

Valerie Martínez

With Carmella Padilla



And they come: on foot, over the borders,
by train and by car. Their luggage creates
a drum-sound beating over sidewalk
seams; they open their coin purses,
their wallets; they check in.



She sits up, climbs out of bed.
On her way to the kitchen
she wakes them. The black and white
of her uniform streaks from stove
to table to sink. Husband and children
wander into the room, half-awake, sit.
School bags, lunch boxes, half-pairs
of shoes crowd the back door.

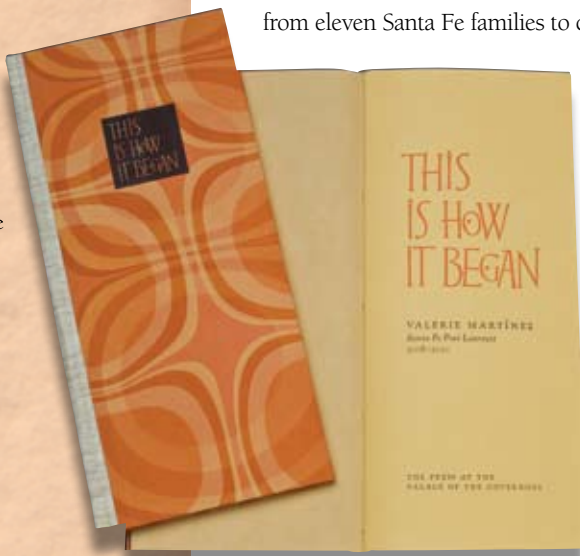
Three stops on the way to work—
day care, engine shop, school—
then to the downtown hotel
where she pulls into a parking space
dabs out the stain on her pant leg,
steps out.



The tourist thanks the waitress
as she lays down the check, asks
Are you from here? “Yes.”
For how long? “Forever.”

And the man looks confused,
half-nods, almost opens his mouth.

“Home” is the final word in Valerie Martínez’s poem, *This Is How It Began*, a layered, meandering word-journey through the creation, history, and multicultural milieu of Santa Fe, the poet’s ancestral home. The poem is showcased in an elegant limited-edition book by the same title that was recently printed and hand bound at The Press at the Palace of the Governors. The book’s release last spring coincided with the end of Martínez’s two-year tenure as Santa Fe poet laureate, a role that took her to schools, senior centers, cafés, libraries, and other city locales to inspire residents to take pleasure in poetry as a way to express and build community. Martínez found her own inspiration in these diverse and often eye-opening interactions, writing a series of poems that pay homage to her hometown to be published this fall in a book, *And They Called It Horizon: Santa Fe Poems*, by Sunstone Press. She also organized the groundbreaking, two-year project, *Lines and Circles: A Celebration of Santa Fe Families*, which united three generations from eleven Santa Fe families to create unique expressions of family history.



Martínez returned to Santa Fe in 2003 after years of studying, writing, teaching, and moving seventeen times throughout the US and to rural Swaziland. Her first book of poetry, *Absence, Luminescent* (Four Way Books, 1999), won the Larry Lewis Prize and was followed by *World to World* (University of Arizona Press, 2004). *A Flock of Scarlet Doves* (Sutton Hoo Press), her translations of works by Uruguayan poet

Delmira Agustini, was published in 2005. Forthcoming this fall is Martínez’s *Each and Her* (University of Arizona Press), which laments the murders of more than 400 women in Juárez, Mexico, since 1993.

Recently married to engineer Paul Resnick of Albuquerque, where the poet now lives part-time, Martínez continues to live, write, and teach in the city where her parents, José Ramón and Exilda, raised her and her five siblings in a one-bath, two-bedroom

Valerie Martínez

Photograph by
Thomas Sayers Ellis.

Opposite:

This Is How It Began, printed and bound at The Press at the Palace of the Governors.



house on San Ildefonso Road. Carmella Padilla sat down with Martínez in a coffee shop not far from that home to talk about the cultural beauty and complexity of Santa Fe—a place where, as Martínez’s work so vividly conveys, you *can* go home again.

Padilla: In *This Is How It Began*, you tell the story of Santa Fe from the time it was, as you write, “smaller than the eye’s dark pupil, smaller than the tiniest yellow idea of seed, and tinier.” Tell me how it began here for you.

Martínez: That’s a hard question. My memories of growing up are of a beautiful family, a very loving family, but I had an early trauma at age seven, so I was also kind of wounded. When I turned thirteen, I turned to writing. But I think very fondly of my very busy, kind of chaotic family, and six children and school and sports and parents who were teachers. We participated in all of the Hispanic family rituals and funerals and gatherings. We belonged to the Elk’s Club. It was kind of a tornado of a household growing up.

Padilla: Had you not been involved in language or reading before thirteen?

Martínez: My mother was an English teacher, but I don’t remember there being a lot of books around my house. I remember my dad used to love *Reader’s Digest*. But my parents were working.

My dad worked about four jobs; he left at six in the morning and came back at ten at night for us to all kneel down and say our prayers before bed. To earn a little extra money, my mom did various jobs. She sold Amway for a while, and she sold *World Book* encyclopedias. I do remember very vividly the two dictionary volumes, *A through L* and *M through Z*, and for whatever reason I decided to read those. I only made it to C, but I do remember that I would sit down in the evenings and read the dictionary.

Padilla: You left Santa Fe after graduating from Santa Fe High School, first to attend Vassar College, then for many experiences. When you returned, were your perceptions of Santa Fe different?

Martínez: There are positive ones and negative ones. To begin to understand what it is to live in one community all your life, like my parents do, and their friends, and many other families in Santa Fe, I really do feel like I’m understanding what it is to be committed to your community for all of your life. So that struck me. Also, the beauty of the landscape, which you just don’t appreciate when you’re younger. I moved so many places in the world and I loved so many landscapes. But when you actually stay in a community a long time, you really start feeling like this is the most beautiful landscape. You sort of grow into it and then it sort of grows onto you. You know how when you see a

INTERVIEW

tree that actually looks like two trees that have somehow merged and are growing together? I feel like that's happening to me, the longer I'm here, the landscape sort of embraces you, and you put down roots. But I'm also disturbed by things in Santa Fe.

Padilla: Why?

Martínez: When we were growing up in Santa Fe, everybody lived in all the neighborhoods, they got along or they didn't get along, but they were mixed. There are some neighborhoods in Santa Fe that are fairly mixed, but there's more segregation—racial, socioeconomic—than I ever remember, that I think makes it harder for Santa Feans to connect.

Once I had an Anglo woman turn to me and say, "You're the only Hispanic person in this town that I socialize with," and it's not like she was at all happy with that, and I realized that other people have similar feelings. A lot of times locals say, "I go to this restaurant, and there's not even one Hispanic person there, so I won't go back." So you've got this interesting mix of people who come here, many of them because it seems diverse, but they are still not meeting people who have lived here all their lives. I don't think that's going to happen so naturally now, unless your social circle is already very diverse. I think it's not just going to change tomorrow, that we need to step away from these invisible boundaries. I think we have work to do.

Padilla: Is that part of why you wanted to be poet laureate?

Martínez: If they choose you, you have this opportunity to do a community project. For the *Lines and Circles* project, I wanted to get some families to meet and know each other over two years. My goal was that each family had to have at least three generations living in the city because, to me, whether you've been here 400 years or 10 years, if you have three generations, I thought that's enough of a commitment to this place. The community got to see that this or that family doesn't exactly fit into the tricultural conception of Santa Fe that gets promoted.

I think we have lots of work to do here in Santa Fe, but really kind of beautiful work about grappling with our identity, about connecting across the boundaries that separate us, trying to figure out how a new generation celebrates its sense of self. The city's 400th anniversary was a good way for us to say, "OK, there's 400, and it was contentious and difficult, but now what? What's going to happen in the next 400 years?"

Padilla: I was reading your contributions to the collaborative online dialogue, "LaChiPo," which seeks to "encourage an aesthetic that resides within, rises from, and reshapes a particular community while rejecting the colonial narrative." Coming from Santa Fe, which promotes its Spanish colonial roots in such a big way, do you feel that the colonial narrative here can be reshaped?

Martínez: Yeah, and I think the way we do it is we offer our hand out and take the hands of the Pueblo people and the other Native people that live here. That's the only way we are going to be able to articulate our own history in a way that encompasses its complexity and encourages us to move beyond the blacks and whites. What the Spaniards did—I have to admit it's in my blood—was absolutely devastating and destructive, it made for the destruction of whole tribes. That is the truth, and the truth is also that this place exists because of the Spanish people. Maybe they should have stayed home, but they didn't, and now we have to acknowledge that.

In the eighties, I had a class with N. Scott Momaday at the University of Arizona, and we were reading his book *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, and on the back of the book it said, "This book nags at the white man's conscience." A young white woman in our class stood up and she was very angry about this, and she said, "I am so tired of being made to feel guilty about what my ancestors did that I don't agree with. I wasn't part of it, I don't agree with it, and I'm really tired of this." What ensued was this really interesting conversation because the class was very mixed with Native students, Hispanic students, black students, white students. At the end, a Navajo woman raised her hand, and she said, and I'm just paraphrasing her, "Do you want to know what Native people want white people to say about this? I think



Photograph by Alejandro Uva.

Valerie Martínez will read her poetry and sign books as part of the **Third Annual New Mexico Women Authors' Book Festival** on Saturday, October 2, at 12:20 PM in the Meem Community Room at the New Mexico History Museum. The festival runs through October 3 in various locations at the History Museum and under tents in the Courtyard of the Palace of the Governors. Over 100 authors will present seminars for writers and readings for the general public. The festival is part of the "New Mexico Creates" program of the Museum of New Mexico Foundation Museum Shops, showcasing the work of New Mexico artists. Music, food, and special presentations from the Palace Print Shop, Santa Fe's Book Arts Group, and the Fray Angélico Chávez Library will contribute to an inspiring celebration of women's writing in New Mexico. For more information, visit newmexicocreates.org.

it's kind of simple. We want you to acknowledge what happened, we want you to say that you're sorry, we want you to not disconnect from your ancestors because in our conception it's simply impossible to do that, and then we want you to walk forward." I always remember that. So that dialogue has to be informed in conversations with the people who were almost destroyed. Otherwise, how do we reshape the way we talk about history? I really think we need this in Santa Fe because so much of the racial tension has to do with the way things are articulated.

Padilla: In writing about the *Lines and Circles* project, you say that the people of Santa Fe, "those that are here to stay," are the city's richest asset. Are you referring mostly to natives of Santa Fe? Where do you see the newcomer fitting in?

Martínez: I have a problem, actually, with the kind of one-upmanship that we hear a lot in Santa Fe, the "Oh, my family's been here 400 years" kind of conversation. I mean, my family has been here for that long, but that does not make me more committed to this place or to its welfare or to its people.

In the *Lines and Circles* project, one family has been here ten years, and they have three generations, and if you hear them talk about Santa Fe, they are as devoted as anyone to the present and future, and they grapple with the past. The asset of the people who are here to stay is that they see all the city's strengths and weaknesses and they want to stay with it. Some of those families have been here forever and some are newcomers. My dad's ancestors came in 1598, my mother's in 1630, and even though that's a long time, we are immigrants. So the whole, "I'm a native" thing, I really don't feel anyone can use that term unless you really are a Native person. The future is who is committed to staying here. That's where we link our elbows.

Padilla: On that note, I love this stanza in *This Is How It Began*:

The tourist thanks the waitress
As she lays down the check, asks
Are you from here? "Yes."
For how long? "Forever."

So, who is this woman?

Martínez: "Forever" could mean she was born and raised here, so she could be white, she could be Hispanic, but in my mind's eye, she is a Native woman or a Pueblo woman. I created the phrase because, if you were born here and have lived here forever, it's becoming an unusual phenomenon because most people are so mobile. So to be able to say, "I was actually born here and am still

working here" is a true statement of forever.

This poem has four languages—English, Spanish, Navajo, and Tewa—so the poem, I hope, is inclusive of the cultures it celebrates. One of the challenges of this poem was I had to deal with the whole history of New Mexico. There are passages in the middle that try to grapple poetically with the bloody history of this place, and that was very hard.

Padilla: But you do that so well. For example, the line "Benevolent place, place of destruction." That says so much.

Martínez: One of the more powerful images for me, emotionally, is in one of the stanzas about conquest, destruction, war, where they have to leave the dead where they are. They can't always bury them, and the animals take them into their mouths, so the dead get taken into the creatures of this place, so even the creatures contain the history. That is a very dark and violent image, but it's also my way to try to talk poetically, metaphorically, about history. When we get to the Santa Fe Trail, or to the waitress at the end, it gets very literal. There's a family getting ready to go to work and school, there's a woman who works at the downtown hotel. I wanted to finish the poem to honor the real people of all backgrounds who work here and live here.

Padilla: In your essay "Diversity, Understanding and Reconciliation in Santa Fe" you write, "I feel the force of history upon me. . . . I feel embarrassed when I answer a Spanish-speaking native in my half-fluent Spanish." I can completely relate to that. How do you feel about the loss of language between our generation and our parents' generation?

Martínez: It's a huge loss. It is something that my generation struggles with; it somehow makes me feel I failed my own family and culture. Young Latino poets and writers are grappling with all these issues very much right now because we have every kind of Latino poetry being written, from experimental to autobiographical narrative. And they're all struggling with fluency or lack of fluency in Spanish, and whether we have to write about topical themes about being Latino. There are people who will say that once you stop writing about your culture, or using Spanish language, then you're no longer Latino. I actually reject that.

Padilla: Do you identify yourself as a Latina poet? A feminist poet?

Martínez: I just say that I'm a person of color because all those terms are complicated for me. I'm a poet who is a feminist and who cares about women's issues. But at the heart of it, I'm a poet. That's my core.

Padilla: Would you say that poetry healed you?

Martínez: Oh, yeah, it saved my life. When I was young, it helped me emotionally deal, it was a way for me to have a voice, it gave me a place in the world. It still does. I love poetry. I want so badly for poetry not to become obsolete. To have fewer and fewer readers of poetry each year, this really disturbs me. I'll do anything to bring poetry to communities because it's a different kind of language. It's not the language of direction, it's the language of indirection. We have plenty of language in our culture that gets at things directly. Poetry preserves a place in language where you can meander, where you can be circular, where you can get at things in a different way.

Poetry forces you to stop. It slows you down. I say this to my students all the time: I don't want poetry to become a language of consumption, something that you can just eat and swallow like you do with your French fries before you leave the parking lot. Even with this long poem, you don't have to sit down and read all the sections at once. A poet doesn't want you to do that, I don't want you to actually get to the end of this poem. To have someone spend fifteen minutes on four lines, that's a really beautiful thing. That means somebody is honoring language.

Padilla: Do you see yourself being in Santa Fe forever?

Martínez: Oh, yeah, I'm not going anywhere. I'm sort of stuck now, sort of sunk in for the long haul. I think there's a yearning once you root yourself in a home somewhere. You want to go back to that. I feel like that about the landscape. I yearn for the open sky, like people yearn for the ocean.

Padilla: It's significant that the last word in your poem is "Home." In every way, it's the final word.

Martínez: Yeah, well, the poem is for everyone who lives here. There are people who, this has been their home much longer than mine, so multiply what I just said about yearning by all their years and days. The poem is mine but it also tries to imagine how other people feel about this place. It comes from two years of talking to people about what this place means to them. It's been informed by everybody who lives here and how much they love this place. ■

This Is How It Began is available in a hand-bound, limited edition for \$100 from The Press at the Palace of the Governors, 505-476-5096 or thomas.leech@state.nm.us. Valerie Martínez's website is www.valeriemartinez.net.

Carmella Padilla is a contributor to *El Palacio* and the author of several books, including *El Rancho de las Golondrinas: Living History in New Mexico's La Ciénega Valley*, published by the Museum of New Mexico Press.