SARGASSO Interview

*Sargasso* 2002-03, I  Pedro Juan Soto

Pedro Juan Soto: Concomitances
An Interview
Rosa Luisa Márquez*

(Interviewer's Note: The interview took place on a Saturday afternoon in October 1984 at the home of Pedro Juan Soto and Carmen Lugo Filippi in Barranquitas—a town in the mountains of Puerto Rico. Traveling from San Juan to meet Pedro Juan and Carmen were the Barbadian novelist George Lamming, Sargasso's editor, Lowell Fiet, and myself. What started as a sunny afternoon soon produced torrential rains, yet that did not dampen the spirit of the interview. Pedro Juan's playful cursing has nothing to do with the downpour, and our conversation remained light-hearted and pleasant throughout.

Pedro Juan Soto is one of Puerto Rico's most distinguished novelists (he is also well known as a journalist, short-story writer, and dramatist). Some of his best known works are Spiks (1956), a collection of stories about Puerto Ricans in New York, Usmail (1959), a novel that focuses on the island of Vieques (a Puerto Rican municipality used by the U.S. Navy for target practice) and the violent conflicts inherent in colonialism, Ardiente suelo, fría estación (1961; Hot Land, Cold Season), the story of a young Puerto Rican's problems when he returns to the island after several years in New York, and Un oscuro pueblo sonriente (1982; A Dark, Smiling People), winner of the prestigious Casa de las Américas award in the same year it was published.

Some notes and sound effects have been integrated into the interview in order to clarify specific references and establish the appropriate mood for the re-creation of the original conversation. R.L.M.)

*University of Puerto Rico
Rosa Luisa Márquez: What language do you want to do this in? It's your decision.

Pedro Juan Soto: No.

RLM: The interview will eventually be in English. So if you want to do it in English . . .

Pedro Juan: I hate translators. I'll do it in English.

RLM: We'll start with the first question then. Would you speak about the influences you have felt from other people in your field? Who are the writers you most like to read and who do you feel have been most influential in your development as a writer?

Pedro Juan: Speaking about influences is bad for me because I'm pretty frank. I have no "hairs on my tongue." And I used to—and I still do—steal from others. I've stolen from—not knowing (Thunder) it ... George Lamming. I find coincidences. That has nothing to do with influences. It has to do with traditions. In the Castle of My Skin [1953] impressed me a lot. I didn't dare to steal from him then because I had started somewhat earlier, as far as short stories are concerned, and I did migration and all that. But I've stolen from everybody. And I find now that dealing with this study on [Joseph] Zobel and [Edouard] Glissant ["La novela de aprendizaje en las Antillas: Zobel, Glissant, González, Soto," a paper delivered at the Seventh Caribbean Encounter sponsored by the Department of Languages and Literature at the University of Puerto Rico] that we have many things which correspond, things which I call concomitances, concordances, because of the habitat we share together in the islands.

But I've stolen from everybody and his aunt. I like Graham Greene very much because he keeps me going from one page to another, something which I've always aspired to do. Graham Greene, Faulkner, who is the
opposite of Hemingway, who is so concise, so precise, so abhorrent of adjectives. I dealt with that a long time, and then I shifted to the very garrulous Faulkner. I stole from him. Mention an author and I'll tell you what I stole from him too. I don't give a damn.

**RLM:** Have you stolen from Puerto Rican literature?

**Pedro Juan:** Sure, sure. When I started writing—that's in the prologue I wrote to José Luis González's *Veinte cuentos y Paisa* [1973] —while I was doing journalistic work in 1948. I was very impressed with González's *El hombre en la calle*. But I detested his approach to New York—dealing with Puerto Ricans. He had written seven short stories and only one or two dealt with Puerto Ricans. So I wanted to reverse the trend, to deal only with New York and Puerto Ricans. I then proclaimed myself the author who should speak about Puerto Ricans in New York. And therefore you set yourself some objectives, some metas, and you go at them however you can. Sometimes you have the talent to be a good thief; sometimes you have no talent as a thief.

**Lowell Fiet:** You mentioned New York. Maybe we can pause there a second and bring up the entire topic of New York. *Spiks* [1956] is an impressive...

**Pedro Juan:** I hate adjectives.

**LF:** It seems to me that it is a violent work, in some senses, yet the scenes from New York are portrayed with incredible affection. What do you feel is the influences of New York—the New York experience—on your entire production as a writer?

**Pedro Juan:** Well, it faced me with violence. I was a nincompoop, eighteen years old. *(Kikiriki)* I didn't know what it was all about. I went there to do my university studies, my bachelor's degree at that time. And I was flabbergasted by the prejudice, and it shocked me so much that I had to do something. I've never been able to overcome that.

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As a matter of fact, I stayed away from New York for ages—ten, twelve long years—I couldn't face it again: the many prejudices, the many chastisements I saw there. I eventually consoled myself. But I had been doing things here, and I felt proud of it because most of us usually travel and stay out of the country. Even though ... and I'm sorry I blame the other Antillean authors, they stay away from the country. They don't go back to make that country valuable in terms of what a particular author concerned can do for a country. They stay away and I decided I had to come back in order to put back into my country what I had gained elsewhere. And I think that should be their attitude.

*LF:* That also influences your approach to language, does it not?

*Pedro Juan:* Oh sure. I had a lot of trouble for a long time dealing with my recognition of myself as far as the loss of language is concerned. I started to write in English really. I did journalism in English initially. Then I protested against myself, against my own tastes, and I went back to study my Spanish grammar, which nobody had taught me until then. So I had to fight for my own being as far as linguistics was concerned. And then, of course, I spoke and I learned a lot from others.

*RLM:* But you said you found violence in New York. You hadn't experienced violence in Puerto Rico?

*Pedro Juan:* No. No. I was living in a village, really a slum, called La Puntilla in Cataño, and I grew up there. But I had acquired some experience selling lottery tickets and learning how to create a good story. I used to engage in long conversations with all kinds of matrons and grandfathers and I wrote them out. They start talking to you and you listen. And you feel in your own innermost being what the hell he is trying to convey to you and how you are going to convey something in exchange. That's the way I learned to write short stories, or write my stories: talking to people, conversing with

them, and listening, most of all listening. I have a very
good ear and I developed it that way, because otherwise
I could have never done that. But you have to work on
it. You have to have a background to do that. And these
long talks were valuable to me, teaching me many
resources I didn’t know about.

*LF:* The return from New York, what comes out in *Hot Land, Cold Season* [1961], was that your own experience? Did
you feel like that when you returned from New York?

*Pedro Juan:* Every damn novel, every damn story, is strictly
autobiographical. You change things in order to divert
the attention of the reader. But you’re dealing
narcissistically. But yes, I faced that. I faced the fact that
they were always criticizing me (and that was many
people, René Marqués, Francisco Manrique Cabrera),
saying “you are from over there, you’re not from here.”
And in order to prove that I was from here I wrote *Usniall*
[1959], wherein I developed an historical . . . a feeling
about history pertaining to Vieques and not Puerto Rico.
But it is concomitant in that respect. And I detested that
always, and they saw that I detested it and they knew
because I insulted them. There were always complaints:
“you’re from there, you haven’t left there. What do you
call life? What do you call life?” My detesting that made
me continue to work in order to prove myself to myself,
not to them or anyone else, but to myself. I was out, I’m
sorry, I was out during what they called crucial years
—the Nationalist rebellion [1950], the inauguration
of the Commonwealth [1952] —and I didn’t feel guilty
about it. I have faced that feeling again, defending people
like Pedro Pietri, people who write in English. “Who the
hell are you to criticize them because they write in
English!” They are colonial subjects and they had to
learn. They had to, as they used to say, pull themselves
up by their own bootstraps to learn. “Who the hell are
you? Did you do anything about that? You didn’t do
anything. So why do you criticize them for writing in
English?” They can write on any subject —they keep
being Puerto Rican.
RLM: Let's return to the experience of violence. I see that reality very clearly portrayed in *El huésped* [*The Guest*], where you speak about a violence that is learned in New York. But I think times have changed and that experience does not only come from there. We are generating our own violence.

Pedro Juan: Oh, of course, of course.

RLM: Does your new literature reflect the violence that emerges from the homeland?

Pedro Juan: I think that I was born out of violence and that's a "leit motif" throughout my literature, be it essay, be it novel, short stories, plays. I've never denied that. I think I am a creature born of violence, and I continue to be violent but disguised in order to not get so frustrated.

LF: But you're a gentle man, easy to talk to . . .

RLM: ... and sometimes you're not so gentle . . .

Pedro Juan: That's a disguise! *(Laughter)*

RLM: That's theatre.

Pedro Juan: That's another disguise. I have a theory, a long essay, the draft of which I haven't finished yet, of the author being an actor. And he constantly disguises himself in order to collect all sorts of lies which may reveal some truth. So that he's everyman, he's everyman.

RLM: That brings me to my main question. You have, that I know of, one theater piece and one piece that has become theater, which is *Spiks*.

Pedro Juan: Two. There's another one called *Las Máscaras* which I detest.

RLM: Why don't you write more theater?
Pedro Juan: Now look, there are too many intermediaries in the theater and I hate them all. And to put across one idea I have to deal with the light technician, the director, the actors, and what not. And I hate that. I am my own man. I do things by myself through writing.

RLM: But that can also happen in the reading process. My interpretation of one of the miniatures of Spiks was completely different from the idea you wanted to convey. In that sense, as a reader I'm another intermediary because I'm decoding in terms of what I bring into the experience.

Pedro Juan: Sure. You have that right . . . a secondary right, not the primary right.

RLM: But I'm distorting what you want to say because my experience is different from yours. Doesn't that negate your arguments?

Pedro Juan: Yes, there are always . . . I may say the moon is black and maintain that for two weeks, and then after two thousand years I'll decide that the moon is not black but blue. I have a right to do that. I have that right to contradict myself besides. But concerning a medium like theater, which is the same somewhat as script writing for the movies, I find that there are too many people who can interfere with the idea that you're trying to get across. There has to be some kind of accord with your director in the theater or in the movie business that everything is subject to and that nothing can go beyond. Otherwise it's a shambles. Others might do it for money. I won't do it, ever. I have to believe in it.

RLM: But you have written for the theater. Why?

Pedro Juan: I have written for the theater, for movies, and all of that because I never forbid myself from intervening in any damn genre that exists. I'll do it even in poetry. I did it when I was eighteen (I burned them all) and I threaten to do it again eventually. I'll do it, I'll do everything.
don’t have any inhibitions left. The only thing is the “moves” [la movida]. The theater here was in the hands of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. I dealt with them. I suggested several ideas about commissioning works dealing with the different genres. I suggested this to Piri Fernández and Ricardo Alegría. Let's commission, say one hundred, two hundred dollars: “you are commissioned to write a theater piece for the next festival.” They never listened to me.

_LF_: But, for example, when the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater in New York mounted _Spiks_ did you see it, did you have an interest in seeing how those stories were translated into a different medium?

_Pedro Juan_: No. I saw it when they played it here at the university. I was away when _Spiks_ was done by Teatro del Sesenta [a San Juan theater company]. I never saw it. I read the scripts. I disregarded several things which deserved some criticism from me. I played like crazy [me hice el loco]. I am willing to intervene in any damn genre. I don’t have qualms about that except for bringing off any project, and for that I want people with a certain amount of seriousness, a certain amount of vision, of responsibility. That’s all I want because, first of all, I demand that from myself. Then I can demand it from others.

_RLM_: You mentioned previously that you juggle fiction and reality in everything you do. How much fiction, how much reality, how do you decide when you are writing.

_Pedro Juan_: I don’t decide. I think the work itself demands it from me, and it’s for me to play the doctor or the pharmacist, or something like that, who gives a certain dosage of this or that. And you test it on your tongue and you know, you know, if it’s good or it’s bad.

_George Lamming_: On the question of influences, there are two types. You were speaking largely about literary influences, of books
you may have read, and so on. But what about the other kind of influence; that is, that writers are often shaped by an influence that has not to do with literature. What are the influences in society as lived; that is, influences of particular events, particular personalities in your life that have left a mark, that are not about literature.

**Pedro Juan:** Well, I think that most of all, as I said before, slum-dwellers have influenced me a lot. Slum-dwellers not only in Cataño, my hometown, but in New York. I used to speak with them a lot and hear their complaints. They speak to try to reach you, and you, after all, have to be sort of an echo chamber. His voice is coming through you. You have to, to a certain extent, to a great extent, be influenced by his living, his pains, so that you try to become... and I said this before, as far as New York was concerned, that after perceiving so much violence someone should talk about it. I went into that and it fit for me, and I did it again. Every damn writer is always writing only one book. His failings are bound for the future edition of another book. But it's the same old book. No matter how many volumes you accumulate, it's only one book. And you pursue that no matter how many forms or techniques you develop.

**LF:** We're back to violence. And it's interesting that you talk about the violence you encountered in New York. And that's a violence that's imposed upon people who emigrate to New York and become ghettoized, become slum-dwellers there. There's also violence in *Usmail*.

**Pedro Juan:** ... and there's violence in the life of my child.

**LF:** Does it come from the same source? The principal source of violence in *Usmail* comes from the presence of the Navy in Vieques. Is there something here, then, saying that the violence that comes in the Puerto Rican reality comes from the colonial experience?

**Pedro Juan:** Yes. To start with, you have a colonial system that pushes you into killing yourself... you kill your brother.
And that’s good for them. There’s one less, at least. And that’s an arrangement that you work out for them. I’m against that kind of violence, but we face it constantly. We’ve faced it since 1898, after the [U.S.] occupation. We faced it before, during the occupation of Spain. Since 1898 it’s always been the same old thing. Nothing changes, it’s monotonous. And that’s why you have many critics saying, “Oh, Puerto Ricans,”—and I dealt with that when facing Lloyd King [then chairman of the Spanish Department at the St. Augustine Campus (Trinidad) of the University of the West Indies]—“all Puerto Rican novels seem to be the same because they are fighting the same damn thing, the colonial system, and they are sometimes too obvious.” And I agreed. That depends on talent or no talent. You can divert, you can do many things disguising your tracks, but you have the same situation. It’s monotonous. It’s oppressive and we complain and step out of character sometimes. But you know you have to go back and do it again, and again, and again. How you do it, depends on talent.

(Interviewer’s note: The next group of questions deals with what is known in Puerto Rico as the Cerro Maravilla incident. In July 1978, police entrapped and killed two young supporters of Puerto Rican independence, claiming that they were terrorists intent on blowing up communication towers on Mount Cerro Maravilla. One of those killed was Pedro Juan Soto’s son. Public hearings have since established that the youths carried no explosives and were killed after they surrendered to police. R.L.M.)

**RLM:**

You were dealing about a year ago with the novel on Cerro Maravilla. And you were examining two approaches, one that was journalistic and one that was abstract. That leads us back to the themes of violence and of fiction and reality. Have you chosen one of the approaches?

**Pedro Juan:** Yes, I chose both. I dealt with it along the journalistic road. I’ve been doing a diary on that since ’78. But I
think that any journalist can do that. Not better than I can, but he can compete. *(Laughter)* Well I’ve put it aside and I’ve been going through the abstract, dealing with a circus, a circus that is near bankruptcy, dealing with two strange . . . I interchange names, sometimes they are beasts, sometimes they are strays, sometimes they are just animals. They are captured by this circus in order to attract the attention of the public in a small country, and the captors get away with it. They kill them at the end. I’m struggling with that.

Every damn writer grows from day to day, and I’ve found out so many things I’m ashamed to even print them. On this particular novel I did seven starts. None has satisfied me and this does not satisfy me either. So you constantly repent from having started something that you don’t know how to finish. And my last idea was, “Look, I’ll just do this damn thing.”

**RLM:**

But the essence of your talk at Tony’s Place [an Old San Juan café-theater where Soto spoke in December 1982] was that reality had turned into bad fiction.

**Pedro Juan:** Of course it’s pretty stereotyped. Yes, I find myself facing things which are not good even in a bad movie. This [Maravilla] occurs at noon, everything is plotted, everything ideally established, and I find too many stereotypes, too many clichés, I hate them. And then I decided to go into this circus business and got tired of that too. And sometimes I find that, well, that my son deserves a good piece of work, literarily good, but, at times, I don’t know if I can do it, because other eyes are upon me, and I don’t mean the police or that, no, no. I mean having done a certain amount of work, some good, some less good, they expect the most, and I don’t know if I can do it. I don’t know if I can do it because it’s a big challenge for you to deal with your own suffering and then write it down. *(I remember a good work of Emile Zola. He did something on Matisse, it’s called The masterpiece, and in his diary I found that he criticizes him because while his child was dead, he was dissecting that cadaver as a visual experience. And he challenges*
me to whether I can do it or not.) I don’t know if I can do it. After I published a fragment of one chapter, many people came to me and said that I could not deal with it, that somebody else should do it. I say, why the hell do I have my own rights. Why the hell should anybody else do it? But that doesn’t stop me from being challenged by it.

**RLM:** Are literary concerns very important in this work or are you satisfied with the testimony of an experience?

**Pedro Juan:** I think I can do a book of testimony simultaneously; that does not exclude the other. I can do two or three works of fiction, but the reality is different. *(Thunder)* The only thing that stops me from dealing with this testimony business is, well, you don’t know how it is going to change. They keep going with these *vistas* [hearings] on television. I don’t know how it will turn out and where I can cut. It would be an extensive book and I hate extensive books. I wrote one, *Un obscuro pueblo sonriente* —I hate it —I was going to throw it into the [waste] basket. After many years revising, I couldn’t read it. I hate long books. And this will be a short book, preferably two hundred pages, two hundred pages at the most for the fiction. The other is too extensive. Where do you cut: at three years, at five?

**LF:** But it’s the extensive book that has recognition, for example, of Casa de las Américas.

**Pedro Juan:** Yes and no, yes and no. As a matter of fact, I’m beginning to hate reading, and I find that that has grown out of my students. They hate long books and I’m beginning to know what they mean. *(Laughter)* I’ll do it in two hundred or three hundred pages at the most, and even three hundred is pretty obsolete.

**LF:** How do you see yourself in relation to other Puerto Rican and Caribbean writers?

**Pedro Juan:** I won’t say that I’ve talked with them all, but I’ve been in contact with them. I feel much affinity with them and
I have learned from them. They have learned from me, I find myself proud to say. Regarding Puerto Rican writers or any writers, the only one who impresses me too much on the bad side is Naipaul, even though he’s a damn good, a damn good writer. But as far as denying his roots, I can’t conceive that anybody can say, “I hate what I was born,” even though you may feel that. But being that eloquent about it and at the same time that, how shall I say it, that . . . parasite: he hates the place he was born but he’s making money out of that and art out of that hatred. He’s nostalgic and I hope he will come to terms with himself.

**RLM:** But your main character in *Usmaîl* also hates his roots ...

**Pedro Juan:** Oh, yes, no, no, no ...

**RLM:** ... and he’s justifiable as a character.

**Pedro Juan:** ... you can deal characters like that.

**RLM:** Not with human beings?

**Pedro Juan:** No. You can split your personality whatever way you want. No, no. What I mean is as far as confessing, “I hate my country and my people.” I don’t know how you can do that.

**LF:** That leads us to another question, which is simply that any Caribbean writer has to live somewhere on that margin between the first world and the third world. In Puerto Rico particularly, because in Puerto Rico these two worlds are in friction all the time. The question is how do you define yourself ideologically when confronted with the situation of your own marginality, trapped between the third world and the first? *(Coqui)*

**Pedro Juan:** I’ve never had any qualms. That all depends on where you want to place Puerto Rico. I think it’s pretty third world and I’ve always dealt only with Puerto Rico. Of course, I’m addressing myself to an audience that is not...
exactly Puerto Rican. At times I’ve thought that I’ve failed, that I haven’t been able to reach my own people because of the bad system of education, for one thing. Sometimes I find that I’m throwing words into the wind, that I’m not reaching my own people. But I must say, concerning Puerto Rican literature, that we have dealt with many things that are sort of predictions for Latin America and most of the Antilles. We’ve been there before. We’ve suffered that before. Now it’s coming to Nicaragua, and has come to Mexico —and they don’t recognize that— and it’s due everywhere in Latin America, at least, and eventually all over the world. We’ve been there.

**RLM:** Do you think television could help in solving the problem of access to a wider Puerto Rican audience?

**Pedro Juan:** As I said before, I am not all against dealing with all kinds of experiments; not only the theater but television and the movies are new things that I wish I could deal with. I haven’t had the chance, except fragmentally as far as material for education is concerned, which I find pretty simplistic. I would like to deal with something else . . . but I have not had the chance. We have no money to do that, and we have had no aid as far as that’s concerned. When I say “we” I am not speaking about myself but about all Puerto Rican writers, or Puerto Rican workers in the theater and in the movies.

**LF:** One final question, and that’s about Puerto Rico and its relation to the rest of the Caribbean. Is it possible to consider yourself a Caribbean writer, or do you see yourself more in terms of the Hispanic tradition? Is there a new definition that makes you or Puerto Rican writers in general more Caribbean than Hispanic?

**Pedro Juan:** Every damn writer worth his while is always dealing with society, and that society can be as particular as Puerto Rican society or it can be as universal as the rest of the world. But you address ... I at least address
myself to one reader and this abstract reader is myself. He has to have the curiosity that I have, he has to have some knowledge of what I have, and I address myself to that one reader. I don't care about other readers at that moment — that's in the abstract — and I try to do as well as I can with whatever little talent I may have in order to reach that one. If I reach one, that will, if it's good enough, percolate, to use a favorite word of Lamming's, and saturate. But it will be really slow because you know the function of a percolator ...