



Why Angie Cruz Believes That Now is Always a Good Time to Start

The acclaimed author of "Dominicana" is back with a new novel, "How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water," and reveals how she almost quit writing before either book was published. In this engaging conversation, Angie reflects on the importance of writers confronting their own bias, the necessity of complex and complete characters of color, and how to ward against the "disease of presumed incompetence."

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- Alicia Menendez: Angie Cruz had already published two books when her widely acclaimed novel *Dominicana* catapulted her to the next level. It was a struggle to get *Dominicana* published and that struggle unfolded during a period of time when the entire world felt on tilt, so much so that Angie almost quit writing. Then a muse came rushing in to let Angie know that she was not allowed to throw in the towel, not yet. Now, in her new novel *How Not To Drown in a Glass of Water*, Angie introduces us to that muse, Cara Romero, a Dominicana who gets laid off from her factory job during the Great Recession, and when the checks from "el Obama" run out is forced back into the job market. Cara gets set up with a job counselor with whom she then shares the story of her incredible life. Angie and I talked about confronting rejection, who is presumed competent, who has to prove their competence, and why she believes that now is always a good time to start. Angie Cruz, thank you so much for doing this.
- Angie Cruz: Oh, thank you so much for inviting me.
- Menendez: Growing up, formative years, you're moving back and forth to New York and the DR. What do you remember about that period and was there a place where you felt you most belonged?
- Cruz: In some ways I feel like I belong nowhere and in a lot of places. Right? When I think about home and I thought about it a lot, I think about how that space usually is occupied in my mother's kitchen. It's like a collection of smells, and things that are said, and intonations, and language, and code switching. But when I'm in Dominican Republic, it's the same kitchen, just a different island. I'm thinking, wow, this is so weird. In some ways, we live in a different time place continuum. When people talk about the multiverse, I'm like, oh, that's the exact embodied experience of the immigrant. We are here and we are there.
- Menendez: I love that, and I love thinking of it as a New Jersey Cuban in the context of my people didn't get to go back home. But to your point, they live there in their own mythology, right, in their hearts and their minds. They are still moving on that space time continuum without actually ever getting on a plane and getting to go back home. I love that.
- Cruz: The stories they tell are so vivid that you sometimes think you experience it. There are things that I experienced when I got older that I would visit a place and it would feel like *deja vu*, but I was thinking, oh no, this was just described to me over and over again that now I believe I ate this or now I believe I have been here.

Menendez: Yes, yes, yes. I find your story very interesting, Angie, in that you're going to FIT, you're working during the day at a cashmere shop. What's the moment where you realize this is not the path that I'm supposed to be on?

Cruz: I think that as I was growing up in a family that was full of aspirations toward gathering wealth, let's say, jobs, benefits, a better life, so much sacrifice went into that entire project. The truth is, I wasn't a very strong student as a high school student, but I had some drawing skills. I knew how to sew. I studied fashion design, but it wasn't a passion. It was just something that I could do to satisfy the desire of the immigrant project in my family, which is I needed to go to college. I also knew that I wanted to be independent so I could set my life around my own rules. My mother was incredibly strict and she said, "If you want to do what you want to do, you have to pay your own rent." I just left and I said, "Okay, I'm going to pay my own rent."

Cruz: The way to do it back then was entering retail. I was fortunate enough to get into a job on Madison Avenue. While I was in that position, I realized that the only reason I was even given the job is because they thought I was Italian. I went into a culture that was incredibly racist, classes for sure, and full of microaggressions, although I didn't have that language back then. It's something we talk about now. Even if I was making very good money, and I was a very strong salesperson, and I was constantly getting a promotion because I was passing as a light-skinned black Latina, I found myself really unhappy. I realized, could I do this for the rest of my life? I was fortunate because I was asked the question, "Well what else would you want to do?" I kind of flippantly said, "I want to tell the stories about how messed up these customers are that they're buying \$300 socks when my grandmother's making \$300 a week, if that, at the factory in New Jersey."

Cruz: I was encouraged. Well you should write that story then. You should write that story, and I didn't take them seriously. What I'm saying is it did plant a seed and I realized that I have to go get an education. I went back to school, and I studied in SUNY Binghamton, and I thrived at SUNY Binghamton. I found black professors who were really invested in helping students, particularly me, a Dominican student, realized that I was part of the black diaspora, that Tony Morrison was telling part of our story. That made me think, "Oh my god, how did I not know this my entire life?" It was a slow start, but I do think that, I like to tell this story because I feel a lot of people I know, especially that come from working class culture, they don't imagine themselves as artists or writers because there really are such few public roadmaps to that place. It's always the right time to start is what I like to believe and say because my trajectory was incredibly non-traditional.

Menendez: I thought a lot about the fact that if I understand this right, *Dominicana* you wrote over the course of more than decade, I think about 14 years. Did it then feel working on *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water*, could you see my New Jersey accent, wudder, water, over the course of four or five years, did you feel like that was a fast clip?

Cruz: Well the truth is that when I was working on *Dominicana* there were a few hurdles I had to get over. One was that I was writing about something that was very personal about my mother. Right? It's a fictional novel, but it was inspired by my mother, and my father was incredibly abusive. I had to overcome the hurdle of my own emotional feelings about the character Juan. When you are writing a book and you have a bias against character, that character will never work. It's almost like you have to figure out, well how do I love this character more, right, even if it's a character that in my own personal life I've shut out. To look at a person holistically, compassionately, generously requires a lot of inner work.

When I think about Dominicana, I think part of it was inner work, part of it I had a child, all of these things got in the way, and also it took four years to find a publisher.

Menendez: Well, I think about you too writing Dominicana, and as you said, it is your mother's story, but in a way of building empathy, you were at a point in your own life where you'd become a homeowner. You'd become a mother. You'd become a wife. Any of us who have gone through any of those things recognize a trapped feeling, especially if we are ambitious, that all of a sudden being all these things all at once can bring. That was part of your way in, even though you did not have the literal same experience as your mother, of understanding what it meant to feel confined and limited. I wonder then beyond the fact that you had family who had been through this experience in the Great Recession, what your entry point was to Cara, and the way that she sees herself and sees her life?

Cruz: Well, it's funny because Cara came to me in a way that no other character has ever come to me before. It was in a moment that I was feeling a lot of despair. I was actually thinking of quitting writing and starting over because I couldn't sell my book Dominicana, but also because Trump was president and the world seemed very, very bleak at the moment. I mean, it should always feel bleak because you look at the news and you're like, what else can go wrong? At the time when Trump was president, it felt like we had gone so many steps backward, especially when it came to gender politics, queer politics, and immigration. Actually, I was on the platform in New York City on West 68th Street and Broadway, and it was crowded and everyone was in a bad mood. I was there, what else could I do?

Cruz: I had just seen on the news, the Muslim ban, and they were calling for immigration lawyers to go to the airport and help people that were arriving. I said I don't have any skills to help anybody. I felt so useless at the time. I was like, what can I do? I saw this woman studying ESL book, some kind of handbook, and she reminded me of my grandmother, my Tia, and I said, "What is it like to start over without a language, having to apply for a job?" Then I just cracked myself up thinking about some of the women in my family having to go to a job interview now where everything's so digital. I literally was, it just came to me, Cara Romero. I got on the subway and I was like, I am going to listen to her answer the first interview question, tell me something about yourself.

Cruz: For 40 minutes I wrote, it's pretty close to what's in the book right now. I messed with it a little bit for the craft of the novel. I had to figure out how to make it work, but literally her voice came to me and for a while, almost a year, I just kept asking her questions. Every time I got on a plane or a train, I wrote the answer on a phone, and that was my first draft.

Menendez: I've heard you describe, and this resonated deeply with me, the ways people of color are often made to perform their identities and not given space to show their complexity. I think for example of my friend Stephanie who's Mexican American showing up at a party. Everyone kept coming up to her and telling her how great the guacamole was. She was like, "That's awesome. I brought the sugar cookies." I think this comes up for all of us in lots of different ways. I wonder both how it has come up for you, and as you shape your characters, do you ever catch yourself falling into this is a one dimensional way to portray this Dominican woman?

Cruz: Absolutely. I feel, one, that we are all being trained by the same stories, right, which is the stories of television and movies and books. If we're constantly consuming stories that have us as women as side characters or not the lead of our particular journey, then we too are going to see ourselves as side characters. Now as women of color, if we're constantly

being portrayed, which we know now from the data that's coming out from all these media organizations, that Latina women are often half naked, rarely speak, are often in roles where they're in service to someone else or some industry, how will other people portray me and how will I work against that main narrative myself, even if I know it's not true? Right? It's a constant unlearning and rechecking because the easiest way to move is with the current of what the mainstream narrative is. The hardest is to work against it, the counter narrative.

Cruz: I think one of the things I try to do as much as possible is think about, wait, have I somehow internalized racism, sexism, homophobia, all these different things, ableism, and am missing out or have a blind spot to these places? Of course I do because I am consuming the same media that everybody else is. I blame an entire industry that's invested in our ratio as women, as people of color, as working class people, all those different things.

Menendez: I think about Sonia Sotomayor when she was nominated to the Supreme Court and how people were very quick to write her off as being not as smart as she thought she was, even though she had every degree, every credential, that there was still all of that bias in place.

Cruz: We can't know everything. I mean, I was educated to believe that I had to know more than everybody else. There's no space for mediocrity ever, yet I feel like that's not true for a lot of people. Right? When I write my character, Cara, it was actually quite fun because here I have this character Cara Romero in *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water* that is kind of amazing what she's able to do. She has a lot of flaws, but also it was an homage to a lot of the women I know that are presumed incompetent or without abilities when they're literally working all the time using all these different gifts that they bring to the table that are largely invisible.

Menendez: Working all the time and in service of community and taking care of others, and we live, as you say, in a society that doesn't value that work, renders that work invisible largely because it has historically been done by women of color. I think Cara's interesting too because to your point about biases, I think age is a bias, right, and the fact that you set her as an older woman, and then she periodically will surprise the person on the other side of the conversation by talking about sex or talking about her panties, and all of a sudden there's this interplay of she responds to the fact that the woman seems scandalized. It's like, yeah, no, I still do that. That to me was this moment of levity and fun where it's like she's still a full complete person.

Cruz: What I find most exciting about this moment is how many articles are coming out about the best sex you'll ever have is in your sixties and seventies. I just turned 50, and there's so few narratives about women in their fifties. It's almost like you fall off a cliff. You're like, am I going to fall off a cliff? What's funny is when I started this book five years ago and I was thinking about the women in my family, my you know, mis tías, my grandmother, my mother, they all were laid off in the Great Recession and became part of this large percentage of women in New York City that never found long term employment again. They all fit a very particular demographic where they had worked in the same company for 20 to 25 years, and when they were laid off, they just weren't able to restart for whatever reason.

Cruz: There were different challenges to what does it mean to start again in your mid fifties to late fifties. It's almost like you're too young to retire, too old to start again in some ways.

When this happens, I was in my twenties, thirties, I thought, "Oh my God, what is it like to be so old and have to do this" I'm like, "Oh my God, they're not old at all." I know myself, I still feel like I'm beginning so many new things in my life.

Menendez: Some of the moments when I was reading *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water* where I most teared up and lost it, when Cara also asserts herself and she says, "Cara Romero is strong. Cara Romero works hard." When she would say, "I am these things and if you don't see these things about me, then I am going to assert them about myself." To your point, it was done with a certain strength of I have given up on the idea that other people will see me as I am, and so I have learned to assert all of the things that I know myself to be.

Cruz: Well, this is why I had her speaking to a younger generation because I do think that one of the things that I love about some of the women I'm mentoring in their twenties is they'll just be asserting something about themselves that they maybe don't even quite believe yet. They tweet it or they'll say it out of nowhere, and it's like, I am the greatest this. I said this is important because the truth is, again, if we look at the mirrors that are casted back at us, when you're moving in spaces that are new and challenging and where we're still the minority in some spaces, you know that's not what they believe. Presumed incompetence is a disease. It's everywhere all the time.

Cruz: I feel like even me with four books now, with a degree, with being a professor to university, I am still in situations where someone will question what I say and say, well, I am an authority in literature. I say, and I am an authority in literature. They actually are like, oh yeah, maybe you are. It's shocking that I have to keep saying this to people that should see me as peers.

Menendez: Among the people you dedicate the book to are those who've experienced rejection. I wonder what it is you want a Latina who is listening, whether she is where you were when no one wanted to publish *Dominicana*, or she is Cara Romero with no college degree, who doesn't think that anybody's ever going to want to hire her for the kind of job she wants to do. What do you want her to know about those moments of rejection?

Cruz: One, that we're not alone. One of the things, I mean, queer culture is very central in the book. One of the reasons that it is central in the book is because I do believe that there's this idea of chosen family is something that I was raised with, even though we don't call it chosen family. I feel incredibly indebted to queer culture, that they've created new languages due to the *rechazo* of the family. They had to create language for all of us to understand how to move in the world being true to ourselves. Right? This could mean what you want to study. It could mean who you want to love. It could mean so many different things, so a *rechazo* really comes from something Cherríe Moraga said in an earlier work where she uses that about estrangement because one is queer, but it also could be a *rechazo* that a lot of us feel.

Cruz: The biggest *rechazo*, I guess I felt was education. All my family wanted me to have education, and the moment I went to college and I came back woke, I was very woke in my twenties, probably more woke than I was in an obnoxious way, I came back and I was calling out everyone in my family as if they had been studying and reading all those books and shutting them down. They were just like, Angie, we can't talk anymore. We can't say anything anymore. I realized, yeah, that was an important stage in my growth, but it was also unfair because language is education. Educating yourself on what it means to be a person in the African diaspora, what it means to be a person who cares about climate, all of these are education and it's work. I think *el rechazo* for me, it was like, oh no, now that

I'm educated, I can never be close to my family. But guess what? When I wrote *Dominicana* and my mother read that book, I felt like that canyon I had created between us shut down because she realized that even though I took off and I traveled and I studied and I did all these things that she could never do, and may never experience, she realized I was always looking at her and that I was paying attention.

Menendez: Angie, I just think you are one of the most exciting writers writing today, and I am so grateful that you took the time to talk with us. Thank you.

Cruz: Oh, thank you so much Alicia, this was amazing.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and makes this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, Latinatolatina.com/shop. Remember, please subscribe or follow us on Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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