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Switching Codes with Luivette Resto

Mike Sonksen · Monday, October 24th, 2022

“Latinx is not a singular story or identity,” says award-winning poet, educator and mom Luivette Resto. “We all have different paths and stories. Being Boricua isn\’t just one thing. Being bilingual isn\’t just one thing. Being a woman isn\’t just one thing. I hope that my poems help people see those things.”

Recently published on FlowerSong Press, Luivette Resto’s new book *Living On Islands Not Found on Maps* is a finalist for the Juan Felipe Herrera Best Poetry Book Award at the International Latino Book Awards. Resto’s first two books, *Unfinished Portrait* and *Ascension* were published by Tia Chucha Press, the publishing company founded by former Los Angeles Poet Laureate Luis J. Rodriguez.

In this essay there is a link to listen to an audio recording of one of Luivette’s recent poems, but first let’s talk about the scope of her work and how she became the prolific poet that she is.

Luivette was born in Aguas Buenas, Puerto Rico and grew up in the Bronx, New York City. In her 11th grade English class, there was a breakthrough moment that led her to poetry. “I read Dorothy Parker\’s poem ‘Indian Summer,” she remembers. “I didn\’t know poetry could be feisty, funny, and meaningful. Parker opened the door for me.”

Studying with the Greats

After reading Parker, she started writing her own poems. A few years later in college it all started coming together. “It was at Cornell that I discovered a love and talent for poetry. I took an intro to creative writing course where I had to write fiction and poetry for a semester,” she states. “Upon completion, I took a 200 level poetry course. After that, it was over. I took a few Latino literature courses with Helena Maria Viramontes. She was the one who introduced me to Martin Espada\’s work and others.”

“When I read Martín Espada\’s book *Rebellion Is the Circle of a Lover\’s Hands* I truly went all in,” she says. “It was the first time I read my language on the page. It was the first time I read poetry about Puerto Rico. It changed my life.” Helena Maria Viramontes became one of her first mentors. Viramontes is originally from East Los Angeles and her fiction works *The Moths* and *They Brought Their Dogs With Them* are both groundbreaking books.

“Helena was wonderful. She is so supportive and giving. Even though she was fiction and I was leaning towards poetry, she always provided me with advice. Her intro to Latino Lit was life

changing for so many of us. She also created a 300 level creative writing course for us my senior year. There wasn\'t one my last semester at Cornell and she made one up for those of us who were wanting to cultivate our craft. The class had fiction writers, poets, nonfiction, you name it. We workshopped our work twice a week. I don\'t think she did it again but we were so grateful to her for providing a space for us. I remember one of my classmates who is now a well-known fiction writer. We will always be indebted to her."

After her undergrad work, she got to study with Martin Espada in graduate school. "Martín Espada has been an inspiration since college. When I got to UMass, I had the opportunity to work closely with him for three years. He taught me how to organize my manuscript," she remembers. "I took an independent study course about Puerto Rican female poets. Even by hanging out with him and his family, I got to see his process. I was able to absorb the best parts that would work for me. He has been an amazing mentor and friend these past 23 years."

Three books later, Luivette continues to gain momentum. The 56 poems in her new collection deal with her everyday life as a mother, teacher, lover, daughter and dreamer. Humor, candor, love and loss are equally represented. Her three children aka her revolutionaries all make several appearances throughout the poems. In poems like "The Case of My Resting Bitch Face," we come to understand why she is both savvy and vulnerable simultaneously. She uses humor and direct language to illuminate her readers. "I don't place my emotions / on display to be picked apart like a thesis defense," she states. Her New York state of mind knows the time.

As she says in the poem "A BX Love Letter," she can "strip someone naked in two languages." She is empowered and tender but on her own terms. There is a synthesis of sarcasm and complexity that urges the reader/listener to keep up with her. Luivette is entrenched in the everyday world creating poetry reflective of someone grounded with ethical maturity.

Patience & Grace

"Parenting and teaching have taught me patience and grace," she states. "As a teacher, I am trying to instill the importance of the writing process and its steps. I tell them that writing is recursive and that revision is key. I cannot preach what I don\'t do myself. I remind my students that I practice the same exact steps, and just like them, I get frustrated and doubt my abilities. As a mom, I have to be patient with my kids and myself as a writer. I also have to be flexible as to when I can write because kids are unpredictable."

Luivette moved to Los Angeles after earning her Masters in her mid 20s. The audio poem "Here in LA," featured in this essay recounts her transition into LA and her own evolution as a poet, mother, educator and woman of the community. She shouts out Tia Chuchas and Avenue 50 Studios, two of the first places she ever read her poetry in California over 15 years ago.

https://www.culturaldaily.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Here-in-LA-take-5-1.m4a

Luivette is a self-proclaimed grammar nerd that can code-switch as well as anyone anywhere. She has an encyclopedic knowledge of poetry from formal classics to the latest avant-garde contemporary verse. Being from the Bronx, she is also a daughter of hip hop. "I listen to music when I write, and depending on the poem I am writing, the playlist changes. Hip hop makes a lot of cameos," she says.

"At the moment, I am working on my Wu-Tang project. Coming from the Bronx, I am a huge hip-

hop fan and there are certain groups whom I love and Wu-Tang is one of them. Their iconic album *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* is considered one of the best hip-hop albums of all time and a personal favorite of mine. I am writing response poems for each of the songs on the album, taking certain lines and repurposing them into my own titles."

Luivette has the chops and pedigree to flip these poems. She can stop on a dime, break a line, wield an extended metaphor and make deeper sociological points in couplet after couplet, let alone each stanza. There are a lot of prose poems in her new book also and the accelerated momentum one achieves while reading them works especially well with her voice.

Luivette's polyvocality makes her a popular guest speaker in college classes in a variety of subjects. For the last five years, Professor Allan Aquino from Cal State Northridge's Asian American Studies Department has invited her to campus to moderate creative writing workshops and give guest lectures. He also frequently uses one of Luivette's signature poems, "Latina Etymology," to discuss code switching and the politics of 21st Century multiculturalism.

Aquino knows that the right poem can offer students breakthrough moments like the Dorothy Parker poem did for Luivette. In the Fall of 2022, one of Aquino's students wrote after reading "Latina Etymology," that, "I couldn't help but feel her words and emotions resonate with my own experiences as a Latina… There is color in my life because of the colorful culture I have, and I would not trade that for anything in the world." Luivette lives to do this.

"Luivette has long been in tune with the profound and interconnected experiences between members of the Boricua and Filipino American/AAPI communities," Aquino states. "Her unique brand of lyricism and cultural empathy has touched the hearts and minds of students from all walks of life, across many campuses and community enclaves. As a visionary educator and artist, Luivette Resto embodies how language empowers and informs our ways of seeing and living in the world at-large."

Luis J. Rodriguez echoes Aquino's sentiments. "I'm mesmerized," Rodriguez declares, "by Luivette Resto's hechizos y encantamientos—her poems are prayers from a deep and subtle marrow." Luivette Resto's poetry shows readers the breadth of the world by honoring ancestors and switching codes on the page and the stage connecting Puerto Rico, New York and Los Angeles in poem after poem after poem.

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