

ENCUENTROS



Out of Silence

Lecture by

Albalucía Angel

IDB CULTURAL CENTER

Director: Ana María Coronel de Rodríguez

Visual Arts: Félix Angel

Concerts and Lectures: Anne Vena

Administrative Assistance: Elba Agusti



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OUT OF SILENCE

Albalucía Angel

I wish to begin by thanking the Cultural Center of the Inter-American Development Bank for having extended this invitation.

My life plan has been essentially experimental, for experimentation is in my blood—very special, Colombian blood. I need to dance in fresh air, which has brought me great joy. But for this, 34 years ago I had to flee my deeply troubled country. In exile I felt increasingly distressed about my country. I had no desire to return, because the country is still in a state of disintegration, lacking physical and psychic harmony.

Thirty years ago, I described the beginning of my country's disintegration in *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón*.¹ Today, as the progressive, unrelenting dissolution of the country is laid bare, people are forced to wonder, What happened to Colombia?

I am Colombian and cannot deny my roots. That is why I wish to explain my journey and this diaspora I joined while in

exile. *Everything* I'm here to talk about comes down to this: that life's guiding principles must be equilibrium and harmony. As women clamoring for change, we have tried, in a whole range of tones and registers, to advance the cause of harmony. And so I'll speak now of the women to whom I'm tied by blood and language—the women of Latin America.

My current book, *De vuelta del silencio*, is devoted to Latin American women writers. Permit me to start by reading a few paragraphs:

"I have taken part in this phenomenon. I come from Latin America. I have seen the word leap over the ramparts and towers of Avila to fall undaunted between the bushes of some village in the south of Chile or Peru and effortlessly recount the whole adventure as though it were happening today. No sooner had it landed than it was collecting, seeing, rendering. If imagination is, as Virginia Woolf believed, "more precious than gold" (as my grandmother would say)—the very gold

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mined during the tumultuous times of the Marquesa of Yolombó²—, then I am prepared to give form and content, or simply testimony, to what the word became, and imagined, there.

“Arriving from the ancestral plains of Castile, irrigated with droplets of Basque and Gallego and Catalan, and even Italian, in Latin America the word flourishes, adorns herself, and—without the chains of awkwardness or inhibition, without taking on the affectations of racism, of where do I come from, or who is the purest, the loveliest of the lovelies—embarks on a life of invention. Speaking as she likes. Shaking her feathers of unprecedented colors, displaying her plumage, like a peacock, in a marvelous fan. She lovingly massages the indigenous languages and, like bread baked in a charcoal oven, speaks to us of her history—quotidian, wild, floating, turbulent. In Latin America the word began her history by pirating from every lineage. And like a good buccaneer, now she is storming the fortress!

“...I also intended to speak of betrayals. Of perseverance. Of silences covered over by time and by the eternal snows that nip emerging words in the bud, leaving them as yet untouched, unspoken. Words from far away—from beyond the silence—known by the insightful. Tender words which got tangled in the skirmishes and quarrels so common to lovers, or jewel-like words that got converted into simple glass beads to adorn some beauty’s throat. The words whispered to the faithful mirror. To a bird flying past. To the wind between the trees and wheat.

“That truncated, sawed-off word. Forgotten and little heard because it comes from other times, or else because it is so familiar, like grandma’s turns of phrase,

or is ‘charming and manageable’... and here I’m talking as the men would talk, those who ‘know.’ Those who know such things. The masters, the proprietors of silence. The history of women’s writing, according to History, has been uneventful, needs little time for the telling.

“The language embodied by women from the beginning of our history has been sequestered in our continent, remained enchanted—like those princesses sleeping in the woods, the ones they told us about when we were girls. Is Sleeping Beauty the Latin American woman? ...A virgin of the woods, who sleeps under a spell on a bed of laurels awaiting her prince, while the dwarves feed her and wash her clothes and straighten her bed and go to work. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?

“But the mirror is a false companion, this we *finally* learned. And the wolf dressed in grandmother’s clothes is lying in wait, and will swallow her down in two bites.”

That is the book’s introduction to what I’m now going to read: my questions to six of the women writers, and their responses.

This first question is very *naive*. Please take into account that these writers were speaking with me fifteen years ago. Yet their words are still relevant and valid, and I don’t think anyone would retract anything we talked about here.

Question No. 1: When did you begin to write, why did you begin to write, and where did you begin to write?

Isabel Allende answered: “I think I began to write even before I began to speak. My mother gave me a notebook when I

was very little so I could jot down things about my life. Then I started making notes when I traveled, wrote letters, and then for many years worked as a journalist, which is a surreptitious way of approaching literature. I also wrote for the theatre. I never felt qualified to be a writer, even though at heart that is what I wanted to be. *The House of the Spirits* was the product of ten years of exile...of solitude...of loss of the past. It was an attempt to recover what had been lost. Perhaps I never would have written this book, nor any other, if I hadn't left Chile in the circumstances I did."

As with all of the writers, I'll highlight a statement from our interview that especially caught my attention: "I never imagined that I was going to write a work of fiction." That was Isabel Allende, fifteen years ago.

Luisa Valenzuela is an Argentine writer born in 1938. Luisa is someone who handles humor in the most extraordinary way, with a very special sense of the grotesque. *El gato eficaz* is, I believe, one of the first Latin American postmodern novels.³ When I asked Luisa Valenzuela when she began to write, she said:

"It's very difficult to say when. Because, for example, at the age of six I said a poem I didn't yet know how to write down, and so they wrote it for me and it was quite lovely. Physically, let's say, and with the awareness that I was writing, I began when I was around seventeen and the first thing I did was a story called "Ciudad Ajena" (Alien City). But one begins writing much before one hatches one's first story. From that 'before' to actually writing, a lot of things can happen. I might have started writing at the age of two when I made my first play on words: a friend of my mother's

would often ask me, What is your name, little girl? And I would answer, Luisa Carne (*carne* means meat) Valenzuela. My name is Luisa Carmen, but I couldn't pronounce it, so the señora kept asking. And the sixth time I told her, My name is *Luisa Bife* (Beef), which not only shows how Argentine I am, but also that I was aware of making a play on words. What I never knew is whether I believed I was named Meat, or realized I couldn't pronounce well. But already I had a writer's consciousness."

For me this phrase of Luisa's encapsulates the whole magnificent interview: even if the unconscious is unified and asexual, language necessarily passes through the filter of consciousness.

When I was first beginning my career as a woman (because *it is a career*), Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "A woman is made, not born." That had a great impact on me. Because I had been making myself for thirty years and still hadn't managed to fit myself in anywhere. And that, in truth, is a kind of praise for "madness," which I still want to *promote*. The *madness* of the thinking woman, especially of one who is Latin American, Colombian, and from Pereira at that.

This homegrown accent, this way of imagining things that do not exist, but that ultimately turn out to be true—this is why I am here today. My purpose is to "praise the madness of women," beginning with Juana de Arco. Poor "madwoman," they burned her. And then Teresa de Avila and Crazy Juana, her corpse on the shoulders of her enchanted prince. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The disobedient ones, the one who had to disappear, who were buried alive or who killed themselves.

This is the theme I wish to develop, and

hope you'll keep listening—I see you watching with such wonderful concentration and happiness—because we are a bunch of beautiful madwomen and we sing with the word. In our hearts we carry the word, seed of revolution. We come not to destroy the world, but to construct, with joy, with “intelligence,” and without being manipulative. And these women are the black pearls of the desert. This word, which in Latin America was provocative, never had anyone to “contradict,” for in reality, in truth, no one was listening.

The Uruguayan writer Cristina Peri Rossi is also practically my own generation. She was a woman who left Uruguay very early in life, to go into exile (settling in Spain in 1972). In her written texts, she fought against what was happening in Uruguay (political unrest, then military dictatorship 1973-85). Cristina has an extraordinary sense of humor. Thousands of her works attest to this, for she is very prolific. She always told me, “What I want is to go down in history like Corín Tellado, through quantity, not quality.” Whether or not she was joking, I think that in any case she'll go down in history for *quality*. At first she was a poet, then she switched to the short story and the novel. She has had a massive readership and critical attention, especially from the female scholars who have constantly supported us. For us women writers, the critics have been tremendously helpful in this career toward the madness of language and thought. A whole series of critics and literary scholars have supported Cristina, and the rest of us, have helped us to believe more in ourselves and, at least in my case, helped us be stronger.

When I asked Cristina, *when did you begin to write?* she replied, “If we think of

writing as not only the act itself but also imagining, then I think I started writing when I was very little, when I invented stories for myself, (playing with) the furniture and other things. I think that was when I began the task of imagining stories for myself. As for writing itself, I started when I learned to read, which I did on my own. I believe the first things I wrote were plays or skits, because I was organizing a kind of theatre group with the other boys and girls in the neighborhood. I lived with my grandparents, who had a big house, lots of room, especially the yard, which was like the Garden of Eden with cats, dogs, ostriches. So we also used the animals (in our plays). For me reading and writing always went together: a single vital impulse. Even now when I'm not physically writing, I'm continually imagining, working in some fashion. From the time I was very young I knew that I wanted to be a writer; and since books aroused great admiration in me, even as physical objects, what I wanted was to write books. From the time I was very young I had a sort of obscure consciousness or presentiment that this formed part of my identity.” Cristina puts it in a nutshell: “For me, writing is a way of knowing.”

And now comes Cecilia Vicuña. Cecilia is Chilean and the youngest of this group. She is a forty-eight year-old poet, artist, improviser of life and experience, of the marvelous and magical. I met Cecilia in Colombia in 1975, through a great friend named Roberto Triana. Something mysterious, very magic, *had to* happen. Today Cecilia has a wide audience. She improvises anything—poetry, song, dance—she is a happening unto herself. She opens a door and one never knows what will happen. Everything (she does) is dazzlingly

beautiful and uniquely magical. I identify very strongly with this improvisation and magic. She invents things and one doesn't know where this story she's been telling since she was little will finally end, but she's telling it now to make you laugh. Cecilia is committed to not only making us laugh, but also touching our soul. And that for me is priceless.

Cecilia tells her story this way: "I had a cousin named Teresa. We lived together in Santiago and when I was two she went to live in Antofagasta. I didn't know all the letters of the alphabet but I had the concept of writing. I wasn't yet four when I asked my mother for paper, saying, I'm going to write a letter. I started to write some signs that were an imitation of writing, recounting to my beloved cousin what was happening and telling her I needed to know what was going on with her. That was my first experience of writing." She sums up: "The important thing is to fully internalize the idea that a woman is a creator."

We move on to Nélida Piñon, who is very well known in the Brazilian literary world. Nélida is a woman who adores language and has hardly any narrative inhibition. Something absolutely extraordinary happened to Nélida, something I haven't been able to understand but which seems marvelously symbolic. Nélida was a "prophet in her own land"; the Brazilians have adored Nélida practically since she began to write. She has been a very important figure, along with Clarice Lispector. Clarice died very young and very tragically. Nélida kept writing, and had quite a good audience, but it was Clarice who was the idol of Brazilians. Then, suddenly, people started idolizing Nélida as well. She showed me a photo-

graph taken in Río de Janeiro of a gigantic wall with a *graffito* forty meters across that said, "Nélida, you put the zest in things!" based on one of her books, *El sabor de las cosas*.

To me it was very impressive that in Brazil a woman could be a prophet in her own land. Nélida also talks of magic. When finally we met (after almost missing our interview in Río de Janeiro and having to look for her everywhere), she looked at me with astonishment, and said, "Weren't you the one singing with a guitar in the streets and bars of Cadaqués, Spain? Didn't I see you singing there twenty years ago?"

Full of magic, she is an extraordinary representative of the change in women, of a particular kind of potency. We were talking about her contemporaries Jorge Amado and Guimaraes Rosa, such important men, such marvelous writers, and Nélida Piñon practically rode the crest of the wave with them. Mario Vargas Llosa dedicated *The War at the End of the World* to her. That was a high point.

Nélida Piñon has only one mission in life: to be a writer. She told me that if she stopped writing it would be like ceasing to breathe, or something just as horrible. Nélida wrote a book that was recently published in English, *The Republic of Dreams*. Her parents are Spaniards, and she has written a tremendously important pioneer family saga, now critically acclaimed in the United States.

Nélida is an extraordinary short story writer, a "big" novelist of great inspiration. Her *Tebas de mi corazón*⁴ calls up Lezama Lima's *Oppiano Licario*: it is one long "breath." An exquisite play of words. *Tebas* owes much to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. The protagonist appears now as a woman

and now as a man; s/he is situated totally outside of time. The novel has several “hallucinatory” flashes, of a kind that has not appeared in other famous writers of magic realism. Although to me *Tebas* seems untranslatable, it was translated in Spain and elsewhere. I have the great good fortune to be able to read it in Portuguese; even in the original I still can’t imagine plumbing all the depths of her language. Nélica is a song; a waterfall. In our interview, she verbalizes with extreme rapidity, and it was hard for me to translate all of that richness.

Here is what she says: “I started writing when I was a very young girl, in a very fugitive way and with all the difficulties of inexperience. What’s important is that from the age of eight I already wanted to be a writer. I wanted to make books because a book for me was a magic object, and I always had books within reach, for my parents had always given them to me. The stories I read were always so enchanting, so marvelous that they transported me to other worlds, to realities much more exciting than those that surrounded me. I thought: My God, who is the person who constructs these worlds! The person describing this must live in a very intense and fertile way. So then I resolved, I am going to write, too! I am going to imitate these people, tell stories myself. Of course I didn’t know anything about the twists and turns of the literary profession, but I started learning from the time I was a girl and keep learning now that I am a mature woman. Another thing that fascinated me was to sit around the table with my grandparents and aunts, with the oldest relatives, and get them to talk. So I grew up with that language, those stories, the incests and intrigues... The feeling I have

now is that I was already listening in through keyhole at the next bedroom, at the living room...to find out what these people were thinking, to get at the stories to which I didn’t have access, unless I invented or imagined them myself. As a child I had a habit that I still have today; I keep saying, Tell me more!

“Except that I adore silence. I am a woman who respects the silence of others. But if the silence seems a barrier or is isolating, then I always ask, What are you thinking? Tell me! I have a passion for my fellow human beings, and recognize that this was one of my motivations to write. To know what the other was thinking or feeling or what he or she was going to do. The lives of other people have been such a strong impulse for me that I can get totally absorbed.” Nélica Piñon asserts, “It is the story’s destiny to be told.”

I will conclude with Rosario Ferré. Rosario is from Ponce, Puerto Rico, and is particularly elastic in her writing. An extraordinary poet. She was above all a greater fighter for Puerto Rico, with a newspaper she published, called *Zona de Carga y de Descarga* (Loading and Unloading Zone). Rosario today is at the forefront of this group of women who are “mad for language.” She has begun now to write in English, which is totally logical and comprehensible. Puerto Ricans are raised with the language, they’re bilingual. Moreover, she said it was her editor who really pushed it, because in order to be sold and known and well distributed throughout the world, the work needs to be in English.

I have had this same impression with practically all of the women in this group; when I presented the manuscript of *De vuelta del silencio*, a very well-known publisher in Barcelona said, “Tell me, just who

are these *señoras*?" I replied, "They are writers." "Fine," he answered, "but I don't know them." Isabel Allende was on the list and already becoming an important writer in Latin America; so were Nélida Piñon, Cristina Peri Rossi, Elena Poniatowska, Luisa Valenzuela, Rosario Ferré... This was a very distinguished group of writers, recognized in the United States by scholars and critics, but the Spanish editor asked who were these "señoras," a terribly pejorative term. In any case, even though the book has yet to be published, you have some excerpts.

Rosario Ferré: "I believe I've always written, in some fashion, although at first I wrote in English. My family's political and social profile in Puerto Rico dictated that to better oneself, to be a civilized Puerto Rican, you had to learn to speak English without any accent. Not only did you have to speak without an accent, but you had to be able to express yourself in all of its forms. That's why I came to the United States to get my BA in English literature. I still know by heart some English poems. One is called "Theseus's Grief" and is about Theseus's pain when his son kills himself. The poem is structured around the idea of culpability. Now I see a whole welter of things that I had never thought about when I was writing at the age of eighteen. The whole problem of writing in English I think became the base, the seed for why I began to write: Because I always felt an immense need to express myself on my own... being a *woman* in the first place and, second, belonging to a political and social context in which *everything* was oriented around writing and speaking English. In reality, I realize my trauma was that I felt mute and, in a way, I believe that this is the problem of all

Puerto Ricans. The problem is really too complex to talk about so superficially here. I would like to structure it better, develop it further.

"In Puerto Rico, Spanish is, as they say, the language of the house, the language used with servants, within the family, at the back door. English is the official language, used in business, in the courts. So we have feelings of inferiority and guilt, which leave us mute. That is to say, at any meeting of historians, political, or literary figures where there is a Mexican, a Cuban, a Colombian, and a Puerto Rican, you know immediately who is the Puerto Rican: the one who doesn't speak. He (or she) is mute, out of a sense of lacking mastery over both Spanish and English. We forgot Spanish and never learned to speak English." Rosario says, "I was constructed by language."

I wanted to know when these women embarked on this "madness," and they all said that at the age of two they simply grabbed a pencil, because they wanted to make books. For me that was decisive.

I have another question that seems fundamental and beautiful. It is more structured. This came after having asked them thirty other things.

Question No. 2: Where and when did you discover language?

This is already part of what today is called *l'écriture féminine* (writing with express consciousness of female gender and its expression through language and thought). I began my book of interviews fourteen years ago at a conference in Costa Rica.

I asked why it was generally believed that women's writing lacked a language

of its own.

One writer, who at the time was involved in these issues, countered with Virginia Woolf's theory that "language was androgynous." And that's true, very true... I *believe* in androgyny. Yes, language is androgynous; absolutely, this is my *primary* position. What I was saying is that if today Virginia Woolf were restored to life and could see that women are writing, could see *how* women are writing, she would take back what she said, accept that there is, definitely, women's language, and what we call "progressive androgyny" in human beings and in language. When we are free of the barriers—which I won't specify, because they are so many and we know them so well—we are going to have a completely different world. We are going to enjoy harmony, we will have a language that *in spite of* all that has been said, will constitute a new "Esperanto," even though, for now, we refer to it with "other" accents.

Yes, at this moment, I believe we are breaking away from masculine language—at least this has been my proposal for the last fourteen years. In Colombia when I wrote a book whose title story was *O gloria inmarcesible*—from the opening lines of our national anthem, "O everlasting glory, immortal jubilation"—they called me a pornographer and said my book insulted the national anthem.

Well, I did narrate the whole story in the voices of a policeman, of an ordinary soldier, of the man in the street, in the idiom of the butler, the bank manager, and it truly is terrible. I re-read the story after they said it was "pornographic," and said to myself: They're *completely* right. It's pure pornography! But, of course, it was *masculine* language! I do not want to exclude that, in our books, women also use very strong,

open language. What we're proposing is that the taboo cease to be taboo.

When Henry Miller told Anaïs Nin that she would be forgotten unless she wrote erotica, she said she couldn't write such things. Henry Miller replied, "Look, Anaïs, you'll starve to death." So she decided against starving to death (she was being supported by others) and struck out on her own. But she wrote erotica with such exquisite, such marvelous language that it had nothing whatever to do with Henry Miller's *Plexus* or *Nexus* or any of his other "exus." From then on, she was convinced. (She was creating) new possibilities, using different, filtered language.

And that is the project I am embarked on today. In breaking away, in speaking "differently," in telling the secrets we need to tell...there is a great deal that is erotic. Women have made extraordinary work out of silence. Fifteen years ago I broke through the barrier, but some women are still in the ring, dodging those bulls, throwing those *banderillas* right and left. I am part of that movement of women who *believe in women* and who believe we must *break away* in order to reach the next step on the ladder. Our true "place."

In Madrid, where I was promoting a novel called *Misía señora*, I was asked if I was one of those who brandished a "feminist flag." The majority of that very large audience was male. And I answered, "I'm not waving any feminist banner; but I do come with the *revolution* that women are making all over the world in the twentieth century."

I really do believe that it is a revolution. I really do believe that revolutions *cannot* be revisionist, that revisionism itself is dangerous; this has been demonstrated by all the great theorists and philosophers we

have had to this day. Those philosophies have been toppled and their revisionism produced no productive reality. If today women appear to men—particularly Latin American men—as revolutionaries, as mad and out of place, then I praise that madness. Sooner or later this “revision,”—which really is a *revolution*—will show that we even “changed the language.” The parameters may be the same for an intelligent person. It is precisely here that we propose to “break away” from vulgar language. Not “vulgarisms,” but the demotic known as “the people’s language,” which I love and respect, and *maximize* in my own literary work.

That was the whole problem with *O everlasting glory!* I want to show you why these women are talking about how they discovered language, and what that language in its essence is like, even though it has been said that it was not different. Today all informed readers say that women “speak” differently. I believe it’s true, not because I’m trying to construct a theory that cannot “fall” tomorrow. We do not want the kind of disinformation that many others have utilized in trying to debunk the truths in certain essential feminist novels. We are, yes, making a proposal, and it begins with “language”—language as a vessel for intelligence. Here are some answers to how you search for your language.

Isabel Allende says, “I try to imagine that I am telling someone a story. I think I was first conscious of the search for a language in the final chapters of *The House of the Spirits*. I re-wrote the last chapter fifteen times without knowing why it didn’t suit me. It was affected, declamatory, pompous, solemn, or else it seemed coarse. I re-read it and knew that *something*

was wrong, but couldn’t say what. I re-wrote it and re-wrote it, and one day I woke up at three in the morning feeling that I was all tangled up, like a thread in a skein of yarn, that what I had to do was sit down and tell it all to my grandfather. So I went into my study and started to write exactly as though my grandfather were sitting there in his rocking chair, exactly as I had left him years before. I ‘told him the story.’ That’s how it got written. And I didn’t have to touch it afterwards. I think that last part really works. It was the first time I was conscious of the search for language. It simply flowed out of me, and now when I feel unsure of something (I’m writing) it’s usually because it feels affected. I have a horror of affected writing, I mean my own. I love finding it at times in others, but I hate it in myself. So whenever I find myself in that situation, I think of simply telling the story, except with anything erotic. When I have to write an erotic scene, I imagine that I’m living it; but everywhere else, I imagine that I’m telling the story to someone near and dear.”

Luisa Valenzuela repeats the question: “How do I find language? I don’t know. How do I search for it? Constantly. My whole life is about playing with language; I’m always making phrases in my head. I write a great deal in my mind. I go out into the streets, and go along in this way writing; I trust that rhythm, whatever it is in that combination of walking and breathing and pulsing, that somehow constructs language tied to the beating of one’s heart.

“But the flip side is that I also destroy: there is both construction and destruction. I believe very much in the moment when I break that combination, that litany, that rhythm of language. I try to give the

phrase another connotation, another *turn of the screw*. Before, I wrote in images –actually saw those images. The first novel I saw like someone watching a film. I believe this is something that beginning writers do. Later I began to hear words, like Juana de Arco. I write *with* the language; the language itself leads me to change, leads me to the plot; it is not the plot that leads me to the language. I believe my principle ‘protagonist’ is always language... This is very noticeable in *The Lizard’s Tail*.”

This is how Cristina Peri Rossi explained her process of “searching for” and “finding” language: “I would say that I am a *menstrual* poet. That’s how it comes to me. Of course I have to be more precise here. What I mean is that, for me, poetry and the short story have a similar poetic, which requires great economy in terms of creating the effect. And given that I write fiction that could be considered fantastical, I think the definitive issue is *how* I immerse the reader in the fictional space required by the story. If this space is fantastical, implausible, for example, then the first sentence has to be so *effective* and *efficient* that the reader is immediately pulled in to a space that is beyond argument, like the one I created in *The Suicide Club*.

“The first sentence had to immediately *create* a space that is so *unreal*, it becomes ‘symbolic’; and I couldn’t spend days and days working on it. I didn’t worry about it either, because I knew *it was going to come*... and one day I was riding the metro talking with a friend and while we were chatting an inner voice said, The city protects its suicides. So these, and only these, were the threads of the sentence in which everything was locked as in a jewel box. Po-

etry is the same; you have to go for synthesis, as in a short story. While there can be reversals or contradiction, everything ultimately has to work toward producing a single effect. It’s different with the novel, which generally works over time. So all I have to do is wait... because I know that if the first sentence *works*, everything else will follow. Like an equation.”

Cecilia Vicuña says, “I search for language by listening, not to others, but inwardly. For me, writing has always meant *paying attention*. Listening to a word that has its own soul, its own existence, its own weight, its own path, its own rhythm. What I have to do is to create the conditions for *inner cleansing*, crystalline conditions that will allow me to listen to that language. Only when I can hear it, do I write. I set the page(s) aside...to look at later. As I read, *I know* whether or not the language is *alive*... the difference is like that between a diamond and a stone. I mean, when the language *is*, it sings!”

Nélida Piñon says: “The problem is that something has to be narrated, and that something has to be narrated with veracity; at the same time it should expand, multiply in the reader’s imagination. As a writer, one needs the recourse of language. I’m not referring to stylistic recourses, but to the way in which we create, narrate, forge a language that allows a text to be imprinted with the deepest meaning, the greatest effect. We create language for the sake of pleasure. One searches for language as a way to confirm that the text has life, to give it distinction. A text recounting itself has *no value whatsoever*. The story’s value derives from its *orality*. The things on paper need certain conditions—light, temperature, atmosphere, water pressure. That is where the

language gains character, attains the level of art. The more one works the language, the more the text gains, because within the text there is *another* text that can only emerge if one is searching for *its* truth.

“A text has a truth that the writer cannot deny. The writer is the only one who can assassinate the reality of her own text. No critic can do this. So, the more the writer keeps working on, keeps elaborating the language, the more she is telling the story, allowing the story to acquire its true face, for a story has many faces.

“I work my language according to what I’m going to say, so I search for the means that will help me realize my objectives. As the language gets *defined*, so too does the *narrative strategy* get defined; and for that language to exist, there also needs to be a defined *procedure*. The language is not the *capitulation* of the text. On the contrary, language enhances, highlights, enriches the tone. My search for language, and my search for the story, is a very slow, very *old* process in my life. In essence, language is thought, a concept. Language is nothing less than man himself. To me it seems that the reality precedes the text. I believe this more and more.”

I’ll conclude this section with Rosario Ferré: “The whole question of language is very curious. It’s so mysterious! Everything can begin with a single phrase. It’s like when you have an oyster and a grain of sand falls inside and day after day the oyster secretes its liquid around that little grain. I write a story at least eighteen times and the first version might have one page and the last forty. In general, everything comes from a single phrase or image; it can be the image of the fields or the image of a woman seated on the corner wearing a rosary, or the image of a West Point

cadet assassinated near the sea. First you have the grain of sand, the original image, and then you have to *guess*, in an almost Socratic way, what is behind the image, as though the story had already been written long before one was born, and one was simply there, trying to discover what is behind this discomfort, behind this particle that makes you blink quickly so as not to cry. Then, when you discover what it is, it’s a kind of *liberation*. You end up feeling certain that that’s the way it is, the way it has to be. That’s why I say that the form precedes the idea. This is how it always happens with me.”

This concludes my introduction to thirty women whose comments have yet to be published: perhaps those gentlemen publishers grew bored with reading about them. Of the thirty, fourteen are considered authors of international importance, and I selected six writers from that group.

I thank you so much for having listened, as with *one voice*, which is the voice of *all* women. I’ll be happy to take any questions you might have.

Questions from the audience

Question: How did you find your language?

Answer: I identify with the whole plurality, with the whole rainbow of women. I share three characteristics with Rosario and Nélida Piñon. And, as Cristina Peri Rossi says, “If the language is right, a single phrase ends up determining the whole story.” I don’t think I quite realized the power of this before.

I find language though ‘hallucinations’ because I am a great dreamer. No sooner do I start, than my grandmothers ‘talk’ to me. I’ll be working on a sentence and hear

my grandmother say, 'You settle accounts as you go.' So I understand that she's telling me not to rush, that I have to wait. I work with images. As Nélida Piñon says, The images of every book have certain 'conditions.' In *Misía señora* the language is very particular; the language of women. And I find a rhythm; for it's true, I'm a singer. I don't know when I began to speak in a *popular* (or demotic) way; some books are inspired by this language, like *O gloria inmarcesible*, for example. A totally popular idiom. The village, my grandmother—here is my great reservoir, I really know this language. And I always listen, as Cecilia Vicuña says, 'inwardly.' That is part of my linguistic hallucination. But I also listen a great deal to the people around me and Colombian vernacular is extraordinary.

I grew up on the coast, in Barranquilla, and I'm *pereirana*. I went to school for a while in Bogotá, and also lived abroad in contact with all the languages of Latin Americans. My writing language is born from listening to people in the street, to the people who really know the idiom, more from intuition than from any grammar book. I never really knew what a Gallicism was; it always confounded me. I never really learned semantics or linguistic structure; the vernacular bursts forth spontaneously. Hallucinatory language came to me with *Misía señora*; I reiterate, the wellspring of female hallucination is silence. And this is how words were born that nobody knew how to pronounce.

A professor in Madrid who was presenting *Misía señora* told me he was a scholar of language. He had lived 25 years in Colombia and confessed, "You sent me to the dictionary, for I believed those words existed." He took a long pause, then admit-

ted, "They *do* exist." *Those* were my grandmother's words. They come from the region of Antioquia. They come down to us from Don Tomás de Carrasquilla, who said of Ligia Cruz that "he made his way like a biting tarantula."⁵ I thought that was marvelous, and later wrote, "I would prefer to have my tongue bitten by a scorpion." Above all I have been inspired by the way village people talk. Nothing is mine, nothing, nothing... I drink from the same fountain as everyone else, and take advantage of that pure water. I invent nothing, but I am 'hallucinatory' in the manner in which I say things. Even now there are critics who don't get it. I hope that one day these ways of speaking will come together. One would think that *Oppiano Licario*, to mention an 'easy' book by Lezama Lima, would be impossible to translate, and yet they managed to do it.⁶

A writer who was my spiritual mentor, the Chilean Alberto Baéza Flores, warned me, "Be careful, translators aren't going to understand." That was thirty years ago, and I replied, "Relax, no one is ever going to translate me." And he said, "My dear, you never know." And look at how García Márquez writes and *everyone* understands. So it occurred to me: let the translators 'tear out their eyes.' *This* is my reservoir of language. I can't give up a word just because it will be labor-intensive, or betray an image because a translator might not get it. It was precisely Lezama Lima whom I quoted in *Misía señora*: "It is only when I betray an image that I am guilty and accountable." I do not want to be a traitor in my literary work. I use words that are Castilian, Chilean, Argentine, Uruguayan, and Cuban; I make use of the universal language of Latin America and if they don't get it, then let them 'tear out

their eyes,' with apologies to translators, for whom I have great respect.

Question: You didn't mention Gabriela Mistral.

Answer: I couldn't interview Gabriela Mistral because she's six feet underground. But it would have been wonderful. This book is about contemporary writers, from my generation on. I have a project, "In Praise of Madness" and "In Praise of Silence," where obviously I will include Gabriela, one of the great teachers of us all. I have placed her among the great precursors of a 'silence' that is *almost* impenetrable. Gabriela died poor in the United States. They gave her the Nobel Prize, which was marvelous, yet today we are just discovering texts that never were published. Why is that? She was silent and hidden, even though she had the Nobel Prize. Gabriela was *the* pioneer. She is a figure that resonates strongly for me, because there was something truly *mystical* about her. [She was] the most spiritually elevated of all the Latin American women writers who have forged our language. It was not in vain that she received the Nobel, the richest and most extraordinarily important prize in the world. Gabriela is the spirit of us all, I believe. She is the pioneer and the mother, but I couldn't put her in (this book) because I couldn't interview her. But I do have dialogues with her, through her books...

Question: You and I belong to a generation that for various reasons had the opportunity to leave Colombia. What would you say to the women who are in Colombia and cannot or do not wish to leave?

Answer: I'm not the best person to answer that question, but I'll try to do my best.

Thanks to Amnesty International which, for many years has been stressing *political exile* in relation to Colombia, the international community is finally beginning to understand the problem.

The exile from our land is above all spiritual, an exile of the soul. This is how I understand the essence of the problem. The disintegration of principles, of morality, security, inner well-being. The gradual depreciation of what a community has as its base, that which allows it to survive with dignity, with respect for itself and from the rest of the world, has been a sad mirror in which now we must examine ourselves, without lies or prejudice. We must accept that we have no solid base. That we lost our oar and oarsman. That the boat is sinking. That the foundation of dignity and respect has been wrecked. This is the country you ask me about. Where women, in an attempt to forge general coherence, should act with more intensity, more conviction. In order to do definitive battle against the *cause* of such aggression to the principles of human dignity.

I repeat, I don't have the answer, however much I wish I did... But that's how I see it, in principle. *Something* needs to shake up the foundations of that terrible machine that wants to swallow up everything, that leaves us nothing that is not corrupted by the thirst for money.

You and I were *internal, secret* exiles. We wouldn't dare to speak out loud from that *exile*, which for me has lasted thirty-four years. But now the world knows our painful secrets, the wound is growing, and the cries are resounding to the heavens. So it occurs to me that for a model *female strat-*

egy, we might look to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina.

That is to say, take group action. By taking to the streets, hand in hand, *united* as one, we might *begin* the combat (that needs to be fought) *at all levels*. (We must) protest against poverty and insecurity. The threats from emerging power groups. Corruption. The lack of coordinated efforts to pull the country out of this integral and spiritual disaster. Those who violate humane principles must be held accountable for the people's suffering, and the people, we must recognize, have shown heroic fortitude.

That is more or less how I see it. I don't know if we should be shouting more. I don't know if that would have any effect. My proposal would be a silent march. As I said, thousands of women, from every social level, hand in hand, in the squares of cities, towns, and villages.

I would like to ask you, Do you see Colombian women united *as women*, as a homogenous group that would be tantamount to a collective scream, a group comprised not only of the poor, but of *every social class*? Could such a groundswell make Colombians realize that women are *uniting* in defense of the basic principles of life?

If the people in power had to confront thousands and thousands of women sitting silently day and night in every town square in Colombia—I repeat, day and night, without breaking the silence and the unity among social classes—at long last a government spokesperson would have to ask, “Ladies, what is it you want? What is your problem?” But it seems that women's voices have been lost in our preyed-upon country, whose problems and suffering are caused by a predator

given wholly to power and ambition. Women bear a tremendous burden which, unfortunately, comes down to us through History. They have born the weight in terrible solitude, because men have always been able to walk calmly through the streets. A woman must always watch her back, and it is she who is usually preyed upon in the street. I believe that little can be done once consciousness is lost, which seems to be our case. But if there is political consciousness within that structure and there are people within the system who will listen to us, then we must find the way to make ourselves heard.

We are protesting *silently*, but I think that can be a start. Days and days and nights and nights, to be sure. History has generated protests of this type, and they have had enormous repercussions, I believe.

The first step is *the union of women*. That would engender a solidarity that would probably be unprecedented in our country. And it would be marvelous to experience that whole episode. Once the heart is moved, the center mobilized, the power of that union could be expressed in a single, catalyzing voice. I wonder what that woman will say, I have no idea. If she is centered in her heart and if the protest embraces the cry of millions of Colombians, she won't err in a single word. Of that I am sure.



Albalucía Angel Marulanda (Pereira, Colombia, 1939) is one of the early pioneers of Latin American postmodernism. In 1975, her book *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón* won the Vivencias Prize in Cali's National Literature Competition. She is the author of five novels, two of which are experimental. Her last book, as yet unpublished, *De vuelta del silencio*, is a collection of interviews with thirty Latin American women writers. Over the course of her career, she has written for numerous magazines, been a singer of traditional Latin American music, and worked as an art critic.

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De vuelta del silencio (Out of Silence), interviews with Latin American women writers.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. The title translates as *The Beautiful Bird Was Perched in the Lime Tree*.
2. Angel is referring to the 18th century, when vast quantities of Colombian gold (especially from the region of Yolombó, Antioquia) were mined and removed to Spain.
3. Luisa Valenzuela's *El gato eficaz* (1972) has yet to be translated in its entirety. Two brief excerpts were published: "The First Feline Vision," Evelyn Picon Garfield, trans., in *Antaeus*, no. 48 (Winter 1983), 75-78; and "The Efficient Cat," Evelyn Picon Garfield, trans., in *River Styx*, no. 14 (January 1984): 87-89. Scholars often refer to the book as *Cat-0-Nine Deaths*.
4. The title translates as "Thebes of my Heart."
5. Tomás de Carrasquilla (1858-1941), excellent regional novelist from Antioquia praised for his fine language and focus on late 18th-century colonial life. His most famous novel is *La marquesa de Yolombó*.
6. José Lezama Lima (1912-1976), Cuban novelist and poet.

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