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Gerry: Hi, my name is Geraldo Cadava, and welcome to season two of Writing Latinos, a podcast from Public Books. We're back for more conversations with Latino authors writing about the wide world of Latinidad. As always, some of our episodes are nerdy and academic, while others are playful and lighthearted. All offer thoughtful reflections on Latino identity and how writing conveys some of its meanings.

If you like what you hear, like and subscribe to Writing Latinos wherever you get your podcasts. We're so excited about the lineup we've got for you this season. We've had so many great conversations with Latina and Latino authors about their new books. We're especially excited to kick things off with Melissa Lozada-Oliva, whose novel Candelaria will come out in paperback soon.

Lozada-Oliva is a New York based writer. A former Poetry Slam champion, she attended NYU's MFA program in creative writing. Candelaria is her second novel. Her first was called Dreaming of You. It was also published by Astra house.

Melissa, Thank you so much for joining us.

Melissa: Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Gerry: It's almost a little bit hard to summarize your novel Candelaria because it does so much and it's about so many things. I think it's fair to call it an intergenerational family drama involving Latina women who are grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters, and the families move between Guatemala and Boston.

And because the Plot is so complex and the relationships between the characters so dynamic. I wanted to just first ask, you know, what was your starting point for this novel? What are, what are some of the themes that you wanted to address in, in a novel?

Melissa: I think that that's a great way to describe the book.

Um, like an intergenerational family drama. I think I've been saying it's about a grandmother at the end of the world and the way her three granddaughters started it. But I think that also doesn't really capture what's going on either. Um, but I, I think I, I really wanted to, to do a family And, um, I've loved to, I've loved like stories about gen, like generations.

Um, and, uh, for example, like practical magic when there's like three generations of women all under the same roof and they're all like fighting this curse that is affecting them. Um, but because they are all in different generations, they all approach things differently, and there's all these things that they don't say to each other.

I, I wanted to explore like miscommunications between families, and I wanted to explore how deep sisterly love really goes, and how, like, how you can, how much you can push it before someone is like, don't talk to me anymore. These three sisters in the book, there's not anything particularly, like, remarkable about any of them, but what is remarkable and really special and really magical is that they're like, Three sisters and like, whenever there's like sisters of three, I think some, some kind of magic is happening.

And as a, as a sister of three, I wanted to show that.

Gerry: that's great. And you've actually teed up so many of the next things I wanted to ask you, you talked a lot about family members communicating and miscommunicating across generations. They understand some things about one another because they're family, but they're also spread apart in years and have different experiences in terms of where they came from, things like that.

So I wanted to ask you actually about how did you want to represent language in your novel and intergenerational communication and language loss in the book?

Melissa: There's this moment in the book where Candy, the youngest, is taking her grandmother, Candelaria, who she is named after, um, to a doctor's appointment.

And the doctor is telling her, basically, that her grandmother's knee is, like, disintegrating. And, um, like the cortisone shots that she's been taking aren't going to help anymore and they need to like talk about what her life is going to

look like in a wheelchair. And it's very sad because Candelaria is a very mobile, very active person, but she doesn't tell her grandmother that she lies to her.

Um, and then later in the car, Candy's feeling all messed up because of something that just happened. And she can't, she doesn't have the language to explain this to her grandmother because it's so complicated and her grandmother just says like something really banal. That's why it's good to stay in the house and pray.

Or, um, you know, what are you just like this because, um, you're, you feel in love. And I think like when you aren't necessarily fluent in the language that like your household is, there are a lot of things that that slip and a lot of nuances that you can't say, that don't get to be said, and I think I wanted to portray that in this moment, because how beautiful would it be to like, talk to a living ancestor about like, really everything that you're going through, but all you can talk about is like, the weather, or praying, or like, making sure you, um, you have your socks on or something.

And so, yeah, I, I think, like, especially if you're in, like, the Latinx diaspora and you're used to living with a bunch of generations under the same house, there are gonna be many things that are left unsaid, and a lot of lying that's gonna happen, too, especially, like, if your family's super Catholic and you wanna, like, go out and do things, but you know your mom isn't gonna approve, you know?

And, um, I think a lot of like diaspora kids are like really used to lying to their family and it's not necessarily a bad thing.

Gerry: You've said a couple things that I think are really important for listeners to understand and one is just the name Candelaria and it's the name of the novel, but it is also the name of the grandmother.

It's the name of the granddaughter, uh, who no longer goes by Candelaria in the novel, but goes by Candy. And Candelaria is also the, the. Place, right? The name of the place in Guatemala, the cave, correct?

Melissa: Yeah. Yes.

Gerry: Yes. And does, I don't even know, I should have known this before, but is Candelaria, is that a real place?

Um, and real names that you were referring to, or did you make them up?

Melissa: There is such thing as the, the Candelaria Caves in, in Guatemala, in Antigua. And it is like a tourist attraction. There isn't much like drama to it. I kind of just embellished, and it also means like feast of the Virgin and it's like this religious holiday.

I kind of wanted to play with the caves and the idea of a feast. And it's such a, I mean, it's such a beautiful name. It sounds like candelabria, you know, it's, um, it's a little haunting. There's so many syllables and. It's my great grandmother's name and she, uh, she was a midwife in Guatemala in her village and birthed, like, hundreds of babies.

Helped birth hundreds of babies and none of them died. And, um, I always thought that was cool. I never got to meet her. But her name was really, my mom would be like, she's visiting me again in my dreams. Uh, and, um, like, I don't know, I was like, that name is cool.

Gerry: Super cool name. Let's stick on the topic of, um, the women in the novel for a moment and the relationships among them.

So the figure of the, Abuelita in Latinx, Latine literature is so kind of prevalent and I'm wondering what you wanted to achieve with Candelaria when it comes to the abuela. How does it add to the, how does your book that is add to the abuelita canon?

Melissa: I think a lot of Latine writers like love writing about their abuelas and I, I kind of feel like there is this, maybe it's because it's like such a tie to like authenticity and like this is like a, you're looking at someone who has lived their full life in another country most of the time.

Whereas like, And I maybe I'm just being for myself, but like you're like one's parents immigrated during um, like a formative time in their 20s and their 30s and then they've lived like half of their life here and have become American in some way and the abuelita often doesn't speak english. She often is like making you food I mean, there's like abuelita chocolate.

She's like, I don't know the abuelita is is an icon and I think I wanted to complicate that and I think old You People, especially old ladies, are kind of seen as like very innocent and I, I wanted to show that like someone who's had a long life has, has made a lot of mistakes and done things that, that aren't so great and that makes them have agency and makes them a three dimensional person.

In addition to an old lady being someone who makes mistakes and. Like, living a full life involves, like, love and sexuality. And I wanted I wanted there to be romance for her and she kind of gets the ultimate love story.

Gerry: To talk about the sisters, I mean, there are three of them. There's Candelaria who goes by Candy.

There's Bianca and there is Paola who through most of the novel goes by Zoe. They are all Lucia's daughter and Lucia is the daughter of the grandmother Candelaria. And just to focus in on the sisters a little bit. But I, I think it's. It would be an understatement to say that the relationship between them is intense.

They, they, they're betraying each other all the time. They're, uh, sleeping with the same men behind each other's backs. talking about it, confronting each other about it. But like you said in the very beginning, they also have, uh, this kind of very deep and unbreakable bond, even in their most desperate moments, they're texting one another and asking one another for support and for help.

So, um, I would like to, you know, just hear you talk a little bit about each of these three sisters as a kind of archetype and how you understand their dynamic relationship.

Melissa: Mm. Um, great question. They are all in different micro generations, and Zoe slash Paola is an older millennial slash Gen X, and uh, growing up, like she, it was very important for her to, to assimilate and to separate herself from, from like Latinidad, and she didn't want to, she, she only felt like, you know, trauma and pain around it, so she was like, I'm not doing this.

I think that kind of like, to me like reflects the media of like the late 90s and the early 2000s. I mean if you just like think of any media then it's like it has not aged well but that was the, you know, that was the the time that um, that Zoe Paola grew up in. Um, so I wanted to show uh, like her Latinidad in that way and then Bianca is this like, middle child classic middle child, um, who kind of can like, be in the background because her sisters are both crazy.

And she is very smart but is like, also kind of like, hiding behind all of that. And she's very obsessed with, you know, with documenting. And she is this millennial and as, uh, you know, she's kind of, she's very obsessed with identity as a lot of millennials are, you know, BuzzFeed quizzes, etc. And Candy is the youngest.

She's kind of like Gen Z. She doesn't really think about her identity that much at all. They're all like apart the whole time and they're all making these decisions about each other and against each other and like in spite of each other, um, because, because they're not together and they're not, they're not communicating and they're not really like facing, you know, this trauma in their lives, um, that doesn't just have to do with their dad dying, but also like this, this trauma of like growing up how they did with sisters and siblings and family in general.

I think something that Well, something I've always, um, admired slash been very curious about and I'm a little resentful toward is like American white people are really good at just being like I'm only due chosen family and like I am I don't talk to my family at all. They're so messed up, like I don't need to be around them.

And, uh, there's been so many moments in my life where I've wanted to do that, where I'm like, no, I don't agree with your politics. Why would we be friends in real life? Like if I knew you in real life, I wouldn't be friends with you. But I think in our community, something really special is that. You're very close to people who aren't like you at all.

And that is kind of sacred because it makes you, I mean, care about people who you don't choose. And I think all those three sisters like would not be friends in real life. They're very, very different, but they love each other so much. And it's, and it's just because they're related.

[MUSIC]

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I wonder if your readers, while they read your book are kind of identifying with one of the sisters or the other, um, over the course of the novel and whether those allegiances, if you want to call them that change. But I know I certainly probably identified most with Bianca, probably because, you know, I'm an academic, I'm kind of familiar with the university world, but also, um, she has these kind of amazing, you know, Lines that really resonated with me about how she thought that through learning, she could belong to a culture more and by discovering more about her culture.

So she's the one who kind of goes down to Guatemala to do research about the family. And she thinks that by learning more about her family's past, she can identify with the culture more. So I was wondering if that kind of impulse to learn more about your culture to become more Part of that culture if that resonated with you or just how you see that issue.

Melissa: Oh, yeah, totally I mean I think I think Bianca really wants um Like this one to one thing to happen about being like, okay, like if I know the most about this certain culture, then I am the most of that certain culture. And I think that is like an instinct for, for a lot of people who are in the diaspora.

I think I really relate to that too. But Bianca's maybe more, more smart about it. I think I Like in the 2010s, like really went after things aesthetically. And I was like, Ooh. And I was like, really just going after like Chicano, Chicana, like Chicax, like simple, like symbolism, um, and being like, wow, like that's me.

But like, I'm not Mexican. Like that's not me at all. And, uh, I think Bianca instead is like, I'm going to like go to the root of it. So in that way, it's like, it's like a metaphor, I think, for, for things that maybe we all do. And ultimately, she's ignoring her community, which is her family, and like the people, the people around her.

Gerry: Yeah, that's so interesting. And I think that, first of all, I think that's a theme that just resonates so much with so many Latinos. And I know for a fact that, I think at least some part of why I've committed my career and my professional life to explorations of Latino history, politics, identity is to try to get closer to what it means for me to be Latino.

And one thing that I think is so interesting is that, um, you know, it's like the more you learn. you don't quite ever get there, perhaps because because there's no there to get to.

Melissa: Yeah, totally. And there's so much that is, is like unattainable. And I think I feel really envious of people who can, like, go back, like, ten generations and, like, know who everyone is, um, who they come from, whereas, like, I can go back three, maybe, and then that's still, like, a little iffy.

Yeah.

Gerry: I think elsewhere you've described yourself, too, as Guatelombian, Guatemalan, and Colombian, and, but you just talked about a fascination with

Chicanx symbols and aesthetics. So how did you incorporate Chicanx symbols and aesthetics into your sense of Latino identity or Latina identity?

Melissa: Yeah. I mean, I feel like there is so much, um, I mean, I know, I know there's, there's so much pride in, in Chicanidad and it's such a like beautiful, vast culture.

And, um, If you go to L. A. or Texas, it's simply there, and there are these really strong communities. Um, I grew up in Boston, where that is not the case. Where like, the community there is like, Ben Affleck. Um, and Dunkin Donuts. It's like, very random for me. Guatemalans and Colombians to be in Boston, but that's for some reason where my parents ended up.

And I think I, I think I just like really idealized, um, a lot of those aesthetics because they're beautiful and some of them like trickle down into Guatemalan aesthetics because it's so close.

Gerry: Yes. And I guess I'm tempted to ask now about the geographies of the book. I mean, because you were just talking about Boston and I think you said random to be kind of Guatemalan and Colombian and maybe Latina in general in Boston.

But, you know, the book kind of moves between Guatemala and Boston and a little bit New York too. And I'm wondering, um, you know, Are those your Latino geographies and what are those as Latino spaces to you?

Melissa: I grew up in Boston. Um, I've spent the last seven years in New York. I have been to Guatemala once as a baby and because of a bunch of trauma, my mom has not returned and I really want to, but my grandmother goes back and forth.

And yeah, I think Boston. is a really segregated place. And I think in certain parts of Boston, you see like stronger Latino communities, but not where I grew up in like Newton, Massachusetts, um, which was a great place to grow up, but, um, definitely didn't see myself among the people that I was around. And New York, I think, you know, it's like a beautiful, like Puerto Rican, Dominican, Caribbean population of, of people.

And so I've, I've been. I don't know, surrounded by a lot of that and it's, it's really cool.

Gerry: Thank you. I wanted to interject that question about geography, but I also want to get back to the characters in the book and the relationship between them. I feel like we've talked a bit about the women, you know, Candelaria, Candy, Bianca, Paula slash Zoe, and a little bit Lucia, but I also really want to know about the men in the book and the relationships between.

The men and the women, um, and the main characters, they're like Mauricio, Fernando and Julian. Um, I don't know if you were imagining Julian as a Julian or a Julian, but in any event, um, I wanted, you know, then too, I didn't quite know what to make with them. I mean, on the one hand, a lot of violence is

committed against them. They are eaten in some cases. And, uh, not to, not to say too much. I don't want to spoil it too much, but they're also manipulated. They're manipulative themselves. And we don't know, uh, with some of them, whether they're kind of the aggressors in the relationship or the victims in a relationship.

Um, so how did you, how did you see the men and their relationships with the women?

Melissa: I mean, this novel very much is about, is about women and the things that they come up against and how, uh, they like fight with and for each other. I wanted to, uh, like, okay, the men, Fernando is like, it seems at first to just be this like man Bianca's having an affair with, who's her professor, but also Red Flag, you know, um, You're having an affair with someone.

Um, he lies. And then he ends up, like, deeply betraying her and manipulating her. It's not all, like, the Fernando conspiracy. There are forces at play. And then Mauricio is Candelaria's husband who, who dies very fast in the first chapter, sorry for the spoiler, but he's kind of just this like nice man and Candelaria has faced so much trauma in her life and that she's just happy to be with this like simple guy, um, who will be there, who is like this company.

And then Julian, he is an adopted child of indigenous Guatemalan heritage. And he also was like really messed up about his identity and really driven by guilt. And, um, the path of his life is really like made clear when he sells drugs to Candy and she has this overdose that almost kills her and he's like, Oh my God, I almost killed someone.

I really have to change my whole life. So that's kind of the deal with all of like what all those three men are going through. And I guess with all of them, even though like some of them do commit like atrocities and are manipulative, I

wanted to show that like, Men are as much victims of patriarchy and capitalism as, as these women are.

So, like, Julian being, like, who he is, also, like, suffers just as much, um, but in a different way as, as, as these sisters. And I also don't want to be like, oh, it's like, it's actually really hard to be a man. Like, we do, there is like a, you know, a few common enemies that, like, all of us from gender to gender all have.

Gerry: So I have one more question about the book, and then I want to ask you a question about writing and craft in general. But this is kind of a story, as you've been describing it, about a grandmother at the end of the world. And I'm wondering, um, you know, what, what the end of the world is a symbol of for you.

I mean, is it, is it about the end of the world and the apocalypse? Or is it also about, you know, the, the, the loss of, A connection to Guatemala or something and that in that in and of itself is a kind of end of a of a world. But, um, you know, I feel like there's a lot of thinking about the apocalypse these days, both literal and imagined and metaphorical.

And so I'm wondering for you what the figure of the apocalypse does.

Melissa: I, as a writer, I, I think about it a lot, you know, Junot Diaz's Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao takes place in the 80s and, um, you know, when there's a bunch of shit happening politically, Oscar Wao is obsessed with the end of the world and he thinks about it constantly because it very well could happen.

And I don't know, weirdly, like the 80s and the 2020s have, have come to seem very similar. But I do think it's an artist's job to world build and and think about endings and think about what we're going to do after because like I don't know if we're if we're so obsessed with with endings we're not we're not really thinking about like how we're going to take care of ourselves up until it happens and how we're going to like rebuild after it happens.

It does. If it does,

Gerry: thank you. And I want to end just by asking you a couple questions about writing since we're on a podcast about Latinos and Latinas who, who write things. I don't think any of us really knows how we chose to become a writer. Um, and if there was a moment and if we've fully 100% Committed

ourselves to that life anyway, um, because it always feels like something we're always wrestling with.

So what were their moments? What was your kind of evolution as a writer? When did you think that it might be something that you want to do with your life?

Melissa: When I was a little kid, I found the back of a book and I didn't really know how to read or write yet, but I know I knew how to do the act of it. And I wrote down the back of it, word for word, and I showed it to my parents, who like, English isn't their first language, and they were like, I can't believe she came up with this.

And then I was like, yeah. And they were like, that's, you're so smart. And then I was like, well, and then like, I kept up the lie for like an hour, and then I showed them the book, and they were like, you can never do that again. And they were like, if you do that again, it better come from your own brain. You never copy.

Like, that is bad. And I was like, ah! And then, um, yeah. I think I just, I just remember that moment a lot when I think of the beginnings of me being a writer. And like in college I was, uh, I got really into spoken word poetry and that's still when I think about, you know, entertaining people. I think reading should be fun.

Um, I don't think it should be hard. I don't think it should make you feel bad or it should make you feel bad, but it may be in like a way that changes you. And so I really, I really want my books to be, to be readable. And I think being like a performance poet really showed me how to like engage with audiences.

Gerry: I'm interested in the, your background as a kind of performer. Do you think that that experience literally changed how you think about writing? I mean, when you put words to a page, are you also thinking about the language on the page as the kind of performance that you're Uh, part of your engagement with your reader.

Melissa: Yeah. I mean, something that I do when I write and like a good incentive to write is I like, I ask my friends if I can send them something and then sometimes I don't send it until like a week after, but I'm thinking of them reading it and I'm like writing it for them for their eyes and um, it's just like, I'm like, okay, would like, like what would Paloma like about this?

You know? And I think, I don't know, for me, writing is. has never been a solitary thing. So when I was writing this book, I was, I think I was really thinking about like, who would read it and how they would.

Gerry: Thank you so much. It was a delight talking to you. And we, this was Melissa Lozada Oliva talking about her new novel Candelaria.

You should all go check it out. It's really magnificent and fun. So thank you so much.

Melissa: This was so sweet.

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Gerry: Thank you for listening to this episode of Writing Latinos. We'd love to hear your suggestions for new books that we should be reading and talking about. Drop us a line at Geraldo at publicbooks.org. This episode is brought to you by Public Books. It was produced by Tasha Sandoval. Our music is City of Mirrors by the Chicago based band Dos Santos.

I'm Geraldo Cadava. We'll see you again next time.

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