

Silvio Torres-Saillant

WRITING HAS TO BE GENEROUS: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANGIE CRUZ

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STS I would like us to begin speaking about your name, “Angie.” Is it your name as it was given or an endearing shortening of “Angela”?

AC I like to think of it as a name that came out of resistance because of the way my mother and father got married which was not completely an agreement with her, but more like an arranged marriage, you know, *tipo dominicano*. Here comes this guy from New York who does very well; “you should marry him,” her family said and she did for the family’s sake. When she came to New York, and I was born, he wanted to call me Angela, but my mother didn’t want to agree with anything he wanted. So she called me Angie.

STS Your answer brings to mind one point in *Soledad* where one learns that Olivia’s father is anxiously waiting for her to grow up so she can be married off to someone, and I thought I should ask you this question: Can we really attribute arranged marriages to the Dominican Republic?

AC I think that’s the easiest way to translate what I have seen happen to so many women in my mother’s generation, which is probably still happening now, though I am not that in touch. We don’t call it that --- arranged marriages --- but what do you call it when you have all these young girls whose families pressure them into marrying for either better lives or education or to come live in the States?

STS Perhaps marriage of opportunity or convenience more than out of anything one might call “love.”

AC You might be right!

STS Give us your date and place of birth.

AC I was born on February 24th, 1972, in New York City’s Washington Heights at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

STS How would you characterize your childhood?

AC My mother would say that I had it so much easier than she did, but I remember of my childhood, that I was home a lot and followed very strict rules. I had to take care of my brother because my mother was a single mom. She divorced my father when I was around six. So while she was putting herself through college and trying to work and pay the bills, I was basically responsible for my little brother. I remember a lot of chores, a lot of chores. But I also found time to play and go behind my mother's back and do all the things that young girls do. When my mother divorced my father, she brought all her family here to New York so I grew up with a big family.

STS Did your parents divorce in New York?

AC Yes, they divorced here when I was six. After the divorce the whole maternal side of the family came to NY: my grandmother, my grandfather, and my mother's five brothers and sisters. We did all the very common things in an immigrant family, a lot of people in one apartment until my mom's siblings established themselves and they went to college. So it was crowded. We lived in Washington Heights on 165th Street and Broadway.

STS I recall that area as a rather notorious spot, a place which, at least in the late 80s and early 90s, many viewed as a brood of drug activity, a dangerous locality.

AC Yes, and also it was the border of danger. Eventually, most of my family moved to 164th St. The novel takes place on 164th because I have a strong love for that street since I spent so much time growing up there. 164th was really hot. 165th St. was facing New York Presbyterian Hospital. The hospital served as kind of protection from that one street, and we occupied the border of what was "good" and "bad".

STS Has the geography changed a lot since then? I know a lot of construction has taken place there in that part of the city.

AC Actually right now, right across the street from the building where I grew up, they are building a hotel for the hospital's patients, which is going to change the neighborhood dramatically. Before, there was a parking lot there.

STS But things stand more or less as you remember them in terms of the streets and the architectural structures?

AC Everything is exactly the same except for the Audubon building, the site where Malcolm X was killed, right across from the building I grew up in, which is now remodeled and is owned by Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center. Back in the day it was burnt down.

STS How important was education for your mom?

AC It was extremely important. It's interesting for me to see how our family compared to other families that we grew up around. My brother and I both went to college. I then pursued graduate studies and so did my brother. My mother went to college and her two brothers whom she brought to this country both obtained masters.

STS So they mastered the English language and crossed cultural barriers?

AC They mastered the English language, and they went for graduate degrees and are professionals. One of my uncles went to SUNY Stony Brook and then he went to UCLA to study Spanish literature. Then he went back to Stony Brook to get his graduate degree in business administration and now he is earning another Master's degree in education. My other uncle did Computer Science at City College and math education. He is now a teacher.

STS What did your mom do?

AC My mother studied accounting, and she's still trying to finish college. Her trying to get us all through college has hindered her own effort to finish college. But I think she is going to finish soon. We are hoping; we are crossing our fingers. It's been slow.

STS Where did you go to school?

AC I went to catholic school through the 8th grade. Then I attended one of the city's specialized high schools. LaGuardia School of the Arts and was an art major. Then I went to FIT- Fashion Institute of Technology. Initially I stayed in New York City to study fashion design. It took me about 4 years to finish a two-year degree because I was working full-time. I've had to work since the age of 13. Going to school and working have always gone hand in hand for me. Soon I began craving my independence because I had to share my room with my brother, and I couldn't stand it anymore. He was 17 and I was 18, and I was doing quite well financially. I was managing a store on Madison Avenue selling cashmere. So I told my mom "I'm ready to move out," and I did. That's why it took me so long to finish this 2-year degree in fashion design. Then I began to feel so unhappy because I was trapped in this world of material survival: "I have to pay the rent, I have to work." I really didn't know what I wanted. All I knew was that this place where we're supposed to arrive yielded no satisfaction. Finally, I had my own space. I was living in the Upper East Side, on 83rd street and Lexington and at this place I felt, "Oh my God, where have I arrived"? Completely unhappy, I was also totally overworked. What changed my whole life was my discovery of writing.

STS Did your mother present any objection to your moving out?

- AC** She wasn't happy. She felt like it was a personal attack because she's still of the old school, though she is modernizing a little bit now. But she said " why are you going to leave when you can stay here and save money until it's time?" I was so young. I think when I finally moved out I turned 19. But she also knew that there was no way she could hold me back. I was making more money than she was, so she had to admit that her little girl was ready.
- STS** You had the credentials of a firm location in the job market.
- AC** She was probably afraid, afraid for me, thinking that now I had an apartment, that I might start sleeping around, you know, all the things that worry overprotective Dominican parents. They think you can't be alone or someone's going to take you.
- STS** Well, I myself confess to some of that. I don't want my children's pictures appearing in a milk carton. If it comes to a choice, I'd much rather have them traumatized by the limits I impose on them. But, of course, you can't deal with young women that way when they become old enough to know what they want.
- AC** Well, the thing is too that my mother's fears were so much informed by the thought of losing me to men, when, really, I was so preoccupied with how I was going to pay the rent that I didn't even have time to think about who I was going to get lost with. So I feel her fears had little to do with my reality.
- STS** You said you discovered writing?
- AC** Yes.
- STS** But first you must have discovered books.
- AC** Actually, no. It was really the other way around. I always feel like the most fraudulent writer on the planet because I did not experience a literary calling to speak of. I went to art school, so you would think that art was part of my life.
- STS** Would that explain why the character of Soledad is an artist?
- AC** I made Soledad an artist because when I was in art school I never thought that I could be an artist. I just thought art was a subject for classes I could take. I thought artists were Picasso and Goya, all of these dead white men. I never ever saw myself as an artist. But I could see myself as a fashion designer because there is Oscar De La Renta. It's this simple. It was so simple in my head.
- STS** Oscar de la Renta's being Dominican gave you confidence, which would suggest that for you the barrier to art was more one of ethnicity than of gender.

AC Yes, it seemed so at that point in time because art was so far-fetched, a thing for other people, a white thing, a European thing.

AC No one ever told me while I was in high school that there was Frida Khalo, or Diego Rivera or Romare Bearden, anything that's connected to my life. But I knew there was Oscar De La Renta who is Dominican. I thought, well, maybe I too can do it, and I sort of just took that path. So books, there were some. I mean, I read some books during high school, but while I was in high school I was working 30 to 40 hours a week so I didn't really have a sense of the intellectual life.

STS You worked your way through high school whereas many people feel they can brag about working their way through college, as did Richard Nixon in his famous "Checker's" speech.

AC I had to work. We were so financially strapped. And, of course, growing up here we were such consumers. We were young and wanted things, but we knew our mother couldn't afford to give us that much. We were such a tight unit: me, my brother, and my mother. My brother worked. I remember him working 50 hours at Wendy's downstairs to just help pay the bills, because my father was definitely financially hands off. I didn't think about books. Here is my story about how I started writing: I was working at a cashmere store on Madison Avenue that would get celebrities walking in all the time. One day Bill Cosby walked in. I'm going to shorten the story because it is very long. Basically he said to me one day "what is it that you do?," and I said "what do you mean?" He actually asked me what I did, and no one ever asks salespersons what they do, what they want, what do they dream. You are just the salesperson. I said "well, I study fashion design, but," and he goes "but, I hear a but, what's the but?" I answered "I don't know," but he continued prodding "what do you want, what do you want?" I finally said, "You know, I wish I could be a bohemian artist or a writer or something." He then asked "if you were a writer, what would you say?, What do you want to say?" I realized I didn't know. "Perhaps I would talk about this guy that I saw in the train today and it pissed me off that he couldn't get something to eat." I really didn't know how to express my concerns; I didn't know how to articulate ideas. All these things I learned in college about ideology, and racism, were things for which I didn't have the language. I only had the feelings. I reacted to marginalization, to being a Latina and not being around Latinos as often, to leaving home and feeling that my family felt this rejection because I left. So I had a lot of stories but I didn't know I had stories. All I knew is that if I could write and express myself. Cosby very firmly said, "OK, then write, write!" He gave me this photograph of himself, and on it he wrote "write!" He was just so kind. For a while he would nurture me and he would ask, "Are you writing, are you writing?"

STS He would drop by regularly?

AC Yes, and we got to know each other. He really cared, and he opened up my consciousness about what it means to be mulata, and what it means to think about identity. So I did this thing with him on television. He offered me an opportunity to write a children's story for Black Entertainment Television. I wrote the story. I got to write four stories for the show, and he read them on television. My family thought this was such a big deal. Then I felt that I could be a writer, and he said "No, no, no. Now you've got to go to school," and I took his advice. That was the time when I was still trying to finish up my associates degree at FIT. Then I applied to SUNY Binghamton. I knew that unless I left the city there was no way that I was going to be able to go to school and really think about getting an education or it could take me four more years, and I was terrified to be in school that long. So I went to Binghamton, and I lost contact with him, which was fine because I felt like he had served his purpose, which was to put me on the path. He truly changed my life.

STS What happened at Binghamton?

AC When I went to SUNY Binghamton, I discovered African American literature. I actually started with slave narratives and just fell in love with them. I learned there that our people speak, that they have a history and have been documenting our stories for ages.

ST Your saying "our people" suggest that you felt a sense of kinship with African Americans.

AC Oh, completely! I never think of us as disconnected from the African experience. I mean we are African diaspora and it is just that we have suffered different geographic displacements. Someone told me the Dominican Republic was just one big plantation. Imagine that. That's our history, a history of plantation, and I had never thought about it that way.

ST Actually the whole Caribbean can be seen as sharing a plantation experience that has shaped the lives of people in the region.

AC I started with slave narratives. I had this teacher Carole Boyce Davies who was teaching at Binghamton. I went to her and I said, "you know what Carole, I just want to learn." She said, "OK, start with Cristina Garcia and Sandra Cisneros. She just threw books at me and urged me to read. I would then eat them up, and it was amazing. When I read Sandra and Cristina I said, "Oh my God, Latinas also can write." I knew that they could write, I just didn't know that they would ever be out there or published in the world. I have read avidly since then. Because I discovered literature so late, I feel like so much of the literature I read is Caribbean, African diasporic which some people say is detrimental and many even say that I'm not even educated. And this is a very interesting issue for me. I was having this conversation with a very well known writer who said "you're not educated unless you read the *Odyssey*, and the *Iliad*, and *Middlemarch*, and I said

but is it really fair to say that? Have you read all of Toni Morrison, and all the works of James Baldwin? I think that sometimes we put so much weight on the canonical writings and forget other things.

STS I would add that often we are obsessed with only one particular canon, namely the Western canon. The writer you allude to will probably not insist on our reading the great works of other cultures, Chinese culture, Japanese culture, Arabian culture, Persian culture. So theirs is not really a concern with knowledge but a predilection for the knowledge produced by the West.

AC Right. So I've been obsessed with reading history books because literature opened for me all the questions about the past. I started reading books about Cuba and the Revolution. I was fascinated by the Revolution and how it happened. I asked myself "when is our revolution going to happen?"

STS Help me with the chronology here. You went to Binghamton in 1994, having finished at FIT the previous semester. You then came out of Binghamton with a BA in 1997, and you were about to describe how you got to thinking that you may want to be a writer as opposed to just writing without a clear purpose.

AC Well, I must mention Carole Davis again. She is another angel in my life. I feel like I have angels. She has said, "Angie you should apply to this Caribbean Writers Workshop." It was the Caribbean Writers Summer Institute at the University of Miami in Florida that Sandra Pouchet Paquet used to run. I caught was there the last year. I did not think I would get in, but Carole insisted, and I got in. I got a fellowship and I worked with Earl Lovelace. I love his writing and it was amazing to be with him for a semester.

STS I often teach his novel *The Wine of Astonishment*.

AC That's the first book of his that I read. It was a real treat because I had never been around a writer of color and seen so many writers of color and Caribbean writers. It made me realize too the complexity of my cultural kinships. I had read some Latino and Latin American literature. A lot of the U.S. Hispanic literature that's published. Of course, there's Julia Alvarez, but her story is not similar to mine. There's Junot Diaz, but he is a boy even though I love Junot. But when I was there I was thinking about how the Latino identity here in the US is very Chicano-centered. Then, when I was at this Caribbean conference around Bahamians and Jamaicans, anglophones, francophone and Dutch Caribbean people, I realized that Dominicans and Puerto Ricans are more Caribbean than Latin American. We don't often see it because we try to disassociate from our African ancestry. I feel like it has to do a lot with the indigenous vs. the African ancestry connection. I don't know if you agree.

STS Well, the issue comes up as a central argument of my book *Caribbean Poetics*, which tries to show the Caribbean as a culture area that is made of different

linguistic blocs. I contend that Dominicans and Puerto Ricans are a lot more Caribbean than they are Latin American although they are part of both. In that respect they are culturally more complicated than their Anglophones, francophone, and even than Dutch-speaking counterparts because they actually have their feet in two cultural spaces. So, I agree with your view of Caribbean identity.

AC I remember just taking it all in. I spent five intense weeks working with these people every day, and I felt blessed. I mean Antonio Benítez-Rojo was there, who wrote *The Repeating Island*. There were just tons of Caribbean artists, scholars, thinkers. I remember thinking, my God; this is a connection that we don't often make. I thought of how separated our communities are, how rarely West Indian and Dominican communities come together, and have the opportunity to see how much we have in common geographically, our rhythms, everything. So to me, that was a big shift of consciousness.

STS At what point did you begin thinking that you were a writer?

AC So, I was there and it was a writing workshop and, again, I guess I needed confirmation that I had talent. Earl Lovelace was so supportive. He said to me "you got it, this is a novel, a novel waiting to be written, you got to keep going" So I ventured into writing a novel. Someone said, "You have to go to an MFA Program" and assured me that I could get funding. I ended up at NYU doing my MFA with funding. I would have never done it without funding because to me it all seemed such a luxury.

STS So it seems like it was a change of lifestyles also. You switched from being an income-producing, self-sustaining grown up to being a student dependent on the minimum income financial aid recipients scrape up for their support.

AC I realized that a lot of the money that I was making when I was working full time was spent on things that I didn't need, like clothes, music, going out to dinner, and taking cabs. I realized that my mother made half of what I made and she was able to support us and save money. That's when I made that shift of consciousness, when I understood that I didn't need to have those things.

STS So you liberated yourself from the throes of consumer consciousness.

AC Completely. It changed my life. Grace Paley said that "the best thing a writer can do is think low overhead," and it's so true. The best thing that occurred to me was knowing that I don't need that much. As soon as I learned to live really simply with very little and not care about what people thought about that choice, I was free. Believe me, my family was not very accepting of the fact that I didn't have the basic stuff like health insurance. But I said, I am going to do what I love.

STS Do you now think of yourself as a writer? When people ask you what you do, do you say, “I’m a writer”?

AC It is still really embarrassing. I don’t know why, but it feels very embarrassing because all of the sudden if you say that you are a writer people think you’re important. But I’m thinking it’s not so. If you start writing one page at a time you also will have a book if you stick to it. I think people work that up a lot and so much of it is luck. So much of it was being at the right place at the right time and meeting people who changed my life. So I feel like that *Soledad* was created by a community of people, not just me, and also all my mother’s sacrifices and my grandmother’s stories and all their love. I have an intense supportive family.

STS I remember Toni Morrison saying once that it took several books for her actually to feel confidence saying “I’m a writer,” and recently I spoke with Rita Dove who said something similar, that it took her quite a while to say “I am a poet” as opposed to, well, “I write poetry.”

AC That’s how I feel. I don’t want to take myself so seriously. There is so much freedom in just saying, OK, I’m trying something new and don’t take me that seriously because it is not finished. And is anything ever really finished because writing is such an involved process. Some people can read my book and hate it. All I can say is, well, that was just my process, and I’m now moving on to other things.

STS Do you have literary models that you recognize?

AC I felt that *Soledad* went through so many transformations because I was discovering writing and literature at the same time. So it was really an intense dialogue that I was having with all these books that I was reading. Initially I felt that Sandra Cisneros was just a really big influence on my work. Then I read Toni Morrison, and I was obsessed with the way she deals with the magical in our everyday lives. Then I read Cristina Garcia with her shifts of point of view. I feel a strong connection to all these writers. I feel the writing in *Soledad* does have a really strong sense of “Caribbeanness”. A lot of people say it’s “circulatory,” and a lot of Caribbean writing that I read has this circulatory feel in that it all comes back around. Life, death, past, future, you know all that. I feel that Caribbean literature has been a really strong influence on me. Books per se, no, I am not really linked to any one book.

STS How about negative models? Do you have models that you don’t want to resemble? Are there texts that you are glad you did not write?

AC There is some writing that’s really non emotional and writing that I don’t feel has a service to render a community to some extent or doesn’t show generosity. I don’t know. To me writing has to be generous. It has to in some ways give back an idea or suggestion, something, for change. I guess that’s where all my politics

come out. I really want to finish a book and say: OK, now, what do we do from here? Where is this taking us? There's, I think, a lot of writing, especially writing that I see now by young people, which I became aware of especially when I was in the MFA programs, that is largely word acrobatics, really clean, unemotional, and ironic. That's the kind of stuff that I want to stay away from.

STS That's probably the sort of writing that tries to show familiarity with the trendiest of thoughts. But let's ask the question differently, what kind of aspirations do you harbor? What kind of book do you want to do? When you set out to tackle a writing project, what is the goal that you seek to achieve?

AC Can I grow up a little more? I feel that's one of my obsessions. How does change happen? I feel like the world is falling apart. Everywhere you look there's one terrible thing happening, even in my immediate circles. I've seen my younger cousin. They are doing so much worse than we were in the sense that they're not interested in anything. They just seem filled with despair, like all they care about is shopping and having new things. They're so superficial, but I know they're good kids. If only they saw a moment in time where they can feel they have dreams. That's why I love James Baldwin. Actually, I've been on a James Baldwin diet, reading a lot of him. I've just finished the book *Just Above My Head*. All his work is so much about love, loving humanity, loving your neighbor, and really seeing your family members holistically and still finding a place to love them, finding a way to love them. I think everything is about love, and I think ideally I would like to write a big chunky book about love that one of my cousins could read and say "Oh my God, there's something for me to strive for" not just be like Puff Daddy.

STS So you hope that your work could have a transformative effect?

AC Definitely. That's my dream. I think that the only way that can happen is for me to allow myself to be transformed and to sort of let go of some of the boundaries that existed in me.

STS What about the comment one hears occasionally from people that the notion that you can change the world for the better stems from the conviction that you possess some kind of privileged knowledge or privileged vision that others lack and that somehow you can bring the light, that you can awaken other people?

AC I actually don't feel that way. I feel that when we start seeing that everyone has power, that's what brings about change. As soon as I sit down with you, and I just believe in you, something is bound to happen. I trust that your ideas are valid and that you are doing great things. Then, automatically, that energy that I'm giving you gets internalized in you as you say, "OK, I do offer something to the world." Therefore change happens. It becomes this domino effect of positiveness and change. Not so much that I have the power to change.

- STS** It's more like your recognition of the power of others
- AC** Yes, I think that's what it is. I see it with kids all the time, young kids. If you believe they're dumb or that they're not going to get it, they won't get it. And it's not even something that has to be said. If you really believe they're going to get it, they will because they could get it. They have the power in them. The problem is with us not believing they have the power to change
- STS** You said the manuscript of *Soledad* went through several transformations. What is your method? How do you work?
- AC** Initially, when I started writing I didn't know what I was doing. I started writing from the gut. I was channeling a lot in dreams. I would go to sleep with problems and think about my characters. They would meet people in the dreams and they would come alive in the book. But then you can do that only so much. It gets very messy because then I had tons of people. You know I grew up around a very busy street, and I wasn't sure if I wanted the book to be about a community or about a family or about this woman. So I did a lot of writing just putting stuff down on paper. Then I read it through. I separated the novel in parts, laid it all out around my room and then picked the parts that I thought were linking up. I have a story. These things are linking up. When I did that I tried to put the novel back together again and read it through again. Then rewrote the entire thing again and again. Then, of course, I had good readers who are good friends. They read the novel and gave me feedback. I rewrote it again. It's a lot of rewriting. For me writing is all about rewriting and rewriting.
- STS** Do you have any trepidation about the likelihood of a major success and its possible repercussions on your life?
- AC** I have a bad relationship with money. I don't like it in my life. I have this fear of being a bourgeois and of people seeing me as one. I do exactly what I love every day. How many people can say that? Very few. But I think if I have great success, and I have some money, I can buy my mother anything she wants so she could retire. That's the goal. I wish I could do that for her. Do I want lot things? No, that is not important to me. I would love to be able to live this life for ever, which means having enough money just to get me by so I can write my stories. But I do fear the fate of so many young writers who get fame and then get blocked. That's scary to me. But I thank God that so many young writers have already paved the way. I don't think I have the same pressure as they did being the first Dominican writer or the first Haitian writer or the first to come out in the world. I feel now that as a Dominican writer in the US, I belong to a community. I also feel that I just want the right people to be able to read my book, like young women like me, and young guys around the neighborhood. Ultimately, the real question is how do you live your life as an artist? I'm always asking "Am I happy?" "Am I living the kind of life I want?"

STS Are you not afraid you might end up living a life in which your success in the market might be unreachable as has often happened with the most commodified minority authors who've become intellectual superstars.

AC Well I think I learned an interesting lesson from Bill Cosby. Meeting him ten years ago was so great for me because I realized I don't ever have to fear that, and I don't ever need to want that. It was reassuring to see that someone with his fame can talk to anyone and really treat you like a human being and connect. That's a great lesson. It doesn't matter where you are at and how much money you have, you can still connect. But I also realized his struggle as an artist. Every artist I meet, it doesn't matter how many books they have, they're still in the same place. They still need to worry about their next great idea. They still need to ask themselves "am I doing the kind of work that matters or is anyone going to care?" In the end, when you start a project you're in the same place. You might have more backing. You might have more money. You could probably afford to take more risks. But still you're in a very similar place, inside of the artist's permanent struggle with the challenges of the craft.

STS In a sense you're still wrestling which ways to tackle the art. But it's still unclear how it is that creation happens for you.

AC Well, what's clear is that it is totally hard work. I think I write from the body. I don't know how to explain it. I am outing myself here for not speaking like an intellectual. They're some people who can quote great writers and break down a story in a certain way and deconstruct things. I'm not like that. I read books, I take them in, I feel them and then I sort of purge. I was talking to a friend about this. He is a musician and he plays by reading music. He improvises but he plays by reading music. He says of course there are geniuses who play just by ear, and I say, if we were to put it in writing terms, I would be a writer who writes by ear. That's the way I approach writing in the sense that to me I listen a lot to language about what people are feeling, and then it comes from a very emotional place. On the other hand, I think there are writers who write as if they were reading music.

STS Why did you become a novelist as opposed to a poet, an essayist, or a short fiction writer?

AC Again, it was all accidental. I didn't choose. I don't think I am a poet. It just never comes up. Short stories? I need more space than short fiction can offer. Cristina García told me once "I love novels because you can be messy," and I think I am messy in general. The way I think made me think it usually takes a lot of space to say things. When I was writing the book, I was putting stuff on paper and people kept saying "this looks like a novel" must be a novel, then, I'm writing a novel. I thought I should take it seriously because a novel is a serious thing.

STS when will your next project see the light?

AC My next project is well on its way. I have at least another 6 months or maybe a year of work to go. It's a novel. The main character is this young girl named Dallas. It's so hard to describe it because I haven't talked about it before. It's about a young girl, Dallas, whose mother came to the US thinking that New York was going to be like *Dallas* the show. It is a commentary on globalization and how television is affecting the way American culture is perceived abroad. It is told from this young woman's perspective. She's 17 years old, and she has a really strong anti-school sentiment. All she wants to do is cut class, but she discovers Barnes and Noble when she's running away from the cops as a truant student. In that place she discovers that she has the desire to learn, but she wants to learn on her own terms. Basically that's what it is, but it's a lot of popular culture commentary. The family is from the Dominican Republic. I'm obsessed with my people.

STS Did you ever leave Washington Heights?

AC I went to the Upper East Side but I never left Washington Heights. Although I was living in the Upper East Side I still had to call my mother every day and I had to go visit her all the time although she kept thinking I never visited. I was there twice a week. I moved back four years ago. I've stayed there. So, I was away downtown Manhattan for three years and then I was away upstate in college three years.

STS And when you came back from Binghamton, where did you come back to?

AC My mother's house. I love my mother. My mother and I are so tight. People who read the book do not deduce that I feel this about her. She's the most amazing role model, and she's just brilliant. She's smart and cultured. She loves everything, she loves art, she loves books, we discovered books together actually. I came back from college and began sharing with her my enthusiasm about Malcolm X and the black experience. At first, she didn't get it. Then I began to try to make her aware of our racial and ethnic biases. I would say things like "mom, you can't say those things about Puerto Ricans," and she would say "why not?" Then I just started giving her books. I gave her *When I was Puerto Rican*, I gave her *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. I knew that I couldn't change her mind. She would have to sort of come to it on her own. And, all of the sudden, I'm sitting at dinner and my mother's like I had no idea Puerto Ricans were like us. I had no idea Haitians went through all that." I thought, my God, this is powerful. That's why books are so powerful.

STS *Soledad* is the novel of Washington Heights if ever there was one. I mean this is like *Comala* in the novel by Rulfo or Washington Square for Henry James or García Márquez's *Macondo*. Or one could think of it's being, rather, your Mango Street a la Cisneros. Is it the neighborhood or is it the street that moves you?

- AC** I'm obsessed with the neighborhood. I think that in this particular novel, though, the street predominates. I feel that there is so much division from one block to another. Washington Heights is changing a great deal through gentrification. I almost feel like 20 years from now we're not going to be there anymore. Little by little Dominicans are being pushed out. Yes, there was a very violent time in Washington Heights. But there is also very much of the immigrant intensity of just believing in the dream, and the informal work structure, and the community buildings that make it feel like another world that you don't really experience anywhere else in New York City. So I felt that I wanted to give something back to the people there. I wanted to document it in some way.
- STS** I had the sense that the novel is about a place as much as it is about people. You know, I'm thinking about the emphasis on the buildings, the roof tops, sidewalks, and so on, which makes for a very place-based story. Are you finished with Washington Heights?
- AC** No, I have like 5 more novels about Washington Heights.
- STS** Do you feel that you know the Dominican community?
- AC** I only know my friends from the Dominican community. I feel like I'm part of it. To say I know the Dominican community is problematic because my uncles and my mother are like "tú no sabes por qué te fuiste." One of my uncles is always accusing me of not knowing Washington Heights, he went to college at UCLA and SUNY Brook for eight years, but still he feels that he knows Washington Heights. He doesn't realize that he left for eight years, but he realizes that I left and I think those people who leave never feel they're absent just because they left.
- STS** I'm taken by Soledad's kind of outsider's gaze when she comes to the neighborhood, namely the sharpness of her observations, her ability to make out the outline of ordinary objects in the surroundings. I think she shows an ability which is a privilege of the outsider more than the insider unless we're prepared to say that the artist is the quintessential outsider whether or not he or she lives in the community. What do you think?
- AC** I think that those are two good points. I think that her leaving and coming back endows Soledad with an enhanced perception. She can say to others "I've seen something you haven't." Also Soledad has been opened to a wider world. She's open to having a gay friend. She has chosen to be an artist, knowing that her family might never accept her because she's not choosing a job that would help the family or serve as a move to a higher class. The artist is an outsider because art. Art, in its best form, will be questioning the status quo and when you do that you remain outside.
- STS** I think of those telling passages that describe roofs in the neighborhood or sneakers hanging from street-lights and traffic signs. It seems to me those images

do not jump at you if you are a regular resident of the neighborhood. You need some degree of “outsiderness” to come see them as distinguishable images. Reading *Soledad*, I feel that for the first time I get to see people spitting --- that urban youth spitting --- that is so evocative of street codes and attitudes. That you should set out to capture details of the sort as something worth recording in your narrative must take a special look, a special distance, I would think.

AC You know, I’ve taken different workshops with different writers who say that when they leave their communities they can write best about them because all of a sudden they really can see. They go back and they’ve seen everything. They can actually smell what things smell like. When you are in a smelly room, you don’t smell it anymore, but if you leave and come back, you are like, “Uh!” I think that being away and just traveling and seeing other social realities will sharpen your vision.

STS In the novel there’s a kind of hyper awareness of skin color and hair texture in the novel, particularly in *Soledad*’s own mind. Is it color that sets *Soledad* apart from her family, causing her initial distance from it? When the novel opens she’s coming back, but she’s been away, she has been distant, she has rejected this setting and the setting involves all of the area, the place as well as the people. Do you see a connection there?

AC I think if she had been a white Latina girl who was embarrassed by her neighborhood, it wouldn’t be such an issue. She didn’t trust the girls from the neighborhood, and she didn’t act like those girls or dated the guys from the neighborhood. Those attitudes just set her farther apart and she chose to be an artist and she chose to move out, I think that set her apart even more than color. But I think color really matters. Also I think hair texture does make a big difference. She has straight hair. I grew up with curly hair. Forever in my life they straightened my hair. They didn’t even know how to comb my curly hair when I was a kid. They would straighten my hair because they didn’t know what to do with it. None of us looks related. We are a mix of things. But I feel girls with straight hair have a certain privilege in the neighborhood, and I feel that also sets *Soledad* apart in the novel in a way. I think that a lot of *Soledad*’s feeling like an outsider has to do with her light skin, but she in the end accepts Washington Heights culture. The thing about color is that the people in my family are obsessed with it. They say they’re not but they are. Someone walks by and you hear comments like, “mira qué blanca” “Ay qué morena!” “Qué nariz tan perfilada.” It’s like an obsession.

STS I noticed in your acknowledgement page a very wide range of debts that you acknowledge. How would you describe the kind of support you received from more established writers?

AC I took a class, as I have said, with Carole Boyce Davis, and this woman was amazing even though I knew nothing of her before I went to her office. Then came the contact with Cristina García while I was in Mexico. She was another person who I just found without planning it. I didn't really have any way of reaching someone like Julia Alvarez. Also I realized that it is through working that you forge relationships. I formed my own writing organization: Women In Literature and Letters (WILL). Sometimes we place too much emphasis on finding a famous writer to help us with a book. I don't find it's always the most crucial thing to try to find these established people to mentor us. I think that in our peer groups there are some people who are really great readers and who have more time to really give back to each other. We can have more of a peer- like relationship and give and take from each other. Junot Diaz, who is Dominican, has been really helpful.

STS Your novel could be read as Olivia's story even though its title refers us to the character of Soledad.

AC Well this is interesting. I had a hard time with the title. I chose Soledad as the title is because I feel that she brings together the plights of all these women who share the same location. I thought also that Soledad (loneliness) sort of corresponds with a theme of the novel. Soledad is the vehicle for every other character to connect. Olivia is very much alone in her story. No one knows her story, and Gorda is very much alone in her story. No one else knows it. She deals with every one but no one knows what's really going on inside of her. Similarly, Doña Sosa goes through all these things that boil inside of her but no one really knows about them. It's the lack of communication among these women that sort of creates a common isolation, which I thought the character of Soledad encapsulated.

STS Is it the isolation of the human condition?

AC It could be. Sometimes either we don't want to or we just don't make the time to find out what's going on inside of people. I remember growing up and feeling there was so much I couldn't tell my mother. I feared that if I told her she would hate me or not accept me. Now I tell her about all those years, and she says, "y por qué no me dijiste; eso no era nada." Imagine all the emotion and anxiety I carried because I was afraid of telling her things that for her turned out to be no big deal. I just feel like I would love to see more places created to talk about sexuality among Latinas. Everything from the very basics onward.

STS Do you find that there's something particular about Latina sexuality that needs attention?

AC Well because I'm Latina I'm talking about my experiences as if the world revolves around me. I had no idea that there was anything else. I thought everyone was Latino until I left Washington Heights. But I think the women in my

community, even going back to the old country in the Dominican Republic, where I have two younger sisters who I just started to get to know, simply don't want to talk about anything that has to do with their sexuality. I believe you're putting yourself in danger if you don't talk about these things. I read this book recently by Silvana Paternostro, *In the Land of God and Man*, in which she talks about how silences are one of the reasons why the AIDS epidemic got so out of control because people don't talk about sex and they don't talk about their bodies.

STS Everyone in the novel is copying or is affected by sexual experiences in significant ways, even Doña Sosa, even Ciego. I'm interested in Flaca's indictment of Soledad in moral terms. Flaca decries Soledad's sluttishness. One might first see Flaca as just a little street girl without much of a moral code, but then she is the one condemning Soledad's sluttishness. I suppose one could say she does so out of resentment about the relationship between Soledad and Richie. But I find an interesting irony in her moral stance.

AC Actually, the KIRKUS reviewer of the book called Flaca a slut, and I thought that was such a misinterpretation of her. I feel that at 14, which is Flaca's age, the time of the discovery of your sexual self, she is quite restrained. I believe the same reviewer went on to describe the novel's plot as basically a parade of prostitutes, hand readers, and magicians, which I thought so grievously misrepresented my work. It was just a really bad review. I never thought of Flaca as a slut. She doesn't even have a first kiss in the book. She wants Richie to be her first kiss. She starts discovering her body and to react to its urges, but, ultimately, she does not go wild. She has boundaries, and she has rules in her head.

STS The story of Soledad deals with a return, a daughter's return to the mother. First the daughter returns to the forsaken mother and then follows the rehabilitation of their relationship. The males in the novel for the most part suck.

AC Except for Richie and Ciego, of course.

STS Ciego actually is a remarkable character that reminds me of Tiresias in the Oedipus story. You will recall that in the play by Sophocles Tiresias, who is physically blind, confronts Oedipus, charging him with blindness. Tiresias lacks eyesight, but can see the things that escape the king, whose vision is blurred by his sense of self-righteousness, and despotic authority, an exacerbated self-importance. I warmed up to the character of Ciego and enjoyed all the irony of his ability to appreciate the landscape. This otherwise gloomy urban landscape appreciated by a blind man. Why this character?

AC He was born in my dreams. This is also one of those miracles. I felt that Doña Sosa, a woman so much like my grandmother, this amazing woman with "tanto gusto por la vida," had to express herself. Something happens to women when they get older. Their sexuality is supposed to shut down, as if it can be turned off like a switch. I think about what can be going through an older woman's mind. I

thought we need a man to complete Doña Sosa. Ciego really started as a vehicle for her, and then he became alive, this person who's the neighborhood's philosopher in some ways. He also serves to balance the character of Victor, whose father is not present and for whom he fulfills the role of a father figure. But also, I didn't want Victor to be an asshole, so through the contact with Ciego he starts in the end to see the world in a different way.

STS You have populated the novel with very powerful women: Olivia, Gorda, Doña Sosa, Carmel, even Flaca, low-income urban Amazons. One finds them putting up a courageous fight against adversity. You have constructed a sort of arena where these women confront demons that come from society and from their souls.

AC It's so funny because I didn't conceptualize it that way. I don't think that way. I just started writing and the residues of all the different powerful women I know just surfaced.

STS Since you had a very warm relationship with your mother and a loving relationship with your neighborhood, I wonder why you created a character with this very tense rapport with her mom and who at the beginning hates Washington Heights, feeling for the most part that she doesn't belong there. Were you trying to rehearse a reality that differed radically from yours?

AC You start writing fiction when you let go of the autobiographical and start making things up. I remember something that Junot said to me, "you should not be afraid to have someone hate Washington Heights". I started thinking about how interesting it would be to create a character that hates my neighborhood despite my loving relationship with it. I thought the challenge would be to make this really believable. A lot of people come back and they hate the neighborhood or are just embarrassed about it. That wasn't my case, but for a lot of people that's really true. So I said ok, that's the character I want to write. I want to write about someone who hates it and falls in love with it in the end.

STS The novel opens with this little passage in which you have us kind of read Olivia's interior, and the book closes with a scene in the lake with Olivia coming back to waking life just as Soledad seems to have descended into a sort kind of dreamworld. Soledad remains very awake through the first half of the novel and she becomes less and less awake while Olivia snaps out of the catatonic condition that has imprisoned her since the beginning of the text.

AC I feel like Soledad and Olivia are almost the same person. It's like a cycle and the fact that one wakes up and the other sleeps sort of shows two facets of their experience. I see one side of Soledad dying and a new side being born. It's like the ultimate *limpieza* to me, with her falling into the lake and Olivia now getting a chance to being listened to.

- STS** I'm impressed by the novel's presenting us with what I would call a landscape of the quotidian, a canvas of urban, inner city everyday life that you can see as if it is spread before your eyes. It does it in a very convincing way. But now, let me turn to a question about the meaning of home. Is home a site? Home seems to be a site of trauma. All of Soledad's problems can be traced to home in a sense and yet in the end Soledad goes back to her origins, an essential source that she needs to connect with. First she goes from Greenwich Village to Washington Heights as a kind of homecoming. Then, to complete her cycle, she needs to recover some kind of ancestral home by coming going back to the Dominican Republic.
- AC** Cristina García talks a lot about that. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar, the character who finally goes home to Cuba, thinks this is home. She had left there when she was two years old. I think that as immigrants and coming from immigrant families, we have the idea of home so present in our every day life. We talk about the ancestral homeland all the time, about going home there or about relatives there or about things that we are sending back. It is very easy to romanticize that place that's home especially if we don't feel completely accepted where we live. I was never American enough in this country or I was never Dominican enough over there. So where do you go? It is nice to know you have another place elsewhere that you can call home to balance emotionally any animosity you encounter in this country even though you may not be accepted entirely there either.
- STS** At one point Manolo gets sexual with his daughter or with the girl named Soledad yet not much is made of that incident in the story. One could understand Soledad's angst without necessarily associating it with sexual abuse. I mean, from her everyday life there appears to be no clear indications of trauma, of scars, of hurt of a particularly sexual nature. Her search for something, her longing, could be understood in any number of other ways. Why is it that this, which in many novels would be "the thing," is not "the thing" here?
- AC** I've done a lot of work with women and women writers and the issue of sexual abuse comes up really often and you're often surprised. You find yourself saying, oh my God, I would have never guessed it happened to you. I think there are things we really don't talk about, but so many of the women I know have been sexually abused. We all look like we're ok, we are not going around crying every five minutes "I was sexually abused," but it's still part of our every day life that we know it happened. I felt with Soledad it would be more powerful to show it that way instead of making it "the thing." Imagine this girl, on top of everything she has to deal with, she also has that, but she can't even deal with that because there's all this other stuff going on. I think in some ways by not making it the central part, it makes her less special since, in truth, she is not an exception.
- STS** I would love for us to speak about the mangú scene, the wonderfully erotic mangú scene. Spirits and the magical get unleashed at the end. Let me just ask you two things, one, the centrality of sex is there but the magical is also central and it gets

really graphically insisted upon in that unleashing of the naked men. Where does that come from? Or, how would my daughter say, “What’s up” with that?

AC It really was about sometimes we see things and we don’t feel anything but how about if we really read something, and then, all of the sudden, it comes alive and is almost a testament to the power of words and how you document something. It does keep it alive. So her desire to know who her father really was kept this thing in her room. So it was sort of playing with that idea.

STS Did you not fear that the scene might become a little bit comical?

AC For me it was disturbing, and it was disturbing to write. I wasn’t even thinking comical. I hope it doesn’t read as comical. When I was writing it I was having a hard time sleeping. I kept thinking my God, if Soledad could just feel an ounce of what her mother could have been experiencing! That’s all I wanted.

STS Olivia when she’s thinking of her past and regretting things, the one thing that she resents the most is the years with Manolo. Its almost as if the years with Manolo take precedence over everything else.

AC And I think the reason that happens is because Manolo sort of made her believe that she was finally safe. And then she was completely betrayed and deceived. With Manolo, it was like you’re one of my kind and that’s like the ultimate betrayal when you feel like someone who’s supposed to be on your side does this thing to you. Manolo was supposed to be the person who was saving her.

STS Angie Cruz, thank you for this interview.

AC My pleasure.