

**What writing means to me****Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa<sup>1</sup>**

I was born into a world of stories full of color, warmth, tragedy and humor. I was born into a world of music and intuitive knowing. I was taught at home, that I had to learn to reason, yes, but just as importantly I had to be true to my feelings, and trust that those feelings would never lead me astray. But when I went to school, I was told that reason and logic were the only acceptable ways of knowing. Emotions clouded reality. Definitions had to be exact, measurable, black and white, no in-betweens. *Keep it simple*, I was told.

It didn't take long for me to look around and take in this new world. The messages were often non-verbal and subtle, but sometimes brutally frank and hurtful. And I was a very good student. I learned that my language was not good enough. My looks were not good enough. My ways of knowing were not good enough. A typical adolescent, I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be included. I wanted to belong. I started doubting myself and all that had come before. The foundation that my parents had carefully and lovingly constructed for me began to cave in. I tried and tried to be what the world told me I should be. I stepped away from the culture I was given at home and tried to be an 'average American teenager'. I transformed my outward self into the best copy I could manage pushing away anything that didn't fit into the Ozzie and Harriet image.

But the truth was, I never did fit in, get included or belong. I never would. The outward trappings did nothing to feed the bigger and bigger void that was growing within. Having rejected the foundation offered by my family, I was left floundering. Finally I realized that I would never be quite acceptable, never quite good enough. Trying to fit my round self into a square world was not going to work. I could never stop being what and who I was, and finally I realized I didn't want to.

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So I learned how to stand alone and look within for strength and resilience. My truth was obviously a different truth than everyone else's. It took a long while and a lot of pain for me to see that it was not *my* reality that was the problem. It took years for me to finally come to my own simple truth again. The simple truth was, *I was not simple*. I was a black, Puerto Rican female in a world that insisted that I be one or the other and valued none of my many facets.

### **My Writing Journey**

When I began writing as a teenager, I poured all my adolescent angst and romanticized notions of the world onto paper. By the time I graduated from university, I had already written volumes on my personal life. I had lots of colors in my head. I had lots of pieces of dreams. But I knew that there was a whole world out there that I knew nothing about. I hadn't explored enough, hadn't given or received enough. In short, I hadn't lived enough. I had the desire to write but I also knew myself well enough to know that I had nothing to write about that would resonate with anyone else, not yet.

All I had ever done was go to school. Life was some nebulous thing waiting to happen. I could have taken off cross-country in a delapidated VW bus as many of my peers were doing. But I knew I wasn't going to find my answers out there in some unknown middle America. I was still a kid from the South Bronx with working class parents who gave me a practical sense of the world. There was no time or money for experimentation. I would have to 'find myself' some other way. So I went home and began giving back to the community that had always supported me.

I began teaching in the public schools of the South Bronx and, consciously or not, began observing and recording the many hues of my world, asking questions, forming opinions, collecting stories. I didn't need to go out to find life. It found me. My students, colleagues, family members, the turbulent times, were all fountains of information, dreams, aspirations, fears. I traveled extensively and found that exploring the way other people live, always gave me new insights into my own life. My stories gained more heft as my world grew larger and more complicated and I learned to see with different eyes.

This period was probably the most nourishing for me as an artist. I fed my creative hunger on everyone and every event in my life. I had achievements and losses in my life. I had joys and tragedies. And all of it ended up on paper in one form or another.

At the same time, I had started examining the world from a more mature and critical perspective. The images of Latinos, and specifically Puerto Ricans, that were paraded on the screen and those splashed across the front pages of newspapers were, at best, incomplete and distorted. At worst, they were images manufactured by ignorant and bigotted people to portray a culture they neither knew nor cared to know. These images bore no resemblance to the people I knew and the world I lived in. It didn't happen overnight but something began to change in me. All the different parts of my life were coalescing. I could *feel* it. I knew had to start writing my world, my way, for others to read. *Now* I had something to say. And it was important. My personal and public journey had become one.

My parents were gone by then but they had left me the tools to find my way. I began to trust in myself again and look to the past, my own past, for solutions that fit better, felt warmer, gave me peace. When I opened the door to memory, I found the stories that had been waiting to come out all along. Images that had been blurred and nearly forgotten took on a new sharpness, a renewed life. I learned to stay out of the way, and let them come out in full strength and color. I began to go within, to learn to listen to what lives inside, to find my own path to my intuition. There would be time for logic, for honing and tweaking later. But first, I had to learn how to open myself and maximize what I found. Meditation was the doorway to my creative force.

It took twenty years for me to finish my first novel. Where did I get the tenacity to keep writing? It took a while for me to understand where my writing comes from and why it is important-- no, *essential*--for me to put my stories down on paper. I write first and foremost because the stories I grew up reading in school bore no resemblance to world of my family and my community. Those stories did not tell about the lines in my grandmother's face or the smell on my grandfather's skin when he came home from the cane fields. Nowhere did I see my many shades of brown and black complexions in the faces of my aunts and uncles and cousins, or the sound of my mother's voice when she

called me *mamita*. Nowhere do I see the strength and resilience of those women who peopled my world on those rockers in those long ago Puerto Rican nights. I write because my ancestors were never allowed a public voice and now that I have claimed that voice, I feel a mandate to make public the stories they only whispered in private. I write because those images will not allow me to be silent. I write for my students whose lives are never recorded or even recognized. In the absence of true understanding from the society as a whole, I write for my family and my community. I write for my own sanity and my ability to say finally and unequivocally, this is who I am and where I come from. And yes, I am an integral part of the fabric of the multicultural American quilt.