong to read these moments as finding the line between tragedy and comedy in a way that heightens the trauma but also manages to make us laugh?

CG: Well, the reader becomes the judge. I do like to go right to the edge of acute absurdity where it's both traumatic and kind of outrageous. In this sense, it can be both appalling and provide a crazed relief.

JS: I am both El Salvadorian and a poker player, so I have to ask about *A Handbook to Luck*.

CG: El Salvadorian *and* a poker player? Oh my, that book was basically written for you.

JS: I felt that way many times while reading it. That book and I have a special friendship. I was curious about your use of poker in that book and how it relates as either motif or metaphor to other themes in that book, such as magic, luck, or chance encounter?

CG: Well, do you think poker is more skill and bravado than luck?

JS: I feel like you are asking me to interpret your work.

CG: By all means, be my guest [laughs].

JS: Well, I've always thought of poker as, at least symbolically, where skill and fortune meet.

CG: I think for Enrique [the poker-playing teenager in *Handbook to Luck*], growing up in Las Vegas with a magician for a father, poker just offered him the best odds. He wasn't going to go to MIT. I think for him, under those circumstances, he believes that poker will make his name in a way his father never could and that he will surpass his father by being consistently good at something. I think it was a psychological need on his part to tip his hat to chance. On the other hand, he wanted to wrest his destiny away from the inconsistencies of his father.

JS: I am glad that you brought up fathers. You have said in the past that you have had difficulty writing male characters. More specifically, I was hoping you could talk a little bit about how you write father figures. Fathers are present in all your novels, typically refracted through children. They can be wise, hilarious parodies

or even familial myths. How do you approach writing fathers and their relationships to their children?

CG: Admittedly, I understand mother-daughter connections and traumas more viscerally. I am a mother myself, after all. But fathers have always felt remote and mysterious to me. My own father was around, but he wasn't around. He was always working, so I typically only saw him on Sunday afternoon. He would cut my meat into tiny pieces, not realizing that I was twelve and didn't need him to do that. So for the longest time, fathers always felt like remote and rather beneficent figures. Sometimes powerless but not evil. There's a domestic innocuousness about fathers, but on the public stage of patriarchy, they can be more harmful and damaging. In the Cuban context, they are capable of choking off reason. The private and public *paterfamilias* are not always the same.

JS: Could you comment further on the "domestic innocuousness of fatherhood" and how that intersects with public/political patriarchy?

CG: When I was growing up, it was my mother who ruled the home, who ran the police state that was our family. My father trundled in and out, occasionally enlisted to be her "enforcer" on the domestic front. Yet, out in the world, my father was a semicompetent businessman and had affairs with other women and a much higher profile than he was permitted at home. I felt that dissonance acutely and, consequently, am quite sensitive to the gulf between people's private and public lives. I've wondered, at times, whether the public intransigence of male Cuban politicians isn't related to a kind of political impotence at home.

JS: That is a potent contradiction. In fact, contradiction shapes many of your stories.

CG: Contradiction is the lifeblood of fully rendered characters and situations, politically charged or not. There is nothing duller than predictability. If characters don't surprise you, exasperate you, or ambush you with their contradictions, then they're not yet fully alive. Each and every one of us (writers or not) has to be able to look in the mirror and imagine the perpetrator in ourselves, to know how far we would go if our lives depended on it. Fictional characters are no different. It's what makes us human.

JS: Let us shift gears a little bit and talk about your love of poetry. You have talked in the past about how poetry shapes both your prose and your thematic content. You have used or referenced José Martí more than once in your work. Would you give us a little insight as to his influence on your work?

CG: Well, I haven't really ever noticed that, but I have read him quite thoroughly. I've read everything—journalism, letters, diary, poetry—but it feels like such a

long time ago. Maybe he has become part of the water table of what I think about when I write, but I don't consciously think about José Martí, to be honest. I think he was just part of my cultural reclamation project when I was first immersing myself in everything Cuban in order to write my early novels. It was one thing to be raised Cuban, but I had a lot to learn about the literature and the wider culture of the island. I grew up isolated in New York with only a few cousins, so I did not have the broader experience of living in Miami or the island itself. For me, José Martí was a sort of early ambassador to those worlds. He is also the one writer everyone claims as his or her own. No one fights *about* José Martí, they fight *over* him.

JS: Since we are talking about potential influences, magical realism has always been a thread in your work, especially in your early novels. And Gabriel García Márquez himself is in *King of Cuba*, correct?

CG: Yup, that's him! It wasn't very imaginative calling him "Babo" instead of "Gabo," but, oh well.

JS: The fact that I was able to figure it out makes me feel like I was in on a joke. Could you comment on the continued influence of magical realism in your work?

CG: Early in my career, I felt a lot freer and looser with magical elements in my work. In fact, it's interesting that you brought this up because just last week I wrote in the margins of my draft "more magic!" The work I'm doing now is underpinned by so much history that it felt quite remnant. I wanted more light, more sense of the absurd, more hallucinations. Things that could not be accounted for or pinned down. I think I need to find a way back to that because I don't think anything illuminates reality more than the surreal.

JS: In our email exchanges, you mentioned that you were on the road teaching as a visiting professor. What is it like in a Cristina García classroom?

CG: I'll give you an example from my politics and literature class, which I've taught a few times in various incarnations. In that class, I look at the cultural production—fiction, nonfiction, poetry, graphic novels, films—that arise from political upheaval around the world. I focus on work that not only captures the spirit, essence, and texture of the time but that does so with great artistic merit. So often works that contain any sort of politics are dismissed as polemical. But politics is the context in which we all live and navigate our lives, so it's become a personal mission to move my students beyond autobiographical or domestic dramas, to live and interact with the world in a larger way. I choose books that amplify students' sense of their own narrative possibilities, such as Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (1998) or Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955). Works that

explode their notions of what it is to write, what it is to tell a story, what the "rules" are. I assign books that break the rules and manage to be transcendent and beautiful. For me, it's a fairly clear mission.

JS: Is there a relationship between the way you conceive of teaching in the classroom and the way you imagine your readerships? Are there similar pedagogical goals motivating your writing?

CG: To me, my students and my readers are quite different. I love teaching and, for me, it's an opportunity to share the fire, the secret knowledge, the stories—as if we all belonged to a tribe we're desperately fighting to preserve against extinction. A common love and willed survival both. I've never met a serious student for whom literature had not saved his or her life. As for readers, my hope is to seduce them into my story and keep them immersed in what I hope is its substance, humor, and beauty.

JS: What is one question you wish people would ask you about your work?

CG: No one has ever asked me about the repeating iconographies that surface again and again in all my books. All kinds of birds, for example, there are all kinds of birds in my books. No one has ever asked me about the birds! Why birds?

JS: So, why birds?

CG: Well, I think from about the mid-nineties forward, I have become a fairly avid bird watcher. I put up hummingbird feeders wherever I live to watch their acrobatics. If I can help it, they are always in my line of vision. I always turn to birds for metaphor, for color, for relief, for release, for a sense of transience and impermanence. They are the constant and conscious icons in all my work. It began with *The Agüero Sisters*. I was living in Hawaii, and I became fascinated by the migrant birds, many of which were wintering from Alaska in the Hawaiian Islands. That's when the love affair began.

JS: You have mentioned that your next novel takes place in Berlin. Can you preview what you are working on now?

CG: It's tentatively called *Dear Visitor*. It's essentially a compendium of many distinct voices telling their stories to an unnamed visitor in Berlin, an outsider who is not a part of their society. I don't know who is going to make it into the final version, but the voices range from an ex-Stasi agent who worked as an international homosexual decoy, to the story of a woman who was entombed by her husband to save her life during World War II, to the story of a Cuban kid who was kidnapped onto a German submarine for five months. There is a clarinetist long retired from the philharmonic whose father committed suicide toward the end of the war. I

had eighty of these stories at one point, and now I am down to about thirty-five. Each one, whether two pages or ten, works as a separate universe, yet is connected to the rest. I find it very interesting and challenging, like directing a choir.

JS: Well, I look forward to reading my signed copy in the future.

CG: You can count on it!

Note

1. See García's interview with Scott Shibuya Brown (1992).

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