



## NELLY ALTAGRACÍA ROSARIO

Photos by Carlos Rodríguez

Interview at her family's home Brooklyn, NY - just down the street from the community garden - November 3, 2016

**Ana: Cuéntame un poco de tu historia en Nueva York. Were you born here, or grow up here?**

**Nelly:** I was born in Santo Domingo en el 1972, pero según yo tengo entendido, me hicieron aquí. [laughter] Entonces a los tres meses me trajeron para acá. Mi mama se fue de allá cuando estaba embarazada, mi papa se quedó aquí trabajando and then she came back. I was raised on South Second, on the south side [of Williamsburg] and lived there pretty much of all my childhood, went to D.R every couple of summers when you know there were four of us. Ya tu sabes eso era un maleterio. Me crie en Los Sures, in a predominatly Puerto Rican community. My parents came in the 1960s they were that first wave, but in the 1980s it was mostly Dominican and Puerto Ricans. When you got off right there on Marcy Avenue, that's the division. On other side of the elevated tracks, that's where I grew up, that was the Latino community, and on this side was the Hasidic community.

**Ana: So it was that segregated?**

**Nelly:** Yeah for the most part. I mean along the edges there are always leaks so there were Hassidic living on the other side and Latinos on this side, too. The reason I mention

that is because I went to a Catholic school that was literally in the other side of the tracks, within the Hassidic community. That was interesting for me because it always opened up the possibility of seeing a different environment, literally like your environmental surroundings – and what you are seeing – is different. So, crossing over, there were suddenly all these trees, the library was located there on Division Street and that was a nexus for a lot of different groups. In many ways that crossing gave me possibilities and it did represent upward mobility: in terms of education, because I went to school, and the library – I went there to get books, and it was quiet compared to our side. Eran los 1970s y 1980s, que ya tu sabes que decian que Los Sures eran candela. People from the Bronx were scared to come here, and we were scared of the Bronx and they were scared of Brooklyn.

**Ana: And what was Los Sures like for you growing up there?**

**Nelly:** I just saw the film by Diego Echeverria, “Los Sures”, and it looks so visually gritty. You look at it and you go “omaiga’ y ¿yo me crie en eso?” I just remember that there are so many parallel universes in any community and so I think our path was school, church. The church was also on the other side of the tracks.

**Ana: You had to cross the tracks for school, church and the library?**

**Nelly:** Yes. All of those three influences were figuratively huge on your imagination, but you understood about where you live y donde estaba tu formación. I always associated nature with that, y Santo Domingo and the trees. And then going to Santo Domingo that’s what opens up... I think is important for children to have all these different worlds to explore. That is the beauty of living in New York in many ways. El mundo se te abre in these little trips you take; you get on the train and cross the bridge to Williamsburg. That is another border I grew up on. We lived near the bridge to Manhattan. My father used to drive us across the bridge, and a whole other world opened up. I grew up in that environment in the 1970s and 1980s and the church was also a Catholic school and that was always interesting.

**Ana: Is the school still there?**

**Nelly:** The church is but not the school, it a convent. It was in the eighties and the church was very involved in the social justice movement and there were a lot of refugees coming in from Central America. There was a lot of community work around that. My parents were very involved I that, in fights around housing, social services. Even the day care that I went to, we helped inaugurate it. That was something the church fought for it, so that working class families could have support. They hired people from the community and that is still there. It was very interesting growing up in an environment where you could see the issues but then you also see the fight for the solutions. There was soup kitchen, a homeless shelter a mission where there were a lot of immigration lawyers -- most of them nuns. Then in the early 1990s, my dad was the interim director at an orphanage run by the church, that became an AIDS hospice. It was sort of the last stage for a lot of Latin Americans that were crossing the border looking for medications. I just grew up around all these social movements as part of my religious, spiritual, educational upbringing.

**Ana: And in this moment in New York history is really marked by the choking of social services.**

**Nelly:** Right, and we have seen what's happened which is the closing down of the schools. and no. Father Karvelis, who I think was Lithuanian, he had a vision for that church and that was to tie social justice to Christianity. You can't be apart from social justice. Not to politicize the teachings but to incorporate social justice as what is at the core of the teachings. So that's what I understood of the world. I just never separated those elements. Later to me it's what figures in my work. I can't tell any story that doesn't account for some historical element, or some element of social justice.

**Ana: Tell me about the questions you are asking with your work, in general.**

**Nelly:** I think the questions I keep coming back too are about historical urgencies. I'm always curious about the history of places. If I'm here I want to know who lived here before. I think there is memory everywhere, whether its ancestral memory or place memory. And we may not see it, maybe, and that is the thing that baffles me about people - people think nothing has memory or vestiges. For example, this was an industrial zone and my mother worked in a lot of these factories prior to NAFTA and all that outsourcing. Ana:

**Ana: Was this a lot of fabric factories?**

**Nelly:** Fabrics, textiles and also there was the Domino sugar factory. And now, I've been to parties where I see the grooves on the floor, and I'm like, "Oh my god - my mother used to work here." I see where the sewing machines used to be. And there is no sort of consciousness about what was there. It's not that we have to be burdened by the backstory all the time, but it does make you inhabit places differently. Even in terms of the environmental half-life of things - there was a time when that was a whole thing. You have high incidences of breast cancer, especially in this area right now. These are all things that haunt me all the time you know? Literally the word haunt is real because I think we carry places with us and we bring places to other places.

**Ana: How significant is it that you're Dominicana or Dominican ancestry. How does that figure into these questions or into you work or hauntings?**

**Nelly:** So growing up, there were the Italians and Irish and Polish communities around us. And it came together for me at school. It was a Catholic school, so we had a lot of Irish, Italian and Polish teachers. On top of that Williamsburg, since its founding, has been an immigrant enclave - from the get go there were Germans, Lithuanians, Italians, Eastern Europeans. During World War II, you had the Brooklyn Navy Yard, so you had all these Puerto Ricans coming in. In the 1940's, people from the Caribbean start coming, there were also huge shifts from African American populations from all other parts of Brooklyn and from all over. By nature, by design, this is an immigrant community. For me, what it meant to be Dominican within this construct, was also about what it meant to be black -- before I even met and socialized with African-Americans. It meant that Puerto Rican kids would be like "Go back to where you came from. Ustedes, los del color." Within our

families we had the whole stuff, but then as my concentric circles started expanding, it forced me to make metaphors which have helped me identify with other groups in ways that I don't always expect.

**Ana: Metaphors like what?**

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**Nelly:** For example, with African Americans. The first time we really interacted in terms of social friendships and real day to day interactions was in high school. That struggle I understand it by virtue of my smaller community, and seeing it within my family: that's one circle, my community – that's another circle, and then what we see on TV is on another level. Another example: Having been Dominican, having gone to D.R, having gone to el campo to visit my grandmother helped me in a very strange way to find, in Texas, some context for understanding the rural students. I thought I was going to be surrounded by all these red necks, but then I would be there and go, "these are the same values." There are certain hopes of understanding each other, and you connect to that. I think that our families and our communities prepare us for larger connections. We can see then as divisions, but if we start seeing them as wormholes into other people's experiences, then you start acquiring a very different way of navigating the world. It's not just about me being Dominican, it's about me also identifying with agricultural sensibilities, or me identifying with displacement or with refugees in different ways. So yo siempre digo que soy un jibara urbana. I feel like a city bumpkin. Even when I have all these experiences, como que people who come to New York they are so stylish. And for me, there is something so gritty about native New Yorkers. People who come to New York is or what is associated with New York... no se. When I see those super stylish kids you went to school with "when did you start wearing club clothes? You're like a model. You know you used to shop at Broadway Dollar..." There is a grittiness that I love, but is fading away.

**Ana: And how did you start writing? Because I'm thinking you talked about connections and what I am immediately reminded of is that you are this amazing engineer who writes novels and has incredible imagination. I mean I just remember a couple of pieces you have shared with me over the years, and the way you think about the way people see is very inspiring and stays with me for a long time. So, how did you start?**

**Nelly:** Writing was one of those things I was born loving. Some people are born they are like "I want to be a dancer" for me it was like desde que yo agarre un lapis, I was fascinated. Just the physicality of writing is interesting to me. Tu sabes que en la familia que si los papeles que si los documentos and my father always had like -- he has almost always fetishized stationary and paper. We would always have a special place for paper and we always had a pen, the materials of writing are a thing. We are probably one of the families that I knew, growing up, that we had a little library. that we had a little library and a collection even if it was found books or encyclopedia, a shelf, and a little collection – of found books, and the encyclopedia and that whole thing. There was something about text to me. I remember learning to read. What was amazing about stringing these pictures together and be able to convey an idea, it was just like wow. I got a note book, and remember seeing a black page and wanting to fill it. I felt like notebooks where already made books you had to fill. It's that easy! And, I told my mom, "Look I published a book." And, I knew what I wanted to do. In many ways books

were portals. Me and my sister weren't allowed to go outside because it was sketchy out there, so what were we supposed to do? La television me aburria because I couldn't do my own thing. So the writing started with the reading. Acquire the vocabulary then the literacy and then came the writing. I spent a lot of time with books, a lot of time because yo no tenia freno. I was in third grade and I was in the adult reading section and half the stuff I read I understood. I was way over my head.

**Ana:** With language play, slang, concepts.

**Nelly:** And then homonym and homophone esa vaina me confundia and everything would be an adventure. I'd find this long word and would try to figure out what it meant. No tenia internet, eso era buscando y buscando. Finding something was the explosion of an idea. So that was what it was for me, it was traveling. It was free, and secret, and quiet. It was a place of total freedom: your mind. You could be sitting there thinking whatever you wanted y nadie te puede detener, and you can't get in trouble. I think that is the power that people don't realize. Eso es tyuyo and my parents always told me, "Eso nadie te lo puede quitar." And that is your responsibility to develop it.



**Ana:** What is your thought on the role of art and writing in social change or in social justice?

**Nelly:** I think that one, it upsets the narrative that has been vetted or confirmed, the one that's bandied about in the media and movies. There is something about the power to create something, another narrative. It's like a flashlight; they are showing this thing but you are flashing other things, you are shedding light on other things that may be for another person the key or the portal to another idea that maybe someone was afraid to explore, or another part of their mind where they were afraid to go. That could work for better or for worse. For me it was through reading that I was exposed to things that I knew, but I never saw on the mainstream or heard commented around me. The minute someone activated that switch, it was over. That region of my consciousness was open and then you find more people that think that way. So it's ways to make you brave, its ways to give you courage. I always loved the stories of people in prison who read

something that will free them. Or anyone who is in some way imprisoned, not just physically but that you are imprisoned in your consciousness or your being, and to read and some unlocked that for you and asserted your humanity in that or clarified it for you. That is really powerful. I think I am stating the obvious, but I don't think people remember what it's like to come upon a text that completely devastates or upsets what you previously thought about.

**Ana: It is rare in a post internet world.**

**Nelly:** Yeah I think.

**Ana: I understand what you are talking about.**

**Nelly:** But even on the internet the text is there and you still read people's ideas, but there is something more intimate about a book and more sustained. In the internet you get all these little lights, but they don't last long enough to stick with you. This is why I believe in the book and in the novel. The long form is more sustained, it's deeper, like meditation. You can set you clock for ten or thirty minutes, you start getting glimmers at ten minutes and it feels good, but it not until you go deeper and you're like, "whoa".

**Ana:** You transcend your own limits.

**Nelly:** I don't think you the internet is evil, but I see myself every day having more and more attention deficit disorder in wanting to feel or achieve that depth. I see it in myself and how when I sit to write, my impatience. You want thing to happen right away, you want a story to reveal itself and you don't stay long enough to trust it to unfold because you go for flash, because it's easy to go for flash and all of these fancy things. And yet, the core of it is still not revealed. That is why it takes me a long time to write because I have to be in the head space and I need the time to do that and I feel sometimes market pressure limits that. I have moments where I feel like a failure because I haven't produced. You said novels and in my head I was like, "Singular! Novel!"

**Ana: But I know you have been working on stuff and if you take the temporal quality out of it it's still there.**

**Nelly:** It's definitively there and by working includes the garden, includes cooking you know? So I'm learning to see the writing process as holistic one. That has been really rewarding for me even if the output as the market would like to define, it is not quite there. I feel like cuando la cosa se va a dar se da, tu sabes como es. You have to put a bulb in during the Winter for it to come out in the Spring. You can't do it right away.

**Ana: Y el aguacate toma siete años para dar fruta. Talking about metaphors right? As a plant it need all these factor pero no da fruto hasta los siete años.**

**Nelly:** We had an avocado plant we almost gave up on it.

**Ana: What are you working now?**

**Nelly:** What is exciting me right now is the Desveladas Project which is a place for me to work visually because I'm always curious on how visuals work with language. With the Desveladas Project, it is more about working with form, and I'm way out of waters with that. It's a fotonovela - we are playing with the graphic novel form - using all this different research the three of us (poet Sheila Maldonado, journalist Macarena Hernández, and writer Nelly Rosario) have been doing. Making visual conversations throughout the Americas that includes all these things we've collected along the way and using these interviews and stories as a way to create a sequential series of images. That is a fun really exploratory project and a collaborative project, which I think I like a lot.



**Ana:** Are all of you asking the same questions or are you asking different questions and then figuring out how are they are in conversation with each other?)

**Nelly:** That is a very good question for us. It's a poet, a prose writer and a journalist so imagine: we are asking different questions and answering them in different ways. And that is something we will refine. Right now we are learning what it is to be a collaborative, because writers are very solitary animals. This is very new for the three of us and that is where we are now in the process. We have our stories. I'm curious and I have my own little standard about who I want on my interviews. Right now I'm a Colombian-American woman who studied medicine in Cuba. I met her in Cuba, and it turns out she's from Queens. I sat down with her and did interviews about her educational history. Her story is fascinating and fun and unlikely, too, because she's a person who thought she'd never finish college and now here she is a doctor. I like stories like that - an input and an output that is completely unexpected, for better or for worse. If I'm surprised, then I'm interested. But in terms of the novel -- and that is what drew me to visit the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) in Cuba. I am looking at different medical movements. Just like with social movements or religion, I'm really curious about medicine and how it's played out within these different medical paradigms, and the way they bring together all these different ideas. I like medicine as a place, because I can geek out about all these things that I like. So the story is set in a fictional clinic in Brooklyn that is illegal, and its run by doctors who are not licensed in this country. They serve undocumented and disenfranchised people. It is sort of a microcosm for all these other things. It's a total universe. You have a garden and you have a kitchen and I am taking my community shrunken down into this clinic. The clinic is actually a house that they squatted in and took over. It was an old crack house and they basically rehabbed the house and it becomes this sprawling, weird place. But the

patients and doctors who come through are from across time. So you have runaway slaves, you have people who I interviewed. I asked Diana Gutierrez, who I am interviewing for the Desveladas Project, would you want to be a cameo in the novel. I am just inviting all these people from history you know? The Black Panther medical movement, the bare foot doctors, Arab physicians from medieval Spain come through. It is exploring history in the present and the future because it is all happening at once right? The underlying question is one about how we heal our communities. I really want to write towards light. Especially today when it's so easy to get heavy and get sad, but you know what? Our community has always survived. We have always hemos buscado formas to make do and use our tools and so I just want to... mira everything I just said could be a different novel in the end, but that is how I see it right now. I see it as a sort of forum where parts are going to be interviews, there will be parts that are historical archival type work, parts that are fiction – una revoltura de vaina, ya tu sabes

**Ana: I remember there was a piece that you were working on a few years back about seeing through others and this concept of people seeing through others eyes.**

**Nelly:** That is an arm of the services in the clinic. There was this doctor that wants to do eye transplants, which can't be done. You can do corneal, but not eye transplants. Some of it is based on the story of Arsenio Rodriguez, el que canto el bolero "La vida es un sueño." Ese bolero el la compuso cuando vino en los 1940s for an eye operation. There was this huge doctor, Ramon Castro Viejo, who was on 96<sup>th</sup> Street y el fue. Cubans paid a thousand dollars to have him come for this operation. So el doctor al fin le dijo "El problema tuyo no es el bombillo, its the whole wiring. I only do corneal work." Castro Viejo is the guy who invented corneal transplants. So Arsenio was under the impression that it was just the cornea, but it was all the way back to the optic nerve. El punto es que, he was so depressed when he got out of there. He went back to his hotel room and took a nap, and when he woke up he was so devastated y esa fue la cancion que le salio. I love the idea that this was Ramon Castro Viejo. I contacted his son to talk to him about how it was to grow up with a father who was a physician. I just wanted to get some of the texture. So quisas Arsenio doesn't appear, but the record is playing in the story. There are all of these little cameos that are part of this world, this universe. There are all these little stories that I love and am collecting y por ahi fue que I found the idea of sight. One of the doctors is working on that, an experiment. And this is an unlicensed clinic, so strange things happen. Y de ahi fue que yo empecé, and I have a thread about eye transplant in the novel. I just don't know how to do it yet. I also have maggot therapy in there

**Ana: That is a big thing in the nineteenth century.**

**Nelly:** Y ahora también for wounds, because they eat gangrenous tissue that is too microscopic for scraping.

**Ana: I didn't know that was still used.**

**Nelly:** I think that what is happening is that they are all going back to the basics, to using our environment to curarnos. I just published a story in African Voices about this Cuban doctor who is deployed to Venezuela and he wants to defect through



Venezuela, through this real U.S. program that exists. He wakes up one day as a maggot, como un gusano, and then he has to turn into a fly. El punto es que he gets here to the United States, but he arrives as a maggot and then he ends up at the clinic. He is in the therapy, he is literally practicing medicine, inside someone's leg. I know it sounds crazy, but I am playing with the word, but also with the idea that when you look into the evolutionary process for a fly – and I mean, I really went there because I am so horrified by maggots, but when you really look at, it's a lot of work to become a fly. I think that when I write I'm also laughing at words because you know when you take everything literally "What if he really was a real maggot?" So you just go there, and see where it takes you. And, it was a weird and scary story to write, but it was fun and got me somewhere in the story somehow.

**Ana: It's freeing too, just going into what freaks you out.**

**Nelly:** Exactly and because all nature is in conversation. What we say is bad and good is very subjective. Not that I want to eat a bowl of maggots, but hay gente que comen maggots, también. So it's just like zooming in and out of crazy things. ¿Tú lo has provado? Creo que saben a camarones.

**Ana: Any questions for me?**

**Nelly: What are you thinking about?**

**Ana:** As a fellow creator, my question – the question I am always asking myself is "what does it mean for black and indigenous women to be free, and queer people, too. But queerness changes based on historical context, it is harder for me to grasp sometimes – even "women" changes, but it's harder to think about than about what it means for black and indigenous women to be free, as a starting point, not an ending point. And I think it's a question I've been asking myself since my early 20s. And it can have cliché answers, the easy answer – to think revolution or starting in point A and ending up in point B. But I really try to uncover the answers from another perspective. I play with time in a different way than you play with time. I think about the palimpsest, I think about the postcard that opens *Song of the Water Saints*, that's a palimpsest. In a similar way, I work with the palimpsests, but it looks different because I'm interested in spirits, and religion, I'm interested in what I call spiritual autonomy, spiritual sovereignty. So, whether it's poetry or fiction or plays or scholarship or performance, that's my big question. I don't know if I'll answer it in my lifetime, but I keep asking the question.

**Nelly:** That's a great question, and one of the things I think a lot about, is how do you narrow the divide between the imagination and reality. For me, freedom is to have no separation between what you can imagine, and what can come to fruition. Shortening that distance is central to what freedom means, that's where creation comes in. Freedom is about choosing what you want. Not just getting what you want, but imagining something and within your power, the distance between your imagination of it and its realization is shorter. Some people can do that, por naturaleza, and some people have the entitlement to do that. It's amazing to me how some men walk into a space, and say, "I'm thinking of doing this project." And they just get funding for it. You know what I mean – there is a level of freedom in that. How do we imagine our

children, how do we imagine our communities, how do we imagine the world around us? Writing is not just about putting words on paper, but also to narrow that gap, hacer ese intento to create something in the imaginary sphere that hopefully one day can come to fruition. That's why I feel that writing towards the light is important, writing towards a certain kind solutions or possibilities.

**Ana: Certain kinds of weavings and portals?**

**Nelly:** Yeah, certain kinds of openings. Because what frustrates me about literature in general right now is that it's all so two dimensional. And I think about writing in terms of verbs and action, and how I actually live my novel. I want to study medicine. I want to inhabit my novel, because I want to see the real outcomes of things and the confusing outcomes that are weird and crazy and also promising. That's why it's so important to be politically engaged – at the community level or at whatever level makes sense for you.