

**'Telling the Silenced Stories' of the Southern Cone:  
An Interview with Carolina De Robertis**

Karen Wooley Martin

Carolina De Robertis is the author of two internationally best-selling novels, *The Invisible Mountain* (2009) and *Perla* (2012), which have been translated into sixteen languages. *The Invisible Mountain* was awarded the Rhegium Julii Debut Prize and was a finalist for the International Latino Book Award and the California Book Award. Her work has been published in *Zoetrope: Allstory*, *Granta*, *The Virginia Quarterly*, *The Indiana Review*, and *n + 1*. She was also selected as a contributing author for the anthologies *Count on Me: Tales of Sisterhoods and Fierce Friendships* (2012) and *Immigrant Voices: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Stories* (2014). De Robertis has also emerged as a respected and skilled literary translator. Her translation of Roberto Ampuero's novel *The Neruda Case* was nominated for the 2013 Northern California Book Award in Translation, and her translation of Alejandro Zambra's *Bonsai* was shortlisted for the Best Translated Book Award in 2009. De Robertis was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 2012. She holds the MFA in Creative Writing from Mills College and has taught at the University of San Francisco and the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing. Prior to publishing *The Invisible Mountain*, she taught Latino immigrant children in an inner-city school, and then worked in women's advocacy for a decade in California, where she founded the first Latina services program at the rape crisis center where she worked.

Of Italian, Argentinian, and Uruguayan descent, De Robertis was born to Uruguayan parents during her father's post-doctoral fellowship in England and spent her childhood in England, Switzerland, and California. In 2013 she relocated to Montevideo, Uruguay, for a year-and-a-half to co-produce the documentary *Afro Uruguay: Forward Together*, with Pamela Harris, and returned to California in Summer 2014 to complete post-production work. Her third novel, *The Gods of Tango*, was published

by Knopf in July 2015. She is a member of the faculty of the Queens University of Charlotte MFA in Creative Writing in Latin America. This interview was conducted via Skype in April 2013, in addition to several written exchanges in 2013 and 2014.

As Dominican-American author Angie Cruz has pointed out, the “Latina writer” label tends to shift in or lose meaning outside the setting of United States identity politics. A Google search of “Latino” or “Latina” authors quickly demonstrates this, as the results often, and inconsistently, include any writers with Spanish or Portuguese ancestry: those who remained anchored in Spanish-speaking countries and wrote exclusively in Spanish; Portuguese-language authors who lived in Brazil for most of their writing lives; Spanish- or Portuguese-language writers who immigrated to the United States; and authors who were born in the United States and write primarily in English. Within the United States, at least in academic settings and marketing contexts, “Latina/o/@” writers are most often designated as those who fit the final category above, with space sometimes set aside to label authors such as Isabel Allende, who holds dual Chilean-United States citizenship but writes exclusively in Spanish, as a “Hispanic” [i.e., not Latina] author. Interviews with authors who are often categorized as “Latina/o” normally include an interviewer’s reluctant posing of the “label” question. De Robertis’s response to the question highlights an angle that is not frequently acknowledged, the tendency to designate “four food groups” of Latina/o authors — Cuban, Dominican, Chicana/o, and Puerto Rican—and conflate “Latina/o” with being non-white. Acknowledging her position of privilege as a white author without ceding her Latina identity, all the while navigating the insider-outsider status of a Californian (but also Uruguayan-Argentinian-Italian) who tells the stories of South America, requires multiple journeys across the bridges of national mythologies of race, historiography, sexuality, and language. This transnational journey resists tendencies to exoticize or eroticize the Other, given that, in a sense, each of the cultures, nations, and languages that she works from may be seen as both Self and Other to the so-called Latina author. This constant dislocation/re-centering requires the author to develop an ability to construct (hi)stories by crossing linguistic and political boundaries, as she writes from a fluid perspective. My conversations with De Robertis explore transnational Latina/o writing and identity through various lenses, including language identity, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, while acknowledging the nebulous nature of the “Latina/o” label itself.

## 'Telling the Silenced Stories' of the Southern Cone

**Q:** *Your work in women's advocacy seems to have clearly influenced the work you're doing now, with both the documentary and your writing. Do you feel that your writing is an outgrowth of the advocacy work that you've done in the past? Did you do the two things simultaneously at any point?*

**CDR:** I wasn't doing the two things simultaneously at first. But I was about three years into my time at the rape crisis center [when] I became obsessed with the idea of writing the novel that became my first novel, so I did start *The Invisible Mountain* in the thick of my time at the rape crisis center. They definitely existed alongside each other, the first five years of working on *Invisible Mountain* and the work in women's rights and human rights organizations. And they absolutely informed each other. Certainly, in both of my first two novels there are people who survive sexual violence, as well as institutional forms of violence and torture, and I don't know that I could have written about those phenomena as intimately as I did without having had this incredible opportunity to listen to my clients who were sexual assault survivors or the significant others of sexual assault survivors. I listened to over a thousand rape survivors and their significant others through the course of five years and got the opportunity not only to hear about the immense pain of experiencing that kind of trauma, but also the incredible resilience of the human soul and the many different ways that people not only live to see another day, but thrive and really re-create their lives on the other end of those kinds of experiences. I feel deeply indebted to all of those people to whom I listened. They gave me tremendous gifts that I don't think I could've found in one hundred libraries.

**Q:** *It seems that your writing and the documentary work are another form of advocacy. [W]hen I read the stories of rape and abuse and so many types of violation that you present, and you give voice to so many invisible groups, I feel like you're advocating for them. It certainly seems as though you feel that, too.*

**CDR:** I absolutely hope so in the sense that I really hope that it's opening space for these under-told and marginalized stories and truths. I told you in our written exchange that I was really moved by that first sentence of your paper, because I really do feel that that is actually quite a compass for me as a writer, not just telling the stories of the Southern Cone, but telling the silenced or marginalized stories.

Karen Wooley Martin

**Q:** *That's wonderful to hear. Thank you. [Carolina is referring to a forthcoming paper in which I described her novels as "a panorama of the invisible—the imagined, unseen, or erased—history of the Southern Cone."]*

**CDR:** It was so moving. It's possible that that sentence twenty years from now will still feel like it encapsulates my career. As far as I can tell, it still does. With the third book I'm still there. I do hope that the books, and certainly the documentary film also, still continue to do that work and that advocacy. I'm still passionate about making a difference in the world. I'm still passionate about those voices, with the caveat that I do believe that art — if I could use the word art, if I could be so bold as to put fiction and literature in a category with painting and music and other forms of creative arts — personally, I don't think that fiction should be polemical, so I think that's the place where I'd say yes, creating space for those voices & hopefully therefore having some positive impact on society, absolutely. As far as advocating, I think that one of the roles of literature is also to be able to tell the full story, so in *Perla* I really wanted to humanize the side of the torturing, so I try to strive to look at the whole thing as it is and tell the story. I'm very capable of being on a soapbox about what I believe to be true, and in the context of fiction, I hope that I also let in a richer humanity to it.

**Q:** *Yes, I've taught Mario Bencastro's **Odisea al Norte**, a beautiful novel about immigration, and he specifically says that he is not a polemical writer because people who don't share his views dismiss him out of hand if they think he's polemical.*

**CDR:** Exactly, and that shuts a door. I think there's a place for polemical writing. But I think novels when they become polemical, they run the risk of being flat, having flat characters or a very black and white picture, and we lose some of the depth and complexity of it, because the novel is particularly well-situated to portraying human complexity. I think it's one of the best forms for that.

**Q:** *Especially in relation to the work you're doing on race in Uruguay with Pamela [Harris], I wanted to ask you about Artigas in **The Invisible Mountain**. When he's traveling to Brazil, he sits with a displaced guaraní family*

## 'Telling the Silenced Stories' of the Southern Cone

*on the train, and he perceives them as Other. He asks himself, "Weren't there echoes of his own skin in this man?" as he realizes that they perceive him as being like them — as indio. In essence, you have one character finding out who he is through an organic process tied to someone else's perception of him. You could have presented race in a very polemical way and, again, lost your audience who believes that Uruguay is a European white nation, but instead ---*

**CDR:** -- which is a lot of Uruguayans who hold that belief, that absolute myth, that this is a nation of Europeans. I had a real estate agent say that to me when we were renting this house, "Oh, but this is a nation of Europeans. We're all European descendants." And as she said it to us, the woman who we had hired to be our nanny for the summer was in the room, and she's of African descent, and she's Uruguayan. So there was an Afro-Uruguayan person, absolutely Afro-Uruguayan, sitting in the room, and she said, "This is a nation of Europeans." Absolutely incredible, just incredible. These myths that we hold about our cultures can run so deep, and here in Uruguay that's a myth that runs very deep. Growing up I just didn't hear the complexity of racial identity or of different races' presences in Uruguay — I didn't receive that from my parents — so the process of writing *The Invisible Mountain* was in so many ways for me about reconnecting with my heritage and taking a journey that would allow me my own direct relationship with Uruguayan culture. Creating these characters that find and discover their way through that was a powerful process for me. Racism in Uruguay is denied, is denied its existence, and it is here, but it has a very different face than in the United States.

**Q:** *Race is not a dominant theme, as I see it, in The Invisible Mountain, but it is a theme that you do trace throughout the novel. There seems to be a slow process with Artigas slowly realizing that he's indio, or that--*

**CDR:** --or that he has something in common with the Indian folks on the train ... because the traces of the blood disappear, because in Uruguay it is so different from so many Latin American countries in that regard, that the indigenous people tragically were victims of genocide. It's not always acknowledged as genocide. The woman who recently gave us a tour of Ciudad Vieja, the old city of Montevideo, said, "Well, the indigenous people, they died in the process of colonization." They just died *in the process*, implying it was by nobody's hand. We do that kind of

thing in the United States as well, but it's so very much a part of this place. With Artigas, he's someone who really tries to see his identity outside of the boxes that he's been given by his surrounding culture. He goes outside of Uruguay and therefore he can look at himself, and then perhaps on a different layer of subtext, look at Uruguayan culture, with different eyes than the ones that he gets from being there. It's that old adage that culture for people is like water to a fish: you can't see it until you leave it.

I think for me, I have this very particular relationship to Uruguayan culture in that I'm an insider/outsider, because I am of Uruguayan heritage, it's always been familiar to me, it was always in my home, but I've never lived here, and I also have this other culture in that I am of the United States. Californian is how I feel. I do have this other North American identity that I feel when I'm here; I can feel that I'm looking at things differently than people here. So, the features of my great-grandmother when I look at a photograph of her, "What do you mean all her ancestors were Spaniards?" Not possible. Absolutely not possible, but nobody told me that story, because my grandmother doesn't want to believe that her mother has indigenous blood, so she just doesn't tell that story.

**Q:** *In terms of [language] identity, you use a very sophisticated level of Spanish in your writing on Facebook [and other social media].*

**CDR:** My English is more sophisticated than my Spanish, my academic and professional English, and I'd love to raise [my Spanish] to that level. I can write e-mails and messages and speak, and I've appeared on television and the radio discussing my novels in Spanish, but that level of writing is something that I do more naturally in English. But I did grow up speaking Spanish in the home, my parents did speak it to me, and it was in a way my first [language]. My first two words were in Spanish, *pan* and *agua*.

**Q:** *Typically, so-called "Latino authors" write in English because that's the language of their education and they have the oral fluency, the strong understanding of the culture and the language that you have, but without having been trained in the language.*

**CDR:** I have more syntactical complexity, more vocabulary, more of that is available to me in English. I'm just more intellectually limber in

## 'Telling the Silenced Stories' of the Southern Cone

English ... I've read hundreds and hundreds of novels in English, and as you said, was educated in English. I've given this so much thought because Spanish is such a big part of me, but I feel like English is the language of my intellect and Spanish is the language of my bones, kind of just soaked down in there.

**Q:** *Do you consider yourself to be a Latina author? We had Lorraine López on campus a year or two ago, and she basically said that sometimes she writes Latina books, and sometimes she writes non-Latina books, so that sometimes she's a Latina author and sometimes she isn't, but she felt that the category was more of a marketing construct than a natural category for her.*

**CDR:** There are so many Latino authors who say they don't want to be a Latino author, they just want to be an author, and I think the problem with that is that people are ghettoized, and their work is ghettoized, marginal — I'm using the word ghetto very consciously here. The work is marginalized for the fact of their being Latino, and of being female, and being a Latina female. I have a joke with some friends about a Latino author who I was talking to on the phone when my first book sold. Right after I got a deal I called him up — he's already published — and he started to tell me about the "book cover thing," every Latino author knows about the "book cover thing." "They're gonna put either a palm tree or a parrot on your cover because this is the *exotic Latino thing*." I have an Iranian-American friend who's an author, and she says for them it's a camel or a woman in a veil, whether or not that has anything to do with the book. Sure enough, this is what happens ... so I think that the marketing thing is problematic. Am I a Latina author? Well, I *am* a Latina author. I'm also a 5'4" [1.63 m.] author, in the sense that those two things are two identities together in one sentence. Am I a Latina author or a Uruguayan author? I'm also a lesbian. I also happen to be bisexual. Does that mean that I don't get to call myself a lesbian? Some people would say yes. The first time I met a woman who told me that she identified as a bisexual lesbian I almost fell over, because I couldn't believe that she was being bold enough to take up that much space. And there's also a part of, you get to do that, and I also get to call myself Latina. Also there's this piece about being a Latina of European descent, which is actually a very simple concept, because people in Latin America have all kinds of different ancestry and, as we were discussing,

Karen Wooley Martin

there are Latinos of Asian descent, there are Latinos of African descent, and of European descent. In the United States though, we put Latino under people of color and then we put whiteness over here, so it's confusing to people, and they say, "You don't look Latina." So for years there was this mirroring back that kind of denied that piece of my identity. There's also this piece for me about standing up and saying that I'm Latina that is also strong, while acknowledging the privilege that comes with whiteness, so I don't want to say I'm not white, because I think that doesn't help support the conversation about the reality of moving through the world with white privilege. But in the publishing world, I know that I'm treated like a Latino author and that sometimes racism or cultural prejudice is absolutely part of what I think can happen to my books, how they can get perceived and pigeonholed. I'm not talking about my publisher, Knopf, let me be clear, they've been incredibly supportive and wonderful. I think there are absolutely some layers of being taken less seriously or put over in a corner, literally sometimes, in the bookstore--

**Q:** --on the Latina shelf.

**CDR:** Right, exactly. Not that there shouldn't be a Latina shelf, but it should be on the other shelf, too. Toni Morrison can be under African-American literature, but she should be under literature, too, and sometimes she's not, and that's pretty incredible. Our only living Nobel laureate of the United States, of literature, and we don't put her in literature?

Do I consider myself a Latina author? Yes. Is that my core identity as an author? No. I want to be a writer of literature, just like anybody else. Are my primary influences Latino? Not exclusively, no. Are my subjects explicitly Latino? Ask Latinos who say that it's not Latino to write a book about gay people, which is where I'm headed.

**Q:** *And South American is sometimes excluded [from Latino]. Sometimes "Latino" becomes Chicano, or Puerto Rican or ... At a conference recently, an author mentioned the "four Latino food groups" — Dominican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Chicano — and of course South American was excluded from that.*

**CDR:** Yes, because the lines don't fit. If you make four food groups, even if you make seven food groups, even if you make ten, what do you



## 'Telling the Silenced Stories' of the Southern Cone

want to bet that people forget about Uruguay, which is a country of three million people, and it's just forgotten. So where does that fit in overly simplified food groups? I think part of my experience is — also being queer in addition to being Latina, and also being Latina in a way where people look at me and they don't perceive me as Latina, so that piece of me is invisible, and being not only queer but also, among gay people, "Are you really gay? You're saying you're bisexual. I can't quite wrap my head around that" — is learning early on that you can't wait for others to define your identity and to give you the membership card into whatever identity feels true to you, because that's just giving other people way too much control over your truth and your life, and you may wait forever. We have to plunge really deep and really ask ourselves who we are and what we are and find the words to wrap our own experience that make sense to us, and then affirm them, no matter what. And also I think have some fluidity with words and language, so, yes, I'm a Latina writer, but those aren't static things to always be attached to each other. It's one more thing about me.

**Q:** *I was going to ask if you consider yourself to be a lesbian writer. Benjamin Alire Sáenz is in his mid-fifties and has written for three decades at least, but he just came out, and he says he's only recently been able to write as a gay man.*

**CDR:** That's interesting. That's fascinating.

**Q:** *You've kind of answered the question of whether that [being gay] is particularly difficult in a Latino context, or in a Uruguayan or South American context. I know with the marriage equality law [in Uruguay] it's probably gotten a bit easier, but I'm sure it's not a smooth path to navigate.*

**CDR:** It's a lot of layers, and certainly I had to make a conscious decision about whether or not I was going to come out — I'd been out in my life — but come out on a public figure/author level. It really came up when I'd been working on *The Invisible Mountain* for eight years and it was time to write my acknowledgements. I could have said, "And I also thank Pamela Harris," and not said, "my wife," but I thought about all the acknowledgements I'd read — particularly I thought about male writers, [writing] "and I'd like to thank my wife, without whom the book would

not be” — and I thought, “Well this book wouldn’t be without her support, and they all get to say, “my wife,” why can’t I say “my wife”?”

**Q:** *You would have to make half of your life invisible, which doesn’t seem fair.*

**CDR:** Yes. Marriage equality is on the brink of becoming law here [in Uruguay], so things are changing at lightning speed. When I started calling Pam my wife in 2002, it was unheard of, even among gay people. Lesbians were shocked that we were doing it, so things are changing culturally at lightning speed, in ways that when I first got married I could not have dreamed.

But your question was more focused on the layers: Do I consider myself a gay author? Again, I am gay. I am lesbian. I am bisexual. I’m bisexual because that’s my truth, that’s my sexual identity. Fortunately now that I’m married to a woman people tend not to sort of question the veracity of my sexual identity quite as much — except when I say that I’m bisexual, which is part of why I continue to say it, to sort of open space for that quite invisible identity and truth. I don’t know if it’s harder to hold in the Latino context. It’s hard for me to say because I only know from the inside and my own experience.

I guess I don’t know what it means to be a gay author. I’m really thinking out loud with you right now because I don’t feel like what I set out to do is write twenty books over the course of thirty years that are all about gay people. I also didn’t set out to write twenty books that are all about what it means to be Latino. I don’t know that those are my central themes. I don’t know what my central themes are. I think every writer who feels compelled to write fiction should listen for what the things are that urgently need to be written, that those are the books that we need to write, and often, those books will reflect our deepest obsessions and our most profound inner urgencies. Often we won’t know what those are until we finish the book, and then we look in the mirror of the book. I think that this how I learn what the obsessions are that are going to thread through my career, with time. I think on the tenth book I’ll learn new things about what those things are, so I think every writer should have the freedom to explore what those are, beyond the bounds of identities, of boxed identities. So, in that sense I would sort of resist being categorized in

## ‘Telling the Silenced Stories’ of the Southern Cone

the sense of assumptions being made about what I write about. Because I’m a woman, because I’m gay, because I’m Latina, because of any of it, because I’m a mother, so I’m aware that queer themes are in *The Invisible Mountain* with the story of Zolá, but it’s not the primary thing. There were particular themes and obsessions and urgencies that I wanted to explore and felt the need to explore at that time. *Perla* has very little of the “gay thing,” there’s just that one little moment that happens with Romina, but it’s essentially, you might call it a very heterosexual book. But it’s the book that needed to be written. I considered the possibility of having *Perla* be queer, but it felt like she had this immense coming out process that needed to happen, that I didn’t want to muddy that coming out process with other coming out processes. That wasn’t her story. This was who she needed to be, and this was enough of a coming out process, though whether my ability to write her coming out process about being a child of the disappeared was in some way informed by my own coming out process as a queer person, that’s very possible, because all of us who are compelled to write fiction draw on what we have, we draw on what we know.

Now with my third novel, this is the novel that is the most queer-centered, sort of revolves around themes of gayness, coming out, and queerness, not just sexual attraction queerness but also gender, a woman dressing as a man — to survive, at first, and then later for other reasons. So, I am exploring those themes now. But I wish on every writer the freedom to roam widely. I’m having fun because now I’m writing some very — I finally got her to the place where she gets to have sexual experiences, and I’m having so much fun [laughs]. I don’t really know where it’s all going, but I have to be honest with you, I’m having an immense amount of fun writing this book.

**Q:** *Do you have to struggle not to censor yourself when you do sexual writing, or do you feel like you’ve moved past that?*

**CDR:** To tell you the truth, I don’t have that. Maybe that’s part of why I’m enjoying writing it so much. I think the challenge for me writing explicit — and even creative — sex scenes, is not that piece. Rather, it is that writing sex well is difficult. There’s so much that’s been said so many times, it can kind of derail into cheesy or into clichés, cheesy romantic airbrushed clichés or pornographic clichés. And I have nothing against

Karen Wooley Martin

commercial romance novels, I have nothing against pornography when it's respectful of women's dignity. But when I'm writing something that I hope will be taken seriously, striving to write something that has some literary worth — as well as being a good read — I'm aware that writing about sex there's a danger of not getting taken seriously that is a much larger danger for women, and a much larger danger for gay people, and for queer women. This feels like really uncharted territory, and I have no idea.

**Q:** *You alluded to the reception in Uruguay of **The Invisible Mountain**. Had you been in and out of Uruguay growing up? How familiar were you with being in the country at the time of your book tour?*

**CDR:** It's a great question. I came back for the first time when I was four, so I have very little memory of that. My grandfather was dying, and we came. And then my parents sent me here when I was sixteen, which I'm really grateful for, because it was a mind-blowing experience and it just absolutely reshaped my world, just to hear people speak *rioplatense* Spanish all around me, so many of them, all of them speaking like us! I just couldn't believe it, and on and on with other aspects of the culture.

**Q:** *How was the reception of the book in Uruguay? I'm interested in the perception within Uruguay, because I'm sure it was so personal, and painful, for so many people.*

**CDR:** The aspect about the Tupamaros in particular?

**Q:** *Right, that final section of **Invisible Mountain**. At least in the US, we don't see much written about Uruguay and the **desaparecidos**: writing seems to be primarily about Argentina or Chile. You've been in Uruguay and in Argentina. In *Perla*, you describe that underwater third city between Montevideo and Buenos Aires [of the disappeared, haunting both cities], and I'm wondering how linked you feel that they are.*

**CDR:** It is one region, and with nations in the Americas, like in Africa and other places that went through colonization, the borders are inventions, and Uruguay was created as a buffer zone between Argentina

## 'Telling the Silenced Stories' of the Southern Cone

and Brazil. Now it's its own nation with its own character and personality, but absolutely there's a lot of confluence between the two cultures. I feel like the river, the Rio de la Plata, is the river that runs through the middle of me; that sort of divides me, because my paternal grandparents were Argentinian and I have more relatives in Buenos Aires than I do here.

As far as the reception of the book, to my surprise and delight it was received so warmly here. It was very beautiful, really beautiful. I had a woman who lives in El Cerro — the little mountain after which the first book was named, now very much a working-class neighborhood — who said, "I'm from El Cerro, and on behalf of the people of El Cerro, thank you for writing this book and bringing these stories to the world." That was so sweet, very beautiful and moving. I've had former Tupamaros tell me that they loved the book, that it took them back and that they found it very accurate, to my shock. I think the most humbling compliment I've received on the book in Uruguay is when people have said, "I can't believe you've never lived here."

**Q:** *That's the highest praise.*

**CDR:** I found that really humbling. So, the reception's been very warm. The current president of Uruguay, José Mujica, is a former Tupamaro who spent thirteen years in prison, tortured in the way Salomé was — Salomé being my character — so there's a way in which it's very much a part of the national conversation. What was amazing was that as part of their marketing campaign [my publisher here] created a pamphlet about the book, and they put it in certain neighborhoods on people's doors, and on it they put a little passage from the book in which Salomé has been imprisoned for being a Tupamara and finds out she's pregnant, and is tortured. It actually had a torture description in it, and they used that as a lead to get people in, whereas in the United States, it's like, "Don't tell people on the offset, at the beginning, that there's torture, because no one wants to read that, people won't want to pick up that book." People shy away from atrocity in reading in the commercial marketplace of US fiction, so there's this way in which the downplaying of the atrocity is part of the US, whereas here it's, "Hey, this is *our* story about the real deal thing that happened. Don't you want to know what happened to the baby?" It's just really wildly different.

Karen Wooley Martin

**Q:** *That's interesting because **Invisible Mountain** was compared to Isabel Allende's **House of the Spirits** [in marketing campaigns] and **House of the Spirits** ends up with torture, with very similar themes as your book, but it is marketed as a romance and an exotic South American novel instead of openly dealing with those realities [in promoting the book]. I hadn't thought about the way it's packaged, that we keep that in the background here.*

**CDR:** Hide it, pull people in with the romance, and also the exoticism — it's the exoticizing piece: Latin America, it's colorful and there's imagining, and the women are very spiritual and passionate because they're Latina and we all know that all Latina women are like that — playing on those things, to attract the reader, the idea being once you're on page 320 and the torture begins, the person's in and they'll stay in. I think that that is the way that the US publishing world approaches that sort of thing, so *Perla* was a very risky second book, because now we have institutional torture even more at the center of the book, and that's risky.

**Q:** *When I presented a paper on **Perla** [in March 2013], the German translation had just come out, and everyone was fascinated by the parallels between Germany and Argentina. Even though it's a generation removed, Germany has the same issues of dealing with the legacy of violence. You have that beautiful line about **Perla** feeling that she's carrying the crimes of the nation in her body and carrying her father's crimes in her body, and many people seem to be trying to come to terms with that. What are you hearing about the perception of the book in Germany?*

**CDR:** That is a marvelous question. I have not yet heard anything from any readers in Germany along those lines. Whether that's happening in the intimacy of people's minds and in their homes I can't possibly know, that's a thing sometimes about being a writer, that you pour your soul into this thing, and then it goes into people's homes and they do what they will with it. Readers have this incredible power, and they may choose to write you a note on Facebook and tell you, or they may not. But I will say on the opposite side, I certainly am indebted to some of the learning that people have done around the German experience, so one of the books that I read in the process of writing *Perla* was Bernhard Schlink *The Reader*, which many people have read, but which I think is an important novel about humanizing a perpetrator, which was useful to me in shaping the character

## ‘Telling the Silenced Stories’ of the Southern Cone

of Perla’s father, and also *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, by Hannah Arendt, which is looking specifically at a Nazi on trial and the coining of the “banality of evil,” that term, and grappling with the humanity of Nazis. Both of those books do that, and I think in some ways the German culture, the German individuals, have had to grapple in that manner, so I know that I’m indebted to that as far as the writing. If there is one German reader out there who draws on the book in that way and it resonates that way, I’ll be incredibly moved.

But also when I toured with the book in the United States, with *Perla*, I heard from people who said that the book resonated for them around thinking about the crimes of past generations and atrocities in their country, people from the Philippines, from Pakistan, from the Dominican Republic — the Trujillo dictatorship — so I was incredibly moved to hear these different people talk about what the book meant for them from their background, things I wouldn’t have imagined.

**Q:** *You have said that **Perla** started out as a short story, after you read [The Flight by investigative journalist Horacio] Verbitsky several years ago. In that story, the spirits of the disappeared come back to visit their torturers and their loved ones. I wondered if your conception of that visiting changed over time. The ghost [in the novel] seems to really be most interested in being with his daughter. He’s certainly aware that he’s in a torturer’s home, and his negative feelings about that are obvious, but I don’t see a level of vengeance. I didn’t know if that was part of your attempt to capture the humanity of the victim and focus on him as the narrative center, or how that process might have evolved for you, because there really isn’t vengeance taken, even though it would be understandable.*

**CDR:** That’s such a great question. No one’s asked me that question, that’s wonderful. I called [that story] “Wet Ghosts” and it’s literally a two-page story, and it’s never been published, though I sent it to a contest and it had an Honorable Mention. In the story the ghosts are together underwater. There’s a group of ghosts and they rise up together — it was an image that I captured. They come out and whisper in the ears of torturers in their sleep and affect their dreams — torturers/perpetrators — and then they go and visit their loved ones and make a blanket over them, and then they go back into the river. So it’s a shorter visit, and the first

thing they do is go to the people who harmed them. The idea did continue to evolve as I started to think about those ghosts and their metaphorical need to exist — or their metaphorical existence already. What is really the unfinished business that the disappeared had interrupted and didn't have the opportunity to finish? I don't know if I'm able yet to articulate the reasons that it felt more urgent for there to be a conversation with one of the loved ones. I think that with time and with writing and exploring, it just felt more urgent for him to come to someone who he loves immensely and never had the chance to know...

I'm thinking further about some of the perpetrators, and in many ways the perpetrators are faceless to the disappeared. Often their eyes were covered, they were hooded, and sometimes they could recognize someone by their voice, or they knew of someone by one of the nicknames that they used in the torture areas, but because there were so many of them, it becomes this sort of faceless collective, where it's actually less about revenge toward a particular individual. I think that as I developed the ghost, it felt like his perpetrators were much more faceless and amorphous, whereas the wife he'd lost and the baby that he'd lost — those are the things that come very much into full focus.

**Q:** *You've mentioned some influences already on your work, but who do you feel have been the shaping influences on your writing?*

**CDR:** I think that I've finally come to a place where I can say my two favorite writers, the ones that really just have moved me and opened my world the most, would be Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf. And then after that there's this long list that can change every day. Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf have both been immensely impactful, and they have a combination of style and aesthetic and literary — on a literary level they amaze me, and also their vision really moves and amazes me, so the combination of those things, because sometimes there are writers who have one thing and not the other. I will always go back to Faulkner and be floored and amazed, I get so much from just entering his books. So humbling. I feel like Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf have more of these visions where they're really telling the intimate side of these stories, with a different kind of humanity. That said, I read Gabriel García Márquez when I was thirteen for the first time and it sort of blew my mind. I didn't know



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that novels could do that. I stumbled on *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and I know that that was a shaping, sort of defining experience for me. I know that different books that I'm writing I feel like are influenced by different books; I know this may be pretty obvious to some, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* with *Perla*, but also Saramago's *Blindness* was really influential in that book. That's a partial, a very partial answer.

**Q:** *They're always partial if you're a passionate reader, and I think most writers are passionate readers.*

**CDR:** Gabriel García Márquez said that William Faulkner was one of the greatest Latin American writers who ever lived, which is fabulous in many ways. One of the reasons it's fabulous is because if William Faulkner gets to be a Latin American writer, then so do I. [laughs] It's a beautiful thing is that literature is so international.

**Q:** *I don't want to ask the timing question about the third novel because I think that's very stressful to be asked, but it's coming along well?*

**CDR:** It's fine, it's coming along.<sup>1</sup> I have time right now while I'm down here in Uruguay. We're working on the documentary, but I'm actually devoting this month and next to really diving into the book. In [2012] I went on tour with *Perla*, in Norway and in the US, I gave birth and then we got ready to move, so I feel like now I'm just really sinking in, and I hope to finish it later this year [2014].

**Q:** *Do you plan to move back to California?*

**CDR:** Absolutely. We're feeling wonderful about being [in Uruguay] in ways that we hadn't expected, and that's great. The kids are thriving. That was my biggest fear, how my four year old would do in the transition, especially with homophobia and racism, but he's just absolutely thriving. But we will go back to California.

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1 The novel was published in July 2015 by Knopf.

Karen Wooley Martin

**Q:** *Do you write full-time, or will you teach when you go back to California?*

**CDR:** I just got invited to teach at a brand new program through Queens University in North Carolina. They started a new low-residency MFA in Latin America in 2014. But writing is currently my primary form of income which is miraculous.

**Q:** *It's been a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you so much for taking the time from your writing to do this.*

**CDR:** This has been such a pleasure. Thank you so much for the conversation. I'm really honored.