

INTERVIEW: Jean Rockford Aguilar-Valdez (with Toby Akire)

Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

I think that this bio that is on the journal “Label Me Latina/o” answers questions #1 and #2 for you. ☺

“**Jean Rockford Aguilar-Valdez** was born and raised in Miami, Florida and is a light skinned Latina, a daughter of immigrants from Cuba and Panama, a former middle school science teacher in East Los Angeles, and a doctoral candidate in education in the Department of Teacher Education and Higher Education at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her research interests include decolonizing science education, indigenous science, postcolonial feminism, Latin@ critical race theory, and social justice in regards to racial, immigration, political, and economic oppressions that Latin@s face in the realm of education. Her dissertation focuses on the testimonios of undocumented Latin@ high school students as they traverse the borderlands between the cultures of their roots and the expected assimilations they are forced to absorb, despite very real political limitations.”

What was your childhood like?

I had a very rough childhood. I grew up in a low-income neighborhood in the barrio of Sweetwater in Miami, which was mostly Cuban and Nicaragüense. I grew up in a pretty dysfunctional family with my mother having many different partners, and I was abused by several of the male figures in my life. I found refuge hiding out at local libraries and school libraries, and I soon developed a love of books, literature, science, and just any kind of intellectual escape. I grew up kind of seeing my teachers as giving me the kind of acceptance that I didn't get at home, and grew up wanting to please my teachers and saw academics as a sort of “escape” from my situation.

Tell me about your family.

My mother is Cuban, my biological father is from Panama. I grew up mostly with my mother but I saw my father on weekends. I have a half-sister and half-brother from my mother's side. We were the typical Spanglish-speaking Miami Cuban-Americans, constantly with one foot in Cuban culture, one foot in American culture, and a third foot (yes, we have 3 feet, don't you?) in the unique “Miami” culture that you just have to live there to understand. ;-)

What is your heritage?

Latin@ in the full, modern sense. I am ropa vieja and cheeseburgers. I am salsa and heavy metal. I am “Thank you sir for your erudite contribution to our intellectual understandings” and “Oye, meng, pero dame un sangwich y callate la boca, ya, que

rayo!”

I live in this mix. That is my heritage.

What was your education like?

I guess I already answered this one partially, above: “I found refuge hiding out at a local libraries and school libraries, and I soon developed a love of books, literature, science, and just any kind of intellectual escape. I grew up kind of seeing my teachers as giving me the kind of acceptance that I didn’t get at home, and grew up wanting to please my teachers and saw academics as a sort of “escape” from my situation.”

To add to that, I did “escape” in the sense that I went to college in South Carolina, where I had absolutely no family, and majors in Physics and Chemistry, because they were the hardest things I could think to major in, and I wanted to prove I could do it. I did. I then went on to graduate school in North Carolina at Wake Forest University, in physics. Then I decided to teach science in public schools, from there. What was interesting was that I started teaching middle school science classes in East Los Angeles. That was my deepest education, there, with them, because where I thought I was going to be bringing science knowledge to these students, these students taught me what it really is to be a Latin@, embrace your culture, your family, and not run from it. It was my experience teaching Latin@ students in East L.A., that led me to re-embrace who I really am, and to dedicate myself to where I am now, doing doctoral studies, and pushing for understanding and celebrating how one could teach science, and know science and still be culturally relevant to the knowledge and culture of Latin@s, in all their iterations.

What inspired you to write (Did you always like writing)?

I always enjoyed writing poetry – it was a catharsis for me. I enjoy composing and being creative with my writing. As for academic writing, both of the scientific and educational sort, which is usually what I’m expected to write these days, it’s less enjoyable, but I still see it as a catharsis. I’m now writing my dissertation, and I’m trying to speak “truths” through my research, and infuse myself and my positionality into my work, so much of my deep self, that I infuse into my poetry, is finding its way into my other writing, as well.

What do you do besides writing (any hobbies as a child or now)?

I’m in the middle of my dissertation as a doctoral candidate: Do I have time to do anything else besides writing? Seriously, right now I write a lot, and I try to take little breaks to sleep, shower, eat, and maybe spend a few moments on Facebook. Sad, I know. ☺ But hopefully by this time next year people can call me “Dr.” and hopefully it would have all been worth it.

What is your favorite novel or short story?

I'm not sure one could call it a "novel" – but Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera* which is a collection of thoughts, poems, etc. It deeply speaks to my soul in ways no other author ever could. Anzaldua "gets me" – I consider myself, like her, a "New Mestiza."

What's your favorite topic to write about?

I suppose I like to write counter-stories. I like to write the truths of those who voices are seldom heard, or are constantly misrepresented, and I like to reveal those "truths," whether they're my own, or the truths of other marginalized people. I feel that this is a great way to fight back against oppression, through one's words and voice.

Who were your influences on your writing?

As I mentioned before, Gloria Anzaldua deeply influences my work, as does Maria Lugones, and Paulo Freire. They all write about Latin@ themes and liberation from oppression, in their own unique ways, and each one of them gives me wings. ☺

Is there a deeper meaning to your work?

Of course! I'm not sure anyone would work, or write, if there wasn't deep meaning to them that was behind it. The meanings are so deep and complex and emerge from so many aspects of my life, that it's difficult, however, for one to say in a single sentence or two "this is the deeper meaning behind all of my work." My work evolves from my life, and my life is comprised of much joy, much pain, much that has been spoken, much that has yet to be spoken, and all the places where my world interacts with that of others, and forms new unions that form a constant, dynamic flux of meanings. My work and my writing lives in that interplay, that's as much as one can describe the deeper meaning: it is everything I have been, am now, will be, mixed with all the places where others have joined in those states of me, all at once.

Anything else you think that I should know?

I suppose, check out my poem. It says a deep amount about what it is to be a light-skinned Latina, and have to walk in the in-between spaces of what it is to have a Latin@ heart, but be perceived as a "White" person because of the shade of my skin.

<http://labelmelatin.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/The-Other-Color.pdf>