



How Gabriela Garcia Took an Ax to Archetype

The breakout author shares how growing up the daughter of a Cuban mother and Mexican father, in a matriarchal family, informed her understanding of the US immigration system, and shaped the characters in her New York Times best-selling debut novel of “Of Women and Salt.”

Alicia Menendez: Gabriela Garcia grew up a first generation daughter of Mexican and Cuban immigrants, raised by a solo mom in a family full of women. That experience fuels her New York Times Best Seller, *Of Women and Salt*, which follows the lives of mothers and daughters across five generations in multiple locales, including Cuba, Mexico, Miami, and Texas. What's most striking to me about Gabriela's writing is how she takes a machete to tropes like the long-suffering, all-sacrificing immigrant mother and instead leaves us to grapple with the often imperfect choices mothers must make and the legacies we are each handed. Gabriela, I feel like I have been spending so much time with you, because I got trapped in the Las Vegas airport for 11 hours with your book as my only companion, so thank you.

Gabriela Garcia: Well, that sounds terrible, but I'm glad the book kept you company.

Menendez: You dedicate your book to your grandmother. I want you to tell me a little bit about her.

Garcia: Yeah. My grandmother has been a really important figure in my life. She's 102 now. She's still alive. I grew up with a single mother and my grandmother lived across the street from us, she was a huge part in helping to raise me, picked me up from school every day, was just sort of the linchpin of my family.

Menendez: You don't just grow up with a single mom and with a grandmother who's largely raising, I mean, you grow up in a family full of women.

Garcia: Mm-hmm. I think that's part of my interest in writing so many women characters. I grew up in a very matriarchal family. I grew up with a single mother and she had all sisters, my grandmother had all sisters, I have all sisters. So, many of these women were involved in helping to raise me and shape me, and I never felt a lack in that. I never felt like I was missing anything in that.

Menendez: Growing up, who were you reading that most closely approximated your life?

Garcia: I remember encountering like Cristina García's work for the first time. That was one of the first Cuban American authors that I had ever read.

Menendez: She's a Cuban American author who puts a masturbation scene in her book, and that's where I was like, "I didn't know we were allowed to talk about this. You're going to get in so much trouble, Cristina."

Garcia: Yeah, there was a lot of that. But then I think I also, growing up, just reading books really focused on women characters. I read a lot of Toni Morrison. I was obsessed with *The Bell*

Jar by Sylvia Plath. Anything that featured really complex relationships between women was something I was always very drawn to.

Menendez: It's just interesting to me, because that is not a dominant culture thread of the place and the culture you grew up in.

Garcia: You're right.

Menendez: I don't know. It seems to me it would not be commonplace.

Garcia: I grew up in Miami, but I also just grew up feeling very different from a lot of the people around me, too. For example, the tensions that I write about in my book with one of the characters who's traveling to Cuba, but her parents don't want her to travel there. I never had that growing up. I grew up traveling to Cuba a lot and being in contact with people in Cuba a lot, and realizing how very different what different populations those were, Cubans in Cuban and Cuban Americans in Miami. I came from a very politically-involved family that often felt out of sorts with the more conservative community of Cubans in Miami. Yeah, I guess I'd never thought of the sort of rebelliousness or darkness in my writing that's at odds with the larger vibe of Miami, but I think that's pretty reflective also of just how I felt growing up in Miami in general.

Menendez: Did you know early that you wanted to be a writer?

Garcia: I didn't consider it as a possible viable career option. But I certainly have been a writer pretty much all of my life since before I could even write, I was dictating stories to my mom, yeah. When I was growing up, I would make up magazines and I wrote a bunch of fake books and things when I was growing up. I was very, very creative, very interested in writing. I was always reading. It's been something that has existed in me all of my life, but it took me a while to land on it as a real possibility.

Menendez: I mean, how does it become a real possibility?

Garcia: I think I worked a lot of writing adjacent jobs. I was an organizer. I worked in media. A lot of my work involved writing in different capacities. But I think I realized at one point, for a decade of various jobs, that all I really wanted to do was just make things up and write stories. So, I applied to some MFA creative writing programs and I thought, "If I get in, I'll take this more seriously as a real option, and if not, I'll just keep doing this for myself." I'm glad that it took me a while to get there as opposed to just graduated from college and decided to write a book. I think I appreciated having more life experience than having a lot of experiences outside of academia before I sat down to write a book. I always think of this Toni Morrison quote that's popular where she says that, "If there's a book that you want to read and it doesn't exist, then you must write it." I think that's how I sort of landed on my first book being so centered around Miami and all of those various experiences portrayed.

Menendez: But a piece of Miami that has not necessarily existed in popular culture. I mean, I think that is, you're offering a more complex and nuanced vision of the city of Cubans and Cuban Americans, and a lot of that is centered in the organizing that you did in immigration detention centers. First, I wonder what it is that drew you to that work in the first place?

Garcia: I grew up very immersed in the inequalities that exist within the immigration system. I experienced that within my own family. I experienced that with friends. It was just always very, very present for me. I started doing local organizing work in Miami, and then that branched out into larger work around detention centers and some of it was focused on the border and in Texas. But yeah, all of that was happening at a time, this was before Trump. It was at a time when a lot of the stuff was still happening, like family separation and children

held in detention centers. But it was just so difficult to get any kind of national attention on all of this stuff.

Menendez: Well, I remember, I'm sure you remember too, when Gaby Pacheco and three other dreamers walked from Miami to Washington, D.C., and it really felt like this pivotal moment where all of a sudden people were forced to understand the stakes.

Garcia: Mm-hmm. Part of the reason why my book is so focused on women and ties in this woman in detention and her story and her daughter's story is that I think in doing this work and talking to women in detention, in visiting with families in detention, I realized how intertwined all of these issues are. People fleeing domestic violence and sexual assaults and the kind of re-traumatizing that happened within the system. Just realizing that all of these things intersect constantly. I think that's something that really struck me in doing that work. The frustrating part, too, I think was just what stories are left out of narratives? What's deemed the acceptable narrative about who gets to stay here and migrants having to be these exceptional people in order to deserve basic dignity? And I think I wanted to think about it with more complexity than that.

Menendez: Talk me through the process of writing *Of Women and Salt*? Because it was not necessarily a linear process, not like you sat down and you were like, "I am going to write a book about multiple..." It sort of revealed itself to you. What did that process look like?

Garcia: Parts of it started at different points and I started weaving it together. I think when I started, I was unsure of what the overall shape of it was going to be. There are writers who plan things out very thoroughly. I think I had a rough idea, but overall, just like you said, wanted it to just unfold organically. In the beginning, I was like, "Maybe these are linked short stories." Then I started adding these pieces that didn't really work as standalone stories, and then I just kept going and let it be what it was, and I was like, "Somebody else will tell me what this is." Then once I had the finished project, they were like, "Okay, this is a novel."

Menendez: Who's they? Who's telling you this is a novel?

Garcia: I had different people read it at different points. I had a thesis committee and then, later on, an agent and editors. But yeah, I think when I started I had very little sense of what it really was. I just gave myself permission to just write what I wanted to write.

Menendez: Gabriela, I have to tell you, I'm super into your entire vibe around writing, which is very often I will interview writers who are like, "At 9:00 AM every day, I do my gratitude journal and then at 10:00 AM, I clear my desk." And you have more of a like, "Well, we'll see where the day takes me," energy about this, and I just wonder if you can... What does that look like? Then when are you actually getting it done?

Garcia: Yeah, I mean, I think I'm really envious of the writers-

Menendez: Me, too.

Garcia: ... who have those kinds of very structured processes. I think I used to feel like I needed to do that. I would just listen really carefully to what every writer said was their routine and felt like I had to copy that to be successful. Then I think I realized that it doesn't work for me that way when I forced myself to write every day, I very often don't like what I produce. I tend to be, like you said, a lot more unstructured. I'll go through periods where I'm just thinking about the writing and then others, where it's just flowing out of me and I'll write for days and then maybe not write for a couple weeks and it's a lot messier and free flowing. But I've also realized that that's what works for me individually. I also wouldn't necessarily tell someone that this is the correct ways to write. Whatever works for each person and produces their best work is the right path.

Menendez: I'm curious, as someone who did organizing and direct service work, at some point there's a decision you make, where you're like, "I am going to step away from this work that I believe is very important in order to take the ethos I had developed in this work and bring it to work that will have impact, but that impact won't be as direct." It's harder to measure how many people you are reaching with this message and how many hearts and minds were changed. I wonder if you struggled with that, if you've struggled with it at all in the process of moving away from it, if there's ever been a pull back to that work, just how you made that break.

Garcia: I mean, I think there are all parts of my life that feed into each other, and I've still been involved in different organizing and movement work even as I was writing this book in the past year. But I think even when I was doing organizing work, I was often talking to other people and then writing, whether it was about trying to get media attention or writing advocacy emails or whatever, so much of what I was doing was storytelling, felt like witnessing and recording and all these parts just don't feel incredibly different, although they are very different. But I think I'm also pretty... Or I try to be pretty humble about the creative work that I'm doing and what its purpose is in the world. But all of these things are going to bleed into each other. All of my own political positions, my own convictions. I mean, this comes out in my writing even when I'm not trying to write something directly polemical or whatever.

Menendez: It's funny, to me, I mean, I've written one book, it is a nonfiction book, but a thing that happens as you're going through the process of selling a book, for someone who's never done it, is that very often publishers will ask you questions about how you see your book positioned in the markets. This is also a business and there is a need and a desire on the part of publishing houses to package not just the book, but to package you. I wonder what that process has been like for you. I mean, did they want you to be a Cuban author, a Mexican author, a Latina author, a millennial author? What was the thing that was super imposed onto you and onto *Of Women and Salt*?

Garcia: Yeah, I mean, I think that's hard, because there's parts that feel like they're in my control and parts that feel like they're out of my control. The only thing that really feels in my control is the writing itself. What other people project onto it or onto me or how they synthesize why I am, I feel like I don't have any control over that, really. I think that's probably the hardest part of being an Author, as opposed to a writer. I'm someone who doesn't really enjoy being in the spotlight. I'm not incredibly active on social media. Yeah, I'm a little bit more selective about what media I do. I think part of why I turn to fiction is because I'm a lot more comfortable making stories up than talking about myself. It comes with the package of doing this. But the publisher that I worked with, the editor that I worked with, they never super imposed this idea of who I had to be as a public-facing individual, and were very open to having a very collaborative relationship with me, but that doesn't mean that I really can't control how other people see me or want to see me or whatever. It just comes with the package.

Menendez: There's the matriarchal piece of this. There is the work that you did organizing in immigrant communities. Those pieces clearly woven throughout *Of Women and Salt*. Where else *Of Women and Salt* can we see pieces of your life?

Garcia: It's not autobiographical and in my family's pretty different from the family that I write about, but I think there's pieces of me in everything and probably in every character, or pieces of people I've known in my life. I loved writing about Miami in the '90s or early

2000s and drawing from a lot of my experiences at that time. There's a piece that takes place in Mexico, in the hometown of my father, where I travel to pretty regularly. I write about neighborhoods in Cuba that I've spent a lot of time in. I write about Buena Vista, which is the neighborhood where my uncle lives and where I used to travel back and forth from pretty frequently. There's pieces of me, pieces of people I know, places. It's all woven in there even if it's not exactly me.

Menendez: Final question, which is, as you said, there is that great Toni Morrison quote that is oft shared as an impetus for writing a book. And I think there are a lot of people who are going to listen who feel the same way, that there is a book they have wanted to read that does not yet exist in the world. What is your best counsel to someone who feels like she has that inside of her?

Garcia: Just to write it. I think there's a million forces telling you to not do something, and I think it takes a lot of fortitude to just get to the point of writing a book and putting it out in the world. It feels like so much is out of your control, but that's the one thing that is in your control. I think if it feels like it did for me, which was just like, "This is the only thing I want to do, this is just something beyond me that I just need to do," then you should, you should do it.

Menendez: Gabriela, thank you so much for doing this.

Garcia: Yeah, thank you. This is really wonderful.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer, Florence Barrau-Adams 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 Podcast, Goodpods or wherever you're listening right now.

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