SARGASSO Interview

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(Luis Rafael Sánchez is a Puerto Rican writer known for his varied production in a number of genres. He first gained recognition in the 1960s as a playwright, and his collection of short stories, En cuerpo de camisa (In Shirtsleeves), appeared at that time as well. Sánchez has written numerous essays on the Puerto Rican cultural scene, and he achieved international attention when his novel, La guaracha del Macho Camacho (Macho Camacho's Beat), appeared in 1976. The novel has since been translated into English and Portuguese. Sánchez's essay "La guagua áerea" ("The Airbus") was recently published in The Village Voice in a translation by Diana Vélez, who is also working on a collection of Sánchez stories in translation to be published by Bilingual Press.

Luis Rafael Sánchez bridges the gap between the fundamentally realistic Puerto Rican writers of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s such as Tomás Blanco, Emilio S. Beával, José Luis González, René Marqués, and Pedro Juan Soto and a younger generation of writers including, among others, Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega, and Manuel Ramos Otero, who view Sánchez as their most immediate predecessor. He teaches in the Department of Hispanic Studies at the University of Puerto Rico and is, without doubt, Puerto Rico's best known and most celebrated contemporary writer.)

Susan Homar: Let's start out by talking about your projects, projects you've mentioned before and that are soon to be published. When is La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos [The Importance of Being Called Daniel Santos] coming out? What's happened to Kindergarten? What's going to become of Hacia una poética de lo soez [Towards a Poetics of the Debased]? 

Luis Rafael Sánchez: The first thing I want to say is that Hemmingway rightly stated that no writer should teach at a university. I agree with him. Academe, the university, is the place that gives prestige to the exact, the correct. And I believe that literature is exactly the opposite. I've always felt a conflict between correct-
ing and teaching and preparing myself for those classes where there has to be an order, a presentation of the ideas of an author by the professor, etcetera. The professor is almost naturally the defender of the author. In the university classroom, a debate takes place where someone has to assume the voice of the author, and that is the professor. In a way, one becomes a defender in every class, the author's counsel, and the students are the dissenting witnesses.

Academe and the classroom propose the idea of correctness, of the verifiable, of immaculate expression, while literature is the vulnerability of correctness, the breaking of the norm, the defense of that which is preposterous and unusual.

SH: How do you work? On many things at the same time? To be able to write a novel, do you need a sabbatical or can you dedicate yourself to big projects during the academic year?

LRS: How to organize time? While I teach, even with the very special schedule I have, it's difficult to plan time for writing. So the works are short, sketches or ideas. The greater bulk of the work is left for the large blocks of time that almost never come.

What do I do? Work on small pieces, fragments maybe, in a piece-meal fashion: an article here, a lecture there—things you can do with talent and without the commitment—that great devouring passion to which you must give in—that a novel demands.

I have discovered that plays are easier to write than novels if the writer has a certain verbal facility, a certain capacity for the colloquial, an ear for the secret cadences of the spoken word. A play can be written with more ease than the novel. Because of all this, my projects in the last few years, since the publication of Macho Camacho's Beat [1976], have become more sporadic and infrequent.

SH: What happens to a writer after he has a major success such as Macho Camacho's Beat?

LRS: In the first place, in a context as limited as ours, success extracts a terrible price. But I have been preparing two long projects. The one on Daniel Santos...
is a project I finished some time ago, an attempt to write an invented biography of the popular singer.

SH: Have you met him?

LRS: I haven't wanted to meet him. I've reinvented him based on what I've heard about him or what people think he's like; I've written to many friends in Venezuela, Panamá, Colombia; I've visited dives and pleasure palaces in Caracas, in Cali, in Bogotá, in Quito, where some of the action takes place.

It's not a novel, it's an essay with narration—what I call a counterpoint of essay and narrative. I ponder machismo, the bohemian world, disorderliness, the lavish expenditure of our own lives, the waste of time in our underdeveloped societies, the useless rhetoric. The book will be out on the streets shortly.

Kindergarten is a theater piece of an experimental nature dedicated to Pavarotti, Marilyn Horne, and Joan Sutherland, who indirectly suggested its theme and plot. I watched a TV program of a concert sung by the three sometime in 1982. I was surprised by the power and force that some arias retain even when they are separated from their original context. I decided to use that form and write a piece based on arias. The work is a little bit hysterical—there's nothing realistic about it, it's insane—and I've had a wonderful time writing it.

And that's what I'm doing. You asked me about Hacia una poética de lo soez. The text is ready, but it's only 45 pages long, and it doesn't fit anywhere. It should go with two other essays. I have recently thought about a short work on Iris Chacón [a Puerto Rican vedette and sex symbol], called "La Chacón, oferta de una erótica nacional" [La Chacón, Offering of a National Eroticism] which I wrote about five years ago. I thought that perhaps Hacia una poética de lo soez, "La Chacó..." other thirty or forty-page-long text could comprise a book.

SH: What about Nuevas canciones festivas para ser llo-radas [New Festive Songs for Crying]?

LRS: The Nuevas Canciones is the outcome of a series of essays published in Claridad [a weekly political news-
and of some lectures given at American and European universities, and it's about to be printed.

SH: As a Caribbean writer, of necessity you exist on the border or margin between the first and third worlds. Given these parameters, how do you define yourself and your work in ideological terms? I would also like you to talk about problems which are pervasive for Caribbean writers working in English or French: the problems of an audience, of publication, of editors, of translations.

LRS: Our problems are not so dramatic as those of the Haitian novelist, for example: not knowing where to publish, who is the audience, or what is the real scope of an artistic project.

We do not have a problem with the lack of a reading public, though I think we over-estimate the number of Puerto Rican readers, which is really very small; to the point that in Puerto Rico, a text, a novel, that sells a thousand copies is a great success, a national success.

The problem is the way in which our texts reach our neighbors in the Caribbean. I think there hasn't been a way of resolving it up to now: we don't have many readers in the English-speaking Caribbean and even fewer in the French.

Pursuing that theme a little further, every day I'm more convinced that if one is firmly planted in his own world, the work necessarily appeals to a greater number of people. In that sense, I want to profit from my Caribbean self and incorporate it into my literature, hoping to give testimony to who and what I am. I want to speak of our contradictions, our character—a bit anarchic, but valuable—of our somewhat different sense of responsibility, of our sensuality—things that in many ways separate us from those countries in which the Judeo-Christian tradition is sovereign.

Our lack of communication is not limited to the French or English-speaking Caribbean. Our ignorance about the Dominican Republic's literature is astonishing, unless the text comes via a Spanish publisher, as is the case of the novelist Pedro Vergés.

In the Caribbean, we are willingly colonized—and fatally fragmented—by the cultural points of view of

our various metropolises. We have even accepted as
symbol that has already been dubbed sacred in Mexico
or Madrid or Buenos Aires. We haven't been able to
understand what is extraordinary in Dominican literature
because of that. In this sense, I think that a Puerto
Rican writer is more familiar with the depth and breadth
of Mexican literature than with the Dominican, even though
we're closer to the Dominican Republic. I believe that
within the realm of Spanish-speaking America there are
established centers of prestige that have also turned
into colonizers of our culture, taste, and sensibility.

SH: What writers do you most enjoy reading and what
other writer or writers do you see as most important
to your literary development?

LRS: In every period of your life there's a different
favorite writer or group or writers, and in most cases,
they get left behind with time. By the end of the
fifties, the works of Jean Paul Sartre arrived in Puerto
Rico via Editorial Losada of Argentina. Besides [Fede-
rico] García Lorca, who was sort of an obligation because
of his myth, because he was a victim of the Spanish
Civil War, and because his death definitively made him
a huge writer, Sartre was the first writer who really
moved me. In his book What is Literature? he proposed
some things I hadn't understood yet.

The position of the Puerto Rican writer always
seemed to me to be one of conflict, especially in the
years when René Marqués represented an oppressive para-
digm, and we thought the only alternative available to
any Puerto Rican writer was to talk about nationalism,
work with nationalism, and propose a type of epic
literature where nationalism or the nationalist idea
appeared like the great idea, the necessary idea for
our literature.

In those years I discovered Sartre, and his famous
essay What is Literature? influenced some of my early
narratives—pieces that I now despise. They were
written based on the idea of the committed writer, a
commitment I now feel was a little bit artificial and
perhaps improvised. It wasn't even a matter of
restating the relationship between the artist and his
society, or the need to sustain, defend, and endorse

Homar, Susan. 1984. "Luis Rafael Sánchez:
Counterpoints." Sargasso, 1 (pp. 8-19).
Puerto Rican culture at all costs. At least, that's how I feel now.

In those years, I also discovered James Baldwin through his enlightening essay The Fire Next Time, which I transposed to apply to our situation. It consists of two letters, one on the centennial of the Abolition of Slavery and the second, "Letter From a Region of My Mind," written to his nephew. After that, Baldwin turned into an obsession and I started reading Another Country, Go Tell It on the Mountain, and his plays The Amen Corner and Blues for Mr. Charlie.

I found in them a very strong correspondence between the situation of Blacks in North American society and the situation of Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico; in other words, a certain permanent humiliation, a certain offensive treatment of Puerto Ricans in their own native land—the position of the pariah, the stranger at home.

In those years, I also read a lot of American theatre translated into Spanish, which also came via Argentina—Tennessee Williams, for example. I think that in these first moments of my creative work, Williams' influence is so strong because some of his works fit the Puerto Rican sensibility very well. All these plays about Southern belles such as Alma in Summer and Smoke or Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire—those partially defeated yet beautiful heroines, laden with poetry—appealed to our taste, enthusiastic about flowery, metaphorical, and exasperatingly lyrical language as we Latin American writers were.

In Spanish literature, I can perhaps think of Camilo José Cela, who had achieved great success with The Family of Pascual Duarte. And everything he published—La Catira, Lazarillo de ciegos caminantes, his travel books—tread enthusiastically, even though I recognized that his rich and incisive language eluded me at times because it was so rigorously regional. I even thought, paraphrasing George Bernard Shaw, that Spain and Latin America are two spaces separated by the same language.

It's a linguistic phenomenon in which a language, although shared, can also separate. Nevertheless, it's a risk writers take, and one which I myself have taken in my later pieces where I have wanted to work out, along with the standard Spanish language, a language that is our own, our Puerto Rican language.
SH: Are there other writers?

LRS: There is always the permanent model of [Ramón del] Valle-Inclán, who is a writer I started reading very early in my life. When I was seventeen or eighteen I had a theater group called Teatro Experimental Acosta, and I looked everywhere for one-act plays. I remember that some of the first we looked at were those included in his book Retablo de la avaricia, la lujuria y la muerte. I then started to get acquainted with all of Valle-Inclán's one-act pieces: "La cabeza del Bautista," "La rosa de papel," "Ligazón." Looking for one-act plays I found in Valle-Inclán a writer who would remain one of my favorites.

SH: And that isn't the case with Sartre?

LRS: What happened with Sartre was that after reading What is Literature?, Nausea, and the stories of The Age of Reason, I read the series of novels originally called Les chemins de la liberté. These were terribly weak and boring, I was disillusioned with Sartre. Much later, in the mid-1970s, I read and admired his unforgettable work The Words.

It's curious that while I talk to you about these writers, I haven't pointed out--aside from Baldwin and Tennessee Williams--any other North American writers. I think that the relation of Puerto Ricans to American literature is very special and different from that of other Latin American writers who enthusiastically talk about Hemmingway or Faulkner. Here in Puerto Rico there was always a resistance to reading in English, a discomfort. To the point that when Nilita Vientós Gastón [an influential journal editor and cultural figure] published her book on Henry James, it seemed baffling. Why talk about an Anglo-Saxon writer? In fact, my relationship with the North American writers that I liked was that of a secret and enjoyable infidelity. For example, my passion for reading Carson McCullers, whose book The Heart is a Lonely Hunter was a moving experience, or another writer not well known here, Flannery O'Connor, author of A Good Man is Hard to Find, a book that strikes like a slap in the face.

Looking back, I suspect that the writers I liked

were those like O'Connor or Cela whose texts are sustained by the infusion of colloquial language, of the continuous and musical dialogue of characters' voices. But why the resistance to literature in English?

The resistance to English, the fear of English, has made us bad readers of English literature because of our fear of contaminating the Spanish language, of losing it in the avalanche of North American influence.

Later, in the seventies, I started reading literature in English that excited my curiosity and imagination. I like a writer such as Truman Capote who is not exactly first class, but who is willing to take risks--not the Capote of Breakfast at Tiffany's but the one of In Cold Blood.

I also like Norman Mailer; I like his capacity for creating all kinds of literature. I like his idea that literature is written for now because that represents an immediate commitment: that of a Ilyzing something at the risk of producing a hasty, i Iudicial account that may no longer be interesting five years from now. There are things that have to be done right now.

Mailer will comment on the Muhammad Ali fight in Zaire, on Puerto Rican graffiti on the subway walls in New York, or he can write a beautiful book on Marilyn Monroe--a kind of invented biography. He is, perhaps, the most lively and alert contemporary American writer. Of course, that liveliness, that force, that enthusiasm for reflecting upon everything while it's going on, could affect the so-called permanence of his works.

But, as Sartre states so well in What is Literature?, one writes to express an opinion about the present, to fight the suffering of the present, to cast a bit of light upon the life we've been given, our only opportunity on earth, as the Buendías [in Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude] discover too late.

Every success paradoxically contains the seed of its failure or destruction, and Mailer--a successful, recognized, respected, and very well-paid writer--cannot escape this punishment. In a society like North America, success becomes another pressure, perhaps the greatest pressure, and leads to William Inge's suicide or the galloping neuroses of Marilyn Monroe and J. D. Salinger.
In our consumer societies where literature has become an industry and has lost the quality of being a noble, honest, and sincere artistic expression, that is the price, and the price is terrible. I suspect that this price has haunted some contemporary Latin American writers as well: such are the cases of García Márquez, [Mario] Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes. Fame and prestige place greater demands on the writer than does creativity.

SH: What Latin American writers interest you?

LRS: I've always had an extraordinary affinity with Vargas Llosa. It may be because he's my own age, and because he represents an extraordinary literary case study. As he recently said, he lives in a faithful married relationship with literature. Nearly all writers relate to literature as if it were a mistress one sees from time to time. His faithfulness to and enthusiasm for literature have always fascinated me.

The first writer I encountered of that great group of Latin American ["boom"] writers was not Mario Vargas Llosa. It was before the "boom" was known internationally—around 1967, the year García Márquez published One-Hundred Years of Solitude and the year I would say the "boom" really began to crystallize. (Also, I think the "boom" as such came to an end with the publication of The Autumn of the Patriarch in 1975.)

[That first encounter] was with Gabriel García Márquez. In 1962, I took a course at Columbia University called Contemporary Latin American Narrative with Professor Hugo Rodríguez Alcalá. It is fascinating that back in 1962 it was Alejo Carpentier and El acoso, Silvina Buhrich and Un momento muy largo, and Eduardo Mallea and Fiesta en Noviembre who stood out in Latin American literature. There was another writer about whom the professor said, "This is the surprise. I want you to read this writer, he's a new writer. It's an extraordinary, strange book. I want you to read it." We read No One Writes to the Colonel. I remember that the text impressed me extraordinarily.

I read García Márquez again in Madrid in 1964. I was buying books in a bookstore on 14 Fernando Fe in Puerta del Sol. Isabel Yotano said to me, "There's a
book everyone's talking about, you have to buy it." That was a real discovery for me, a discovery of quality and unbounded imagination.

SH: What struck you as so special?

LRS: Remember that Puerto Rican literature always experienced a kind of shortcoming because there was a moral obligation to write realistically, to dramatize our struggle for independence—our colonial drama. If this was ignored, it became a faulty literature which should be punished with oblivion. Imaginative literature was practically disqualified. For example, when Emilio S. Belaval published his Cuentos de la plaza fuerte, which is a delirious book, it went unnoticed, it only had one very short review, a very enthusiastic one I did for the magazine Asomante. That book didn't fit into the celebrated tradition of Puerto Rican literature since it didn't deal with the prestigious, the so-called "solvent" themes of the moral order.

When I read those writers who had solved the political dilemma by making a day-to-day commitment to the destiny of our continent while leaving the literary space open for the free play of their imaginations, I realized that that was the responsible solution.

This is especially García Márquez's case, for whom politics has definitively always been part of his literature, though integrated into the world of unbounded imagination. Specifically I'm referring to The Autumn of the Patriarch, which I think is one of the most amazing denunciations of the survival of dictatorships and their brazen support by Washington.

I always appreciated [Jorge Luis] Borges because he seems to be a word magician, a man who has parodied all the great falsehoods, the apocryphal in literature.

In [Julio] Cortázar's case, I like his stories. The best Cortázar is the story writer. His novels, I believe, are uneven works, with the honorable exception of Hopscotch. In his short stories he has the ability of combining everyday life with the fantastic, of having the fantastic spring from daily life.

I think that gives you more or less a general idea, of my likes and dislikes, but then again you didn't
exactly ask me for a shopping list. I don’t know whether you are aware of the fact that I haven’t mentioned many Spanish writers. After we became aware of the splendor of Latin American literature, the Spanish writers diminished to the production of a minor literature, a tired, localist literature, as Rubén Darío would say. But I like Juan Marsé very much, especially his last novels Tardes con Teresa and Si te dicen que caí. I like some of [Juan] Goytisol’s experiments such as Reinvisicación del Conde don Julián.


What writers don’t I like any more?—that’s another thing I didn’t say. García Lorca, who I really liked at the end of the 1950s and who I considered the highest possible literary expression, I read him now and find him very puerile, unacceptable. I dislike the phony union of verse and prose and the brilliant metaphor that paralyzes theatrical action. I dislike such drunkenness of metaphor.

I enjoy going back to writers of the past like Balzac, Pérez Galdós, and Cervantes more everyday. Maybe that’s because I believe that their novels offer such complex plots.

I also like the fact that none of them tried to be a great writer; they became great writers in spite of themselves. Those writers, who apparently have been passed over by all the new techniques, the levels of reading interpretation and the gobbledygook of semiotics, are healthy for any writer who still feels the need to tell a story.

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