



Living Icon Esmeralda Santiago Asks Who We Are Without Our Memory

The acclaimed author joins Alicia to talk about her newest novel, *Las Madres*, how a stroke changed her writing and her life, and the cruelest feedback she has ever received.

Alicia Menendez: Who are we without our memory and without our context? How do we come to understand the women who raise us and make us who we are when they themselves may not know? These are among the driving questions in Esmeralda Santiago's new novel *Las Madres*, the story of a group of women and their daughters strung across five decades from Puerto Rico to the Bronx, their traumas, their secrets, their love. It has been 20 years since Esmeralda published her critically acclaimed memoir, *When I Was Puerto Rican*. I remember my mom insisting that I read it. Wow. To be in conversation with Esmeralda about everything from relearning language in the wake of a stroke to the cruelest feedback she has ever received, this was such a gift. Esmeralda Santiago, what an honor. Thank you so much for being here.

Esmeralda Santiago:

Thank you so much for inviting me on this beautiful, gorgeous day.

Menendez: When you auditioned to go to the School of Performing Arts, what was it that you were imagining for your life?

Santiago: I don't think that I really had a vision of my future at that time. I think I went to Performing Arts High School or I tried to audition to Performing Arts because my teachers thought I might be successful in being admitted there. I was not really thinking really way beyond what was happening the next day. This is the kind of life that we had, is that we really couldn't predict our future. We couldn't really envision it. I paid a lot of attention to my teachers, to the adults around me. I was 12, 13 years old in a school in Brooklyn, had been arrived in the United States just over a year, and to hear anybody having a vision for me was very... It was dramatic. It really was. I pretty much just like Luz in *Las Madres*, I became the person other people told me I was. I didn't have a clue. I was still trying to figure out language, culture, climate, environment. Everything was happening at once. For one person, or in this case, two teachers who really saw something that I could not even envision is the biggest gift I've ever had in my life.

Menendez: There is a line early in *Las Madres* that stood out to me, and that was this idea that Luz, your protagonist, has experienced a slight, and the adults around her are not treating it as though it was a slight. They're actually being very convivial with the person who she feels has offended her. You write, their deference felt like a betrayal. Can you tell me a story about a time when you felt you had experienced an injustice, but the adults around you or the people around you did not treat it as the same?

Santiago: I really had the sense as a teenager that the more ambitious I was, the more I was cut down by people who thought I was too ambitious. I do have this very strong feeling the way people would say, "Oh, you think you just want to be white, or you think you deserve this more than we do." I mean, a girl group beat me up when I got to Performing Arts High School because they thought that I thought I was more than they.

Those kinds of experiences were very much a part of my life, well into young adulthood, and I had to find a time and a place to say, well, I can't listen to this. I just can't listen to this anymore. I cannot pay attention to that. If I'm to survive, I have to listen to my own gut. And by then I had developed a sense of my own ambitions and my desires. I think in the case of Luz when she's dancing and this person is being so mean, she tried really hard to build up her own confidence because he was trying to tear it down.

Menendez: I believe you described the feedback in that scene as a vicious. If that was not your word, then that is how it landed with me. Can you tell me about a time when you have received feedback that you felt was vicious and a time when you have received feedback specifically as a writer where you were like, feedback's never easy, but that is helpful?

Santiago: I enter Performing Arts 18 months after I arrived in New York City, so I was still learning English. I had a really heavy accent. Plus, my English just was not developed. As a result, I was not a good actress. The critiques were really not very complimentary to say the least. I was not a truthful actress. Why? Because I was acting. I was always acting. They never understood that, that in order for me to even to be there, I was not being myself.

I could only be myself when I'm at home, when I speak my language, where my people know me. But to hear from a total stranger, a teacher who does not speak your language and then talks about you in front of the class, by the way, because they don't take you into a separate room, all the things that you're doing wrong, those are things that diminished me in many ways until I learned, oh, this is what they have to do in order to build me up to be a good actress. And then I started to listen to the critique and trying not to take it personally.

It turns out that the teacher who critiqued me the most is the one that by the time I graduated, I loved the most, because she knew how to make me better than when I became a dancer and then when I became a writer. Because of course, you're constantly being critiqued in those fields. You learn how to listen and how to take what's useful and discard what isn't.

Menendez: How did you become a writer as an adult?

Santiago: I began writing earnestly when I was no longer dance. I was an Indian classical dancer. I was 36 years old and I had a kid, one on the way, and I was still performing. In fact, I was still seven months pregnant my last performance, and I realized my body just can't go in the same way it did when I was 20 or 21. It was a huge... It was like a death for me. If I'm not a dancer, what am I really? Because until then, I had a lot of jobs to support my dance. I worked so that I could pay for lessons, so that I could travel, so I could do the things that I wanted to do.

Once I realized I wasn't going to do that, I had to find another way. Writing came because I was a reader. I think in telling myself in journals that I was going through this devastating part of my life where I was no longer a dancer, but I was like a mother, I had a business with my husband and I was like doing accounting, all these things that I just didn't imagine as what the rest of my life should be, I mean, of course, I would be a mother the rest of my

life and hopefully a wife the rest of my life, but all the other things I was doing were not fulfilling in the same way that was even a dance class.

Forget about performing, just the dance class was fulfilling. By beginning to talk about it to myself in my journals, I began to see that there's a narrative. I know I have a lot of women friends and we talk and, of course, we share things with one another that we wouldn't share with anybody else except with one another. The more I shared my own story and heard theirs, the more I realized I'm not alone in these questions that I'm asking myself.

Menendez: What you managed to achieve is beyond metrics. I mean, you come to fundamentally define a genre that had not yet been built or defined.

Santiago: I didn't know any better really. I didn't think I could write a novel, but I thought I could write about my experiences. It wasn't until the book was out, and then I'm beginning to meet people who say, "Oh my God, you're speaking a story that is so familiar to me, and I have been looking for a story like this." Not only for myself to confirm my experiences, but also because some of them wanted to share stories like that for their own children or their own relatives or their friends. And that's when I begin to understand, oh, okay, this is something bigger than I ever expected.

Menendez: There's a lot of success between the release of *When I Was Puerto Rican* and where I'm going to go next, but I am so moved by what happens to you in 2008 where you all of a sudden realize that you're not processing the way that you had been processing. You go to the doctor. They confirm that you've had a stroke, and it really becomes a process of learning and relearning from there on out. How did the stroke change both your writing in a technical sense, but also in an existential sense?

Santiago: I'm a mother of two children. When this happened, they were just teenagers. Immediately you start worrying about your children and your husband who has been supportive and loving throughout your marriage up until then. I was really so much more worried about them at the beginning than I was worried about me. I was worried about my mother, who I'm her eldest child. What would it be for her to lose me? It would be terrible for her. I knew that. But then the more time spent thinking about it, the more I realize I have to get better. That's the only option.

I had to relearn how to read and write in two languages pretty much in the same way that I did when I was a little kid or when I first came to the United States by starting with children's books and learning how to form letters and those kinds of things. I didn't have any therapies that helped me. I just did it on myself, because I knew I had done it before, and so I can do it again. Technically, as a writer, I used to be the kind of person that would sit down to write and I would write 15 pages in a day.

That was easy for me. I've always been a writer who writes this very long bloated first draft because I feel like if I don't put it all down, I'm going to forget it because the fun part of writing really is rewriting, but since the stroke, I have not been able to do that. It's rare for me to write more than maybe eight pages maximum. I mean, that's a good day for me. Most of the time it's one or two or three pages. It's discouraging sometimes because it's taking longer.

There are times when I still feel like I do have comprehension issues, and so I lean on my trusted readers to help me to ask questions that I might have left out or to let me know, "This totally makes no sense. Can you rephrase that," because I still have that issue sometimes. But I trust that I'm doing the best that I can.

Menendez: I think you are doing more than the best that you can. I hope you take this as the compliment that it is intended, but I think *Las Madres* may be your finest work yet.

Santiago: Thank you.

Menendez: I thought each character was incredibly compelling. I think why I was so drawn to it is I, as with many other women, have grappled with this question of, who was my mother? Who was my grandmother before she was mine? Before I became a mother myself, I started to ask this question, but also just this flattening that happens to women when we become mothers, where in the eyes of so many people, that becomes the entirety of who we are. And that I as a mother now want to be like, I have all these other interests. Please talk to me about anything other than my beautiful, wonderful children. I wonder for you, first, if that lands as what you intended, but also if that is what you experienced, if it was motherhood that allowed you to experience that, or if it was something else that made you curious about the women in your life.

Santiago: I've always been surrounded by women. I'm the eldest of 11, but the first three children are girls. And of course, a lot of aunties and tías, títis, and the cousins, female most of them, because the men, they didn't engage in our lives. They had their own things going on. The women very often would just be together, and that was one thing that I longed for when I left my family. I didn't get that, and so I would try to recreate it with my friendships. I think *Las Madres* came from a different place, although a lot of that experience is in that story. What it is is that the more I wrote about my own life, I wondered about my parents, both of them, not just my mother, but also my father, who was really a virtual stranger to me. Because once we came to New York, I didn't see him for many years. I asked them if I could record them because I wanted their history. They were both very generous in whatever time they could set aside for me, for me to record them and to ask them "preguntas impertinentes" as they would say. These were impertinent questions that people don't ask other people. But because of the familiarity, I felt like I could ask them. The more I recorded them, the more I understood my childhood. My intention actually had been to write a biography of my parents. But then the more I talked to them about their memories, there's just one point where I said, what is it like to not have any memories? How does one remember, what does one remember, who remembers what from your life, and who holds your memories? And in the case of Luz, her parents who passed away, her grandparents who go away. She has no history, according to her, but of course, she has a history. She exists. These kinds of themes and questions were just revoloteando all over my mind.

Menendez: It is then an interesting choice to rob somewhat of memory as a young person, rather than doing what I think would've been the more obvious choice, which is to write this from a place of dementia or cognitive impairment or Alzheimer's, but there's something much more disorienting about a young person who has lost their memory.

Santiago: And then for me, it all brought a lot of emotion and questions for me. Who you lose context for yourself, what is your identity? This is what happened to me. I go from Puerto Rico, 13 years old, just turned 13, and placed in a completely foreign context with no help. I mean, there were no psychologists looking at me. I had to figure it out. For me, really it explains a lot about what happens to us who come here or who move from one culture to another, is really we lose our context. And all of a sudden, we have to either create the person that we're going to become or hold on to the past so tightly that you can't move forward.

Menendez: Esmeralda, thank you so much for this time.

Santiago: Thank you. Thank you for your great questions. You've really made me think a lot. I'll be writing in my journal tonight.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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