

Writing Towards the Truth and Away from Invisibility: A Conversation with Patricia Engel

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Born in New Jersey to Colombian parents, Patricia Engel (b. 1977) encapsulates many themes central to the Colombian-American, Colombian diasporic, and US Latinx experience. Engel's novels *Vida* (2010), *It's Not Love, It's Just Paris* (2013), *The Veins of the Ocean* (2016), and most recently, *Infinite Country* (2021) have garnered attention and numerous awards both in the United States and internationally, and have been translated into several languages. Engel has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, amongst numerous other accolades recognizing her contribution to literature. The narrative universe created by Engel captures a frankness and newness in her description of the multiple experiences of the Colombian-American community, which in the last decade has seen a rise in creative writers who share this identity; Juliana Delgado Lopera, Carlos Andrés Gómez, Daisy Hernández, and Ingrid Rojas Contreras—amongst others—have all published novels and memoirs within the last few years. Before Engel's first novel *Vida* was published in 2010, however, only the fictional work of Jaime Manrique (b. Barranquilla, Colombia, 1949), and particularly his novel *Latin Moon in Manhattan* (1992), focused on a central character of Colombian descent living in the United States. Within the span of nearly twenty years between the publication of Manrique's *Latin Moon* and Engel's *Vida*, no other novel or collection of fictional narratives featured Colombian-Americans as protagonists.

In 2016, the Spanish translation of *Vida* received the honor of the III Premio Biblioteca de Narrativa Colombiana from EAFIT University in Medellín, marking the first time that a woman and a Colombian-American received this award. Although it was only the third prize since the inception of the Premio Biblioteca de Narrativa Colombiana in 2014, the recognition of *Vida* within the canon of Colombian literature by one of Colombia's major universities is meaningful, particularly in relation to the subjects that Engel's work represents. Engel's narratives contest the ongoing US imaginary of what comprises "authentic" US Latinx culture. Furthermore, the plurality associated with *Colombianidad* in Engel's texts sustains representations of divergences within this identity category. The decision to grant Engel the Premio Biblioteca de Narrativa Colombiana is appropriate in the broader transnational sense of *narrativa colombiana* that the prize recognizes, while at the same time postulating a timely contribution to US Latinx literature on the experience and identity of Colombian-Americans. The feeling of invisibility that takes centerstage in *Vida*, as well as in all

of Engel's novels and fictional works, serves to problematize categorizations of transnational Latino identity against perceived essential markers of *colombianidad* in addition to *latinidad*. Engel challenges these dominant perceptions by moving away from a Latin-American/US American binary model regarding race, ethnicity, and language. The traditional narrative of the Latino/Latin-American-origin duality and that of the internal battle to "fit in" with the dominant Anglo US American cultural and linguistic society is set aside in Engel's novels. Instead, the reader witnesses her diverse protagonists' struggle for visibility, as opposed to either a desire for or a resistance to acculturation, as is the case in the prominent US Latinx narratives of the 1980s and 1990s. To be Colombian-American in Patricia Engel's texts means possessing a complex and layered understanding of identity, in particular as race, class, gender and inherited historical trauma shape this categorization trans-nationally and through intersecting geographic locations. Although Engel is Colombian-American, her work does not conform to the parameters of cultural labeling, as she has created narrators that represent a plurality of ethnic identities. This includes protagonists who represent the diverse ethno-racial backgrounds of Colombians from novel to novel, and Cuban as well as Cuban-American experiences in her most recent publications. In terms of US Latinx literature, this is often an unconventional position, as writers traditionally create protagonists mirroring their own cultural identification. In this interview, Patricia Engel and I spoke about how the ethnic labeling of writers can be problematic; the goal of writing for an authentic voice; the invisibility caused by immigration; and identity politics for US Latinx communities. The theme of immigration is the center of her most recent novel, *Infinite Country*, which was released in March of 2021 to much acclaim and positive reviews, and has become a New York Times bestseller.

Patricia Engel and I spoke on February 26, 2019 via Skype from her home in Miami, Florida, where she is a professor of Creative Writing at the University of Miami.

(AM): Almost every review of your work first notes you as a "Colombian-American" writer. I've read you have mixed feelings on this notion of categorization that only happens to writers of color in the United States. Could you expand on why this constant labeling can be so problematic?

Patricia Engel (PE): Well, it's something tricky and there's no one, flat answer for this. First of all, I am very proud of my background; I was raised 100% Colombian with a clear sense of cultural identity. My parents took great care to not lose that in the transition of immigration as often happens. So [being Colombian] is very much a part of me. But at the same time, in my professional life, that's where I feel it's problematic. And I always point out that Anglo writers never get questions like that and the reason is because society, literature and [US] American culture is always centering the white experience as the neutral experience, as the one that is prioritized, as the perspective we all defer to. And then it's often up to everyone else to make our experiences *relatable*, as they say, to the central Anglo experience. So, it's often a symptom of this tendency of people to ask you to prove or identify yourself. It's not unusual when someone asks me "Where are you from?," "Where are you *really* from?," "Where did you learn how to speak English so well?," and "Were you born in this country?" It's essentially a process of casually asking for my papers, my documentation. And this same sort of thing happens when I'm presenting or discussing [my] books and I'm asked "As a Colombian...?" The subtext is that I have to humanize myself, because the central Anglo perspective sees themselves as human and everyone else as maybe a little less human or outside that experience, in which case you have to describe yourself. You have to do the extra work to build that bridge of connection because that central experience of the white culture in America is so comfortable with itself. So like I said, on a personal level I'm deeply proud of being Colombian and those are the characters that I write about. But they are never treated simply as characters or as people. And their experiences are never treated just as an experience. It's this constant push to qualify everything, to have to describe yourself constantly; and I suspect it's because the people asking those questions are the ones resistant to accepting it as just as normal and central to their experience.

AM: *Your novels, if read chronologically according to how you published them, each takes on the themes of race and colorism to a more deepened extent. Is this because you found the liberty to explore these notions more as you grew in your literary career?*

PE: Everything is always particular to the characters that I'm writing about. The experiences between characters do not apply to the other. For example, Sabina [*Vida*] grew up in a mainly white suburb and Reina [*The Veins of the Ocean*] grew up in Miami, where she was part of the majority there. So it's a different experience [for each one]. I have to keep myself, and wherever I am in my life out of each book and out of each characters' heads so I can give them agency to live their own lives. But, I do write different novels and stories to deal with things that are interesting to me at the time. But I don't have an agenda, or even everything worked out. I just work on the characters and just think about where they are, but it's not

about "What do they have to say?" I don't want to use them as mouthpieces. It's what is authentic to their experience and to their psychology and to what they are feeling and how they inhabit their communities.

AM: *Connected to that, each of your novels also often center around forgiveness, trauma, inheritance of trauma, and memory, which are subjects that are very common in immigrant stories. Would you be able to expand on why it is important to have these themes present in all of your novels?*

PE: I don't look at it as a theme, I just look at it as a part of life, as a part of everybody's life. A lot of people want to look away from that, but everybody carries trauma. A lot of people suffer because of their unwillingness to acknowledge that. I think that writing away from trauma is not authentic. That's more fraudulent. I write towards the trauma and the characters for the most part have an earnestness about them where they're in a process of understanding trauma. And it's not always trauma that happens to them, it's inherited trauma, peripheral trauma, generational trauma: all sorts of trauma that becomes a part of who we are when we inhabit our own lives. Forgiveness is a part of that, and I think that is also something that people struggle with in their lives. For me, it's the most normal thing in the world. I don't know if it's that I was just raised that way. But I try to write towards the truth, and for me that's where truth is: in exploring and confronting trauma and all the ways that forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation or confrontation are a part of that.

AM: *I also see the concepts of invisibility and marginalization run through all of your narratives, especially as tied to notions of diaspora. Two moments that stand out are the stories "Lucho" and "Madre Patria" in *Vida*, where "invisibility" is a central motif; while both *Lita* in *It's Not Love*, *It's Just Paris* as well as *Reina* in *The Veins of the Ocean* are intent on self-invisibilizing. What draws you to invisibility as a sub-text in all of your work? Is it the immigrant or first-generation experience, or is it something else?*

PE: The difference between immigrants and people who have not immigrated is that you are always "from" a place, meaning this is where you were born, this is where your parents were born, your grandparents, your relatives and you have roots. The minute a person leaves a country where they are from and goes to another one all that is gone. They have made the decision to sever their family tree in some ways, or sever the family experience by moving and starting someplace else. So there is a rootlessness about the lives of immigrants that is very unique and maybe that manifests in a feeling of anonymity because you are in a place where nobody knows you: nobody knows your grandparents, who you went to high school with, your aunts and uncles, you're

not going to run into somebody who knew your grandmother. You don't have any of that. So naturally, that creates a sense of being a stranger, of being invisible. People only see me but they don't know where I come from, they don't know my family the way that other people who haven't experienced that have. They have a last name that people recognize: "Oh, are you related to so-and-so?" When you immigrate, you have none of that, it all disappears. So there's a loneliness, there's a solitude to it. Nothing belongs to you, this is not the place where your family is from. So in a way you are always a bit of an intruder and it doesn't help that a lot of times people look at you that way, especially if you are speaking a different language.

AM: In both *Vida* and *The Veins of the Ocean* you shed light on the punishment of the family, both immediate and extended, as a result of the criminal incarceration system here in the US. How did you become interested in this aspect of society, and in representing criminal justice, or the lack thereof, in your novels?

PE: I had incarcerated family members when I was growing up, so it was not a faraway experience; it was a very near experience to me. I was part of a family that experienced prison closely, I was always interested in how you never hear about that in literature. I never read any book featuring characters that had [incarcerated individuals] as part of their family experience. Sometimes you would read about prisoners or about victims, but not about the people who are somewhere in between: who are related to someone who has committed a crime and what that does to their family and their family experience. So much of being a writer is writing the books you wished existed and that's part of it: those are [themes] that I wish existed in books that I read when I was growing up or developing as a reader or a writer, I was exploring that.

AM: The lexicon and frankness in your writing is something I find fascinating, and very accessible. You belong to a generation of writers who were young adults during the post-9/11 time frame: in their 20s or early 30s when this tragedy occurred; for example, in the US, Junot Díaz or internationally [the British writer], Zadie Smith. I see similarities in all of your prose styles. Do you feel that this style of frankness is characteristic of your generation? Or, do you see your writing in a different way?

PE: I don't know if this style is of my generation because I grew up reading a lot of writers such as Albert Camus and Romain Gary who were very frank in their writing, so it's not something that I think started recently. In my mind, I'm very sentimental, so when people describe my writing that way I think "Really?". But, like I said, I always try to write towards the truth of an experience so sometimes that involves laying

things out as they are. And the priority is always keeping to the truth of the narrator's voice. Very often I write a first-person narrator, so I have to make sure that whatever they say is in line with who they are and everything that they have lived up until that moment. It's interesting because when *Vida* came out, people would say to me that Sabina [the main character] was unsentimental or sardonic. And I don't see that at all; she's a girl who is just trying to figure things out and is doing her best. She's actually very open hearted, in my mind, because of the chances that she gives to people who are otherwise dismissed by other people. The language is always the way that a character would speak and I try to keep that in line with not only their spoken voice, but also their intellectual and inner voice. You don't lie to yourself in your inner voice and you also don't speak "high English" when it's just you alone with your most intimate thoughts, and that is what I try to create in the prose.

AM: All of your books provide the reader with a geographical tour of every narrative location presented: whether it be New York, Miami, Paris, La Habana, Cartagena, or many other places that are central to your narratives. The attention to detail you provide is fascinating. How important is a setting to you? What kind of inspiration does it provide?

PE: Well, it's twofold. From the craft perspective, the reason that places and landscapes are so important, and being able to show that to the reader, is because you understand how the character is inhabiting that space. We both lived in Miami; but even though we were part of the same university and went to the same places, your Miami is quite different from mine. It's a fixed place that can be described on maps and in books and we can look at it on Google Earth, but what the place represents to a character is totally unique and totally intimate. So it's important for me to describe a place in order to reveal the character: how they see the place, how they experience it. But I do a lot of research in order to get the details right, like you said, for people who have been there, for people who know the place better than I do. As a reader, probably nothing bothers me more than when I read a book and I see that I know more about the place than the author does or that they didn't take the time to do very basic research; [because of that] you lose complete trust in the author. The most important bond is the author and the reader. And you have to trust that voice, not just as an authority, but with an emotional trust in order to receive what the author is describing as truth. I know people love people who inhabit the spaces that I write about, and I want them to read the books and feel "She got it right. She took the time to get those details right."

AM: *It's Not Love, It's Just Paris* was published in 2013—before Brexit, before Trump's political hyperbole—even though all of the anti-immigrant rhetoric that you wrote

about in the book had always existed. I'm wondering what was the inspiration behind the setting of 1997-1998 in the novel? It's interesting that the anti-immigrant rhetoric you describe was from a few decades ago, but has gained new fervor recently. What inspired you to write this novel about those years at the end of the last century and the political climate in Europe?

PE: I did live in Paris during that time [written about in the book]. It was a combination of things. I studied French literature in college, and I read a lot of books set in Paris, both in French and English. So I had this idea that I wanted to write a book about Paris that was not cliché, stereotypical Paris, or the Paris that I've seen so many times in books. I wanted to write about the Paris that I knew, which is a beautiful city but a very flawed city. A city with all kinds of struggles and turns on itself in many ways, and about the communities I knew in Paris which were immigrants and students and young people just trying to figure things out. And new money up against old money up against no money up against xenophobia. And how that translates into a relationship with young people who are so open to connections and relationships and forming friendships and bonds and how that steps into who they are, as they are trying to *figure out who they are*. Love stories in literature usually are not seen as literary for the most part, so I wanted to write a love story that I felt was true to life, that was not formulaic and didn't have the typical outcomes. I wanted to write a love story that felt honest given young people in those circumstances, the choices that would have been available to them. And when I started writing it around 2010 or 2011 a lot of things were behind us like 9/11, the Iraq war, and the way society changed because of the response to 9/11: security measures, the anxiety, terrorism. But, there was terrorism in Paris long before that, bombs in subway stations for example and that was something I knew about. So I wanted to both describe the innocence of that time—when you could travel with less anxiety—but at the same time there were still tensions, and there were still things happening. I also wanted to displace my characters in a way because the conversation on Latin American immigration in the United States is one thing, but I found that when I was living in Europe it was a very different conversation. And, dilute that down to the very intimate experience of characters who are becoming friends, getting to know each other, falling in love, and experiencing all sorts of things.

AM: *In that same sense of not having to be confined to one experience is one of the reasons why I really like The Veins of the Ocean; because I see it as a very pan-Caribbean book and this identity of Caribbeanness can mean different things to different people. It's one of few narrative instances we see where more than one international Latin American identity is considered; your novel grapples with both the Cuban and the Colombian diasporic experience. That to me is completely innovative because sometimes an*

expectation is put on writers to only write about an experience or an identity that they also have. This book challenges that way of pigeonholing writers. Can you comment on this unconventional approach to representing a plurality of communities and identities within one novel? What was your inspiration for creating The Veins of the Ocean and do you think that inspiration happened because of living in Miami?

PE: One thing about being in an immigrant family or in an immigrant community is that I grew up around immigrants of all kinds of backgrounds. My parents' best friends when I was growing up were Lebanese and Cuban. Their experiences were so close to ours and they still felt like family, even though they came from different countries and circumstances. So I wanted to show that just because I'm Colombian, or my characters tend to be Colombian, doesn't mean I only associate with Colombians. It's not like that at all. But I do think this book could only have been written because I lived here in Miami. There were things in me that were provoked just because of my life here, which has to do with the landscape, the natural world. I wanted to write a very environmentally focused novel. I'm not Cuban and so there will always be a separation between me and that Cuban diasporic experience. However, I've become very close to people who have lived that experience and so I felt that I could write about a character who was also very close to people who have lived that experience. And again, in order to do that well, I took on a lot of research. I went to Cuba about ten times and it was to get those details right in order to write the life of Nesto in a way that was true to his background and not in a way that felt like I was just using these countries or these experiences as a set. But I wanted to show the daily experience of [Nesto's] life: grocery shopping, his home situation, the buildings and how all that affects the individual.

AM: *Related to those connections, when I first came across your book The Veins of the Ocean, the title brought to mind another important book from Latin America: Eduardo Galeano's The Open Veins of Latin America (1971). At first, I thought these titles' similarities were just a coincidence, as I imagine you did not write the book with Galeano's text in mind. But nevertheless, I began to see that these connections in terms of your discussion of exploitation and exploited bodies—whether it be the nation via colonialism and imperialism, or the exploited body that is a result of historical violence and trauma—appear in both Galeano's text and your text. And both Cuba and Colombia undeniably share that traumatic and violent history of colonialism and US exploitation. I'm wondering if you were inspired by this text as well, and if you can comment on this similarity?*

PE: Yes. You are the only person who has noticed that reference to the *Open Veins of Latin America*. But it was. It was a reference to it as a formative text obviously. But then

the title *The Veins of the Ocean* also refers to the two proverbs described in the book as being mentioned in the Diloggún, the holy book of Santería. Two proverbs that are set against each other also have significance [in the title] which are: “nobody knows what lies at the bottom of the ocean” and “blood that flows through the veins.” The title also came from a combination of those two proverbs from Santería. So, yes, it was both [Galeano and the proverbs]. You always look for a title that connects in different ways and that is how it is related to *The Open Veins of Latin America* as well as directly related to what was happening in the book, specifically to the proverbs.

AM: Related to that notion of historical trauma shared by Cuba and Colombia, it's interesting how the peace accords with the FARC [that took place in La Habana, Cuba] fit well historically in *The Veins of the Ocean* to forge this connection between these two nations as well as the characters. As a fiction writer, how important is it for you to note history within your works and how do you feel this connects with the reader? I'm wondering if these notions were at the forefront of your writing, or just in the background as historic side details or moments for your characters?

PE: Yes, the characters are living history, as we all are. Don't you feel it so much at this moment? We just check the news and see things that have never happened before are happening. I've always been interested in that. You can see that in *Vida* in the story “Refuge”: on September 11, the towers are coming down and the character is dealing with a break-up, and her pain, isolation and depression. And that is how history is experienced most of the time. We weren't all in the building, but a lot of us were close and the intimacy of an event that belongs to the whole world is interesting to me. So what happened when I was doing research for the *Veins of the Ocean* and I went to Cuba so many times, the FARC negotiations were going on. It was very weird. I'm a Colombian who was raised with all the traumas of Colombia and all the brutality of the 1980s, when I was small, and it was a constant conversation in my household. So to be out in public and see people who I recognized from the news because they were wanted criminals, and there they are at the café. It was very strange. So, I could not leave that out, because that would have been a lie unto itself. The negotiations were a part of every Colombian in Colombia and in the diaspora's mind at the time: where is this going to go? Where are we going with this? It's still a question. So, I knew that it would be part of Reina's mindset. It would be something she would be in

tune to, at least when it flashes across the news or something like that. So it's just a way for me to speak to the truth of the moment.

AM: The coincidences of history I feel worked well in this book, not only in the FARC peace accords that began in 2012, but because of all the changes that also have happened in Cuba in the past few years.

PE: The book was published in 2016 and the first time that I went to Cuba was in January of 2013 and I traveled there through March 2016. The interesting thing is that when I started going there, Cuba was in one circumstance and it was December of 2014 when Obama started the process of the change in relation [between the US and Cuba]. The Cuba that I was getting to know until then was very different from when this huge announcement had been made and all the things that were happening towards the tail end of that research. So again, that's why I thought it was specific to mark the moment. Because with the opening of relations [led by] Barack Obama and Raúl Castro, the idea of Cuba totally changed in public consciousness. But of course, that had not yet happened in the narrative.

AM: Patricia, thank you so much for this conversation. Like you, I'm always concerned about these categorizations in which we as academics and writers are asked to constantly place ourselves, so this discussion was very enlightening for me. I think it's very important to have conversations with artists and writers on these views of identity and identity politics.

PE: Yes, and the reason I do see the value in these labels is because when I was coming up as a reader, I did not know where to look to find writers whose experience resembled mine. Now for writers coming up, it's easier because they can google “Colombian-American” or “Latino” writers, and there we are. So, there is a value to these labels. My resistance only comes up against it when publishers use labels which then infiltrate the readers' mindset, and that creates separations in literature.

AM: I completely agree. Thank you again, Patricia. This has been a pleasure.

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