INTERVIEW

Belonging to a Collage: An Interview with Marjorie Agosín

by Dolores Hunsky



Marjorie Agosín

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***Tint Journal* is about to release their first anthology *Tinted Trails: Exploring Writings in English as a Second Language* and I have had the opportunity to interview one of the guest editors – Marjorie Agosín, award-winning Chilean-American writer, human rights activist, literary critic, and sunshine personified. She is known for her poetry and promotion of social justice and feminism. Her work encompasses a variety of topics, as well as genres; from creative writing about traumatic historical events both in the Americas and in Europe, to scholarly literature and autobiographical memoirs. She has received several literary awards, including the Gabriela Mistral Medal of Honor for Life Achievement by Chilean government, the Peabody Award, and the Belpré Medal. Having written and edited more than a hundred books, she continues to be one of the most inspiring, genuine, and kind people I have had the pleasure of meeting.**

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Anyone who has known me can probably imagine the puppy-like excitement that accompanied this task, as I have been a fan of Marjorie's work since we were introduced in 2019. As our paths continue to cross, my fondness for her only grows. You are about to read the conversation between two misplaced humans, discussing languages, creativity, and belonging. I hope that Marjorie's words will touch other souls out there, who are trying to find a place in the collage that is society.

Dolores Hunsky: Thank you, Marjorie, for agreeing to this interview. The release of the upcoming anthology *Tinted Trails* is approaching and you happen to be one of its guest editors. Last time we spoke, we had a conversation about visibility and artists (or people in general) struggling as they are trying to find their place in the world – a place for their creativity. Do you think Tint provides exactly that for many ESL creators? A sort of "home" for their unheard stories?

Marjorie Agosín: First, I'd like to share with you this idea that I think a lot about, that, just like life itself, belonging is fluid. Sometimes you want to belong to a community of artists, to a place, you want to belong to a world filled with stones that reveal a sense of history, and sometimes you only want to belong to yourself. I think it's very difficult – this constant search for belonging to a community – it's difficult, because it involves a sense of trust. You must trust the community you want to belong to. Having said that, I do think that Tint offers all these possibilities. You can belong to a community of writers or you can belong only to your text and perhaps not engage with others. Tint gives a sense of freedom that I truly think is important when you wish to belong to a community. They are gathering people from various parts of the world and have achieved true diversity. Not one that is politically correct, but the diversity that enriches you. The idea that a magazine has this ability is

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remarkable. I think belonging is also finding refuge and I think that the idea of Tint is both – belonging or refuge and a safe space, because they're not afraid of publishing experimental literature or literature that could be highly controversial for other people.

Dolores: Do you think that is why you agreed to be the editor for *Tinted Trails*?

Marjorie: Yes. I have met Lisa [*Tint Journal*'s founder and editor-in-chief] and numerous other talented and strong-willed young people. I like her determination and resilience. What I also like about her, about Tint, and about you, is that you believe that literature can transform our world. I am a believer in that, but not many people think so. Almost half of the world believes in wars. Why not change that and make people believe in poetry? Believe in kindness? Believe in encounters? I think it's our responsibility to invite others and make them feel like they can transform the world.

Dolores: In an interview with Gregory Donovan for *Blackbird* (in 2004), you've stated that despite your bilingualism, Spanish feels more home-like to you. It is the language you identify with and prefer to write in – "language of your soul". Do you think that is the reason you were drawn to Tint? Because, in a way, it provides a place for all those lost souls out there who have found their voice in English, rather than their mother tongue? Do you believe that, because of this, you managed to connect with and understand these writers better?

Marjorie: Yes. When I was writing the introduction for *Tinted Trails*, I began to write it in Spanish and then I realized Tint is a journal where people write in English. I've immediately translated it, but when I told Lisa, she asked me: "Don't you write in English?" Yes. I write in English, I teach in English, most of my life is in English. However, I've come to understand that what is truly important to me is in Spanish. That shows how important Tint is to me.

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A lot of people who write in their native language want to belong in English as well. Somehow, English is universal. Spanish is not only the language of my soul, but it's the language of the memory, of my emotions, the first language I began to write and to think in. I think of the poems I'm going to write, not in English, but in Spanish. The great attraction to being guest editor for Tint is that they are welcoming of all languages. Tint provides a bridge between one language and the other. We all look for safety in this very unsafe world. We can look at Tint as a place that will not exercise judgement, but will welcome you as a creative artist.

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Dolores: And now, this safe space is being turned into their first anthology. I read somewhere that you're fond of collages. Perhaps all of us, who have in one way or another been (or feel) scattered around the world, understand the stories that are torn and incomplete and quite simply different from the majority. Do you think this anthology is one of the collages that the readers will be able to both lose and find themselves in?

Marjorie: Yes. What is interesting about the collage is that it's almost like building memories – bit by bit, piece by piece. Then, all of the sudden, all the pieces can be read together, but they can also stand separately. The true work of a collage is that it works as a unity at the end. I think that this idea fits very well with the concept of change. You have people that have been displaced, that have travelled far to feel at home; whether it's in Graz or Maribor or the US; then, suddenly, they are together in a magazine. The idea of collage also has to do with the idea of belonging; each author is a collage of its own, but then they appear as part of the community.

Dolores: That is such a wonderful analogy. What would you say that, as an editor, you like to focus on?

Marjorie: I'm a very spontaneous, intuitive writer and I don't edit my own work. I enjoy editing others, but I'm not the editor that goes word by word. I am more an editor that understands the whole picture, the broader aspect of writing. I'm not very strict and I don't think every word needs to make sense. One of the difficulties that a lot of people have is that they long for certainty and long for making sense, but few things make sense in the world. Everything is filled with uncertainty, so we have to acknowledge uncertainty in every aspect of our life and especially in writing.

Dolores: What is your favourite thing about *Tinted Trails*?

Marjorie: I feel that this anthology embraces the world of voices that we would not otherwise hear. The work of this anthology has excellence. Has ambition. Has agency. These writers are exceptional and perhaps they would not have found home for their work, if not for Tint. This is why I'm committed to this magazine and I agreed to serve as guest editor.

Dolores: Thank you for these very poetic words. Is there anything that you're currently working on? Anything we can look forward to seeing from you?

Marjorie: I always work on many projects. I just finished a collection of prose poems that is called *Notas del mar* (*Notes from the Sea*) that will be forthcoming in 2024. It's very ambitious and mysterious. I wrote the poems, somehow looking at the sea or thinking about the sea and it kind of emulates the idea of the sea, the fluidity, the mystery, the rage, and the calmness. Even I look at it and I say: "This is very beautiful, but I don't understand

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everything." Yet, people are drawn to this, because it has a sense of magic. A very young muralist chose my poetry, *Notes from the Sea*, to illustrate or to paint the murals in a very beautiful museum right here – Delgado Museum of Art. With that, I've moved into a larger experience than writing poetry and have people read it. The poetry becomes part of the mural, the museum, and the ocean, because the museum faces the ocean.

After I wrote *Notes from the Sea*, I started working on collages of prose poems, called *Offerings*, which is about gratitude, writing, love, and the experience of readers, in very lyrical pieces, 5 – 6 verses. I think people want to engage in the process of reading as they would engage with a collage. Somehow, I'm drawn to do that.

Dolores: Is there perhaps a question that you wish somebody would have asked you over the years and nobody has? If so, what is it?

Marjorie: People don't ask me: What is your hope when you write a poem? What do you want? Where do you want the poem to lead you? Where would this poem go? No one has asked me that.

Dolores: Would you mind answering that for Tint?

Marjorie: I would like this poem to go into the hands and into the eyes of a loving reader. It doesn't matter where they are and who they are. I always hope somebody will find this poem, somebody will find me. I don't have social media – maybe secretly I don't want to be found – but they always find me. So, I'm hoping that someone finds a poem I've written and that poem helps them alleviate their sorrows, bring them joyful moments, and that there will be a connection with the reader, an unknown reader. That this poem comes to life for him/her and myself. That's what I hope for. I don't need to know who the reader is.

Dolores: I can only speak for myself, but your work definitely moves people. Do you perhaps have any words for the writers and readers alike, who are out there, just waiting for another piece of collage to either create or consume?

Marjorie: I'd like to say that every writer – or every person that aspires to write – has to become a reader. There's nothing more beautiful than engaging with a novel, a poem, or an essay. You should not write for others, you should write from the point of authenticity, from your own self, from what you know. You hope that others will be enriched by your writing, but you don't write for financial reward, recognition, or hitting the "best-seller" list. If you are worried about these things, you're a different writer, not so much committed to what I think really matters, which is to capture your own voice, to release it and to share it. The most important, what we all struggle with, but is essential, is to be ourselves. As writers, as humans, as friends – to be ourselves.

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