

INTERVIEW

Tint Author Talk with Cleyvis Natera and Jane Muschenetz

by Andrea Färber



On July 26, 2024, Tint Journal held its first Tint Talk. With this new online format, our aim is to bring together different ESL writers for a reading and a discussion on their craft and works. Our first guests, Cleyvis Natera and Jane Muschenetz, joined us via Zoom. Both authors read from their works and engaged in a lively discussion with each other, taking questions from the audience. Below, you will find an edited transcript of the event, where we talked about the importance of language in writing, cityscapes, and who one should write for among other things.

Cleyvis Natera is the award-winning author of the critically acclaimed debut, *Neruda on the Park*. Her fiction, essays and criticisms have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Kirkus*, *URSA Story*, *TIME*, *Gagosian Quarterly*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Rumpus*, *The Washington Post*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Aster(ix)* and *Kweli Journal*, among others. Her second novel, *The Grand Paloma Resort*, is forthcoming in 2025.

Jane Yevgenia Muschenetz is a Ukrainian-born, Russian-speaking, Jewish refugee who fled the Soviet regime as a child. Jane's debut, *All the Bad Girls Wear Russian Accents* (Kelsay, 2023), won the 2024 California Press Women Communications Award and was named the 2024 San Diego Writers Festival Poetry Collection of the Year. Her new collection, *Power Point* (Sheila-Na-Gig, 2024), combines dark humor, statistical analysis and visual poetics to interrogate societal inequalities. Connect with Jane and her work at www.PalmFronDZoo.com

Thank you for joining us. Cleyvis, *Neruda on the Park* is set in New York City. The neighborhood that the characters live in, *Nothar Park*, is a fictional neighborhood. What made you decide to set the novel in a fictional place within a real city?

Cleyvis: I grew up in New York City, and one of the things that I was always struck by was the many boundaries and borders between the neighborhoods. When I think about my journey from Washington Heights after arriving from the Dominican Republic, to moving to the Bronx, and later getting my MFA from NYU, each neighborhood felt like it had its own immigrant culture. When building Nothar Park, I wanted to collapse the boundaries between all of these neighborhoods that I love. It's an odd little neighborhood where you have tenement buildings, brownstones, small buildings and tall buildings, and I wanted to highlight how this threat of gentrification is a threat that exists in all of New York City's neighborhoods. I wanted folks to consider what it means to live in a threatened neighborhood, regardless of where you're from.



Cleyvis Natera © Beowulf Sheehan

We learn early in the novel that conversations between most characters living in Nothar Park take place in Spanish, yet we readers follow the dialogues in English. Did writing dialogues in English that are meant to be spoken in Spanish have any influence on your writing process?

Cleyvis: Yes, it impacted it so much. You could say that half of the book is translated. Eusebia doesn't speak English. When she tries to speak it, the words are choking her. We get her part of the story in translation. There's this tension between her daughter and herself because Luz has lost a lot of her Spanish. She has gone to elite spaces, mostly Ivy League educations in the United States, and thereby lost a lot of her culture and language. When they communicate, the mother speaks in Spanish and the daughter speaks in English. The way that those conversations are rendered in the novel are all in English.

One of the things that I was really conscious of when crafting the book was syntax. There are times you'd have the feeling that the language is flowing and smooth, and other parts where the language feels very sharp and almost awkward because of the construction of the syntax. Some sentences might make more sense if they were written in Spanish and not in English. Essentially, the reader only learns about Eusebia in translation and is aware of that as well. As women, most of us have to bend ourselves, especially in patriarchal societies, to fit in, to be accepted, and to fulfill norms that very often harm us. Through this language and sentence construction, I wanted to show that Eusebia is a woman who is very complicated and has multitudes.

Jane, your poems discuss social topics, personal moments, and the feminist perspective. Do you think poetry and politics are ultimately connected, and how does that influence your writing?

Jane: I actually have a poem called "Every Poem is Political," because it is such a hot topic between poets. Poetry has a history of spoken word and protest art. Some people get very much up in arms saying every poem is political and if it's not, then you're coming from a place of privilege and ignorance, which is not a view I necessarily ascribe to. I think we always bring ourselves fully to our writing, and we exist in a political climate that influences that. I can't separate it from what I write, and at the same time I'm conscious of the fact that

politics has often been used to usurp art for its own purposes. I'm very careful of becoming a propaganda piece, because I feel like it is too simple to just state clearly what is wrong and how to fix it. I want to include the idea that there are multiple realities happening at the same time, and humor and juxtaposition of different ideas are a great way to do that. I don't want to shy away from politics, but I also don't want to beat people over the head with the solution either.



Jane Muschenetz © Ingo Muschenetz

This also relates to the next question. Poetry is politics, but language is politics as well. In “All the Bad Girls Wear Russian Accents,” the speaker teaches others only beautiful words in Russian, conscious of the fact that others will repeat these learned words to native Russian speakers. How did you discover the power of language and how to use it?

Jane: The poem was fun to write and I love the different things that people take from it. We've all been on that curiosity side of meeting someone from a different culture and all we have of that culture is our preconceived notions learned by movies. The immigrant community have played the part in the middle of having to be the ambassador and representative of all of those preconceived notions for people as perhaps the only person from that background that they're interacting with. It was definitely a survival mechanism to turn those potentially ostracizing situations into a place of safety. Humor and performance and language became a way for me to do that. From an early age writing, literature and art was a tool of power for me, but as the one on whom it was being worked on. I first felt that power, and then later came to understand that I have the ability to learn how to wield that power myself. That's very much reflective of the power dynamics that are in that poem as well.

You both came to the U.S. when you were young and grew up learning English. Are you only writing in English as your second language, or are you writing in your native language as well?

Cleyvis: I write only in English. Part of the American experiment is our surrendering language. It's difficult unless you're in private school to really flourish in another language, whether you have it or you're trying to learn it. I did not have a bilingual education, and it

wasn't until I got to college that I was able to take literature classes that were in Spanish. I don't think that I could write the novel that I wrote in English in Spanish. It hurts my heart to say that, because I feel that it is as much a product of my own inability to be stubborn and steadfast in the face of obstacles and difficulties, as it has been a system that doesn't really encourage or reward people who want to be multilingual. I'm fluent, I read in Spanish all the time, and I certainly speak Spanish all the time, but it has become a fixation as of late that I really want my native language to be as strong as my English.

Jane: I echo that sentiment. I don't write in Russian because in some parts I don't have that kind of fluency as Cleyvis was saying, that would come from having an education in that language all throughout highschool. I also didn't pursue that education, although I read in Russian and I'm fluent in it. At the same time, it very much informs my understanding of literature and how I express myself. If you learn other languages, even if you don't become fluent in them, the structure, the syntax, the double meanings of certain words, they permeate how you express yourself. Your familiarity with the important writers and historical moments of that culture also informs your writing which makes it richer and more nuanced.

Who are you writing for? Do you consider the audience or do you write for yourself?

Jane: I write for myself first. I have to get it out, just because that's what pushes me. So much of writing is solitary, and so much of it happens before it gets published and before anyone edits it, or anyone has a response to it. I write because I struggle through something and that way I can understand it better myself. I'm lucky that other people like it too, but that's not a given. Many other writers and artists don't have the time or ability to get their work out, or the access to publication, but that doesn't diminish their work or the quality of it.

Cleyvis: I think my answer is pretty similar to Jane's. I had a really tough time publishing my first book. I wrote a manuscript when I was in graduate school at NYU that I never sold and I started writing this second book, which became my debut, at the heels of that failure. When I started writing that book, my audience was really anybody who would want to publish my book, but I started from a place where I wanted to push against the canon. I felt like my own aesthetic disintegrated under the pressure of failure. It wasn't until this second book also was failing that I thought if no one was going to read my book anyway, I might as well write something that is just delicious and really different. One of the things I really love about being Dominican is our social capital: humor, charisma and sexiness. I remember feeling like that is missing from books. It wasn't until I really embraced the fact that maybe I wasn't supposed to be an author that I felt this freedom to write the book that I felt I was

born to write.



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As an outsider or immigrant, you tend to be more vulnerable and your senses are heightened more than if you were in an environment in which people were more similar to you. When did you start writing, and how did the experience of being an immigrant influence it?

Cleyvis: Writing for me started in highschool. I wasn't writing creatively at that point, I was in the newspaper. I did a lot of interviews and opinion pieces. I was always reading and it wasn't until I got to college and took a creative writing class in my freshmen year that I realized that I had never felt more joyful than when writing creatively. I feel that going through the difficult experience that many of us went through as children naturally made us observant. What makes writers excellent writers is that most of us are obsessed with psychology: how people think, the contradictions in how people act and the joy of trying to understand people. A lot of those skills are skills that we learned as children when we were put into difficult situations when we were forced to learn about the culture because we wanted so desperately to be a part of it. Writing for me became an escape and joyful process.

Jane: I absolutely agree with that. The first piece of writing I did was a little poem when I was four years old. I spoke it to my mom and she wrote it down for me. The wonderful thing about when you're little and you have an interest in something is that you don't yet know that you can't do it. You have this possibility thinking that we lose when growing up and can so hinder us when we try anything new. I think we need a little bit of that pizzazz and joy to be in the driver's seat when we try to create something. I wasn't published until I was in my 40s. It took a really long time, and a lot of why I didn't write was because I tried and it didn't work, life was in the way, people told me it wasn't a real job. At some point I told myself that, yes, no one else might appreciate my writing, other people might say my voice and perspectives are not worthwhile, but why in the world am I saying it to myself?