Distance Shapes Memory: An Interview with Karla Suárez (https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2021/05/13/distanc shapes-memory-an-interview-with-karla-suarez/)

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In my case, at least, I look first, get muddy and sweaty, and walk away. Only then do I write.

As I coordinated this interview with Karla Suárez, I had the impression that she was in constant motion. She is an inveterate bike rider and, even while working, takes "virtual trips by pacing around [her] writing table." Her abundant energy is evident both in her productive career (nine books and participation in no less than forty-two anthologies during the last decade and a half) and in her female characters, canny women who are the architects of their destinies.

For Suárez, the mind's attempt to understand is best complemented by a strong dose of the physical, because the body offers its own truths: "The best thing to do is to make love," declares brainy Julia, the protagonist of Havana Year Zero. *". . . not think, offer up the body, the body, the body, the body, to the point of exhaustion . . . and the next day another body, and not thinking, not thinking, not thinking."*

Suárez's background as an electrical engineer and a classical guitarist is evident in her novels which have the timing, complexity, and structural elegance of the proverbial Swiss watch. She likes her chapters to be about the same length to offer the reader rhythmic consistency, and intertextual gems await the attentive reader. But she is also something of an imp. She likes to have fun—and so do her characters.

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I started our interview with word association, just as friends Lucía and Circe do in Suárez's second novel Viajera*, and she played right along. Then we talked about writing about home through the twin lenses of time and distance.*

— Dorothy Potter Snyder

Dorothy Potter Snyder (DPS): Let's play word association.

Karla Suárez (KS): Okay.

DPS: City?

KS: Should have an ocean.

DPS: Ocean?

KS: Motion.

DPS: Body?

KS: Sweat.

DPS: Stranger?

KS: What I am sometimes.

DPS: People call you a Cuban writer, but above all you're an urban writer, whether the setting is Havana, Mexico City, Sao Paolo, Rome, Paris, or Lisbon where you live now. Can you imagine writing a novel that doesn't have anything to do with a city? Or are they—and Havana in particular—indispensable to you?

KS: Four novels (*Silencios, La viajera, Habana año cero, El hijo del héroe*) compose what I call "my Havana Symphony," because the characters in them are either from Havana or live there. In those novels, I wanted to deal with themes that concern the country and the city where I was born and raised, a Havana that goes from the 1970s to the '90s. They are independent stories, of course, but there are subtle links between them. For example, some secondary characters appear in more than one novel; there are scenes in which the protagonists of several novels meet without knowing each other; and there is an object (a backpack) that passes from one character to another and thus travels from novel to novel. I wanted to create a micro-world where my characters cross paths—and even I with them, because I also appear in a very subtle way (though not as a protagonist) in some of these stories. This symphony is now complete, and I've started another cycle. The story I'm writing now, for example, does not take place in Havana nor does it have anything special to do with the city. It's part of a different symphony.

DPS: Quevedo writes: "*Buscas en Roma a Roma, ¡oh, peregrino! / y en Roma misma a Roma no la hallas . . .*" When I interviewed (https://www.lagaceta.com.ar/nota/765875/la-gaceta-literaria/tiempo-cuba-tiene-dimension-especial.html) **[Cuban novelist] Leonardo Padura three years ago in Key West (in fact, it was he who first told me about you!), he said: "Time in Cuba has a special dimension because it's a country that, in many ways, has been frozen in time." When you return to Cuba, do you feel like a time traveler? Do you find that it's *there*? Do you look for fragments of Havana wherever you are?**

KS: The city where I grew up no longer exists and, of course, I'm not the same as when I lived there, either. Maybe that's why I wanted to reconstruct it in my novels, so that it would be preserved somehow, like in a photograph, because life goes on. Maybe that's also why I don't look for Havana in other cities. When I lived in Rome, I lived in Rome. I wanted to be in Rome, to build my own Rome. It was the same in Paris and Lisbon for me. Every time I've settled in a different city, the hardest thing has been to realize that I have no history there, that *I am not there*. There are no traces of me, no *I studied there* or *on that corner I did this*. It's the most difficult but also the most interesting thing, because I know I must build an emotional history with the place. And that's what I've done. So now when I return to Rome, I see myself in the city. Apart

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from what the streets or monuments may signify to a visitor, there is something of me in the city, I have memories and emotions there. There is *my Rome* and *my Paris* and *my Lisbon*. Just as there is my Havana, of course. That's why I don't mix them. I like each one to have its own personal space.

DPS: In Christina Stead's novel, *The Little Hotel,* she writes (https://apublicspace.org/news/detail/idra-novey-christina-stead): "To seek the mercy of strangers can feel like a beginning, in a way that going home full of sadness never can." As a Cuban who has made a life outside the island for almost twenty-three years, can you relate to that? Does distance from your roots shape memory? Sharpen your pen?

KS: Yes, I believe that distance shapes memory. Sometimes it sweetens it and sometimes it embitters it, depending on the subject and the person. When I lived in Havana and wrote my first stories, they had very little to do with Cuba. They had to do with being human, with general problems. That country was my reality, but I explored other territories through my literature. When I left and began writing novels, they dealt with Havana and Cuba—always as a setting, because my protagonists are the characters, not the country. Back then, it was as if I needed to reconstruct what I had lived. Time and distance allowed me to digest many things, so then I could transform my experiences into literature. Emotional distance allows us to be a bit more objective. In my case, at least, I look first, get muddy and sweaty, and walk away. Only then do I write.

DPS: Let's turn our attention to *Havana Year Zero* (https://charcopress.com/bookstore/havana-year-zero), your third novel and the first available in English in Christina MacSweeney's excellent translation (Charco Press, 2021). Your background in engineering is evident in both the complicated narrative structure and the sharp calculations of your ruthlessly logical, funny, and sexy character, Julia. In my review (https://readingintranslation.com/2021/05/03/zero-is-a-lens-to-see-karla-suarezs-havana-year-zero-translated-from-spanish-by-christina-macsweeney/) of the novel, I wrote that you "achieve[d] a kind of polyphony braided into a monophonic narrative." Is this how you conceived the novel's structure? Does Julia's preoccupation with the intersection of the x-axis of logic and the y-axis of intuition mirror your own concerns in your writing?

KS: It was fun to write Julia. As you say, she's ruthlessly logical. She has a degree in mathematics and as such, her mind is structured in a specific way—so is mine, in a way, because I studied electronic engineering. Julia needs to find logical explanations for everything that happens; she needs theorems for things to be crystal clear, and this tendency comes across in her relationships with men as well. As you said in your review, for her, each one is "a facet of her personality." In Julia, there's no confusion; each one occupies his precise place, everything is clear and orderly. Julia sees the world as a mathematical problem to be solved. However, she neither expresses herself nor acts in a complicated way—she doesn't only speak as a mathematician. This was one of my concerns when I was writing: how to make the complicated simple. In the novel, five characters are looking for an unpublished document about the invention of the telephone, and all of them lie. There are alliances, betrayals, entanglements, but I believe that in both mathematics and literature, no matter how challenging the phenomenon, the explanation must be simple, comprehensible. That was one of the challenges in writing this novel: to find order in chaos. The truth is, I had a lot of fun putting the two Karlas to work: the writer and the engineer.

DPS: You consistently address the mediation between silences and speech in your writing. The protagonist of *Silencios* takes refuge in silence. In *La viajera*, Circe doesn't just tell Lucía what has happened since they last saw each other, but rather makes Lucía read her journal. In *Havana Year Zero*, Julia orchestrates the messages and silences between the other characters—and the

reader! The unsaid is as crucial, often more so, than what is spoken. Could we say that your novels exist to make the inaudible audible? Does this preoccupation with silences have its roots in your training as a classical guitarist?

KS: This question is so interesting. It had never occurred to me that my concern for silences, which I certainly have, had its roots in my musical studies, but now that you say it, it makes sense. I had a music theory teacher who used to say something that stuck with me since I was a child: in music you must know how to listen to silence. This is true in music and in everything else, too. Just because someone talks a lot doesn't mean they're saying what they feel. Sometimes what's unsaid is more important because it's what hurts most or what you truly desire. I think what we leave unspoken reveals much of who we are. In my novel *Silencios*, for example, the protagonist decides to stop talking for a few months because she doesn't want to say anything. Then she starts talking again and it's as if nothing had happened. I'm fascinated by the characters in literature who say, but do not say; who lie or omit truths—who disguise their words.

DPS: Many of your protagonists are smart, interesting, strong women on a quest. They follow their own compass while finding themselves through their relationships. Do you consider yourself a feminist writer?

KS: I don't like labels. Since I began writing, I've been interested in talking about women—because I am a woman, but also because I come from a very sexist country. There are concepts and attitudes that are entrenched in the ways most people think and that's always bothered me. That's why since I was young, I've stood up to this type of macho mentality. I do it as a writer, too—but, as I say, I don't like labels. Besides, today the term "feminist" is applied to things with which I really identify, but also to others with which I'm not in agreement. For example, I don't like some changes to the language that are being proposed because, personally, I don't think that's where the problem lies.

As a writer I'm interested in talking about persistent conflicts, giving a voice to those who have less, wearing different skins and exploring human nature. And, yes, I'm interested in women protagonists. There are many women's stories that have yet to be told and we must do it. I will keep at it.

DPS: Your four novels are part of a larger work that you frame as a symphony. There are intertextual elements: I love how the reader gets to trace elements—like a lost backpack—from novel to novel. Will you keep connecting your characters intertextually in big and small ways?

KS: I mentioned my Havana Symphony before. The backpack you're talking about is the same one that travels through all the novels. It belongs to the protagonist of *Silencios*, and someone in that novel gives it to the protagonist of *La viajera*. In *La viajera,* someone takes the protagonist's backpack by mistake at an airport, and that someone is a character who later appears in *Havana Year Zero*. That character's sister then gives the backpack to her best friend, and the best friend is the sister of the protagonist of *El hijo del héroe*. So, the backpack travels from hand to hand, jumping from novel to novel. I like the idea of novels forming a world. One story happens here, but some characters cross paths and that becomes another story. That's why it's a symphony. The Havana Symphony has no more movements; perhaps the fifth one is the backpack's journey, which is hidden between the four novels. Now I've started another symphony where there will also be an internal game. I like the playful side of literature. I love to play.

DPS: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you'd like to say, especially about *Havana Year Zero* and the experience of seeing one of your novels published in English for the first time?

KS: I am very happy with the publication of *Havana Year Zero*. I had published short stories in English before, in anthologies or magazines, but this is my first book in translation. The collaboration with Charco Press has been great. I worked very closely with the translator Christina MacSweeney and editor Carolina Orloff. And it's a new reading public for me! I'm very curious and very happy.

Interview translated from the Spanish by Dorothy Potter Snyder

Karla Suarez *(La Habana, 1969). Her novels include* El hijo del héroe, Habana año cero *(Premio Carbet del Caribe and the Gran Premio del Libro Insular, Francia, 2012),* La viajera, *and* Silencios *(Premio Lengua de Trapo, España, 1999), as well as the short fiction collections,* Carroza para actores *and* Espuma. *Her novels have been translated into several languages, and* Havana Year Zero *(Charco Press, 2021) is her first novel in English (translator, Christina MacSweeney). In 2019 she won the Julio Cortázar Ibero-American Short Story Award. In 2007, she was among the thirty-nine young writers chosen as the best from Latin America. She now lives in Lisbon, Portugal where she coordinates The Cervantes Institute Reading Club, and is a professor of creative writing at The Madrid Writers School. (Website: www.karlasuarez.com* (http://www.karlasuarez.com/)*).*

Dorothy Potter Snyder *(Philadelphia, 1960) is a writer who translates works by Mónica Lavín (Mexico), Almudena Sánchez (Spain), Alberto Chimal (México), and Juan Carlos Garvayo (Spain), among others. Her translations have appeared in* The Sewanee Review, Surreal Poetics, Two Lines Press, Review: Literature and Art of the Americas*, and* Short Story Project. *She is a contributor to* Public Seminar, Reading in Translation, World Literature Today*, and* La Gaceta de Tucumán *(Argentina). Her translation of a collection of short stories by Mónica Lavín,* Meaty Pleasures*, will be published by Katakana Editores in 2021. (Website: www.dorothypotter.com* (http://www.dorothypotter.com/)*)*

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