

What We Leave We Carry

Claudia Rivera Echevarría

'I am so used to walking here, doing my trails in England, and everything is by the book. There's arrows; it's impossible to get lost. And sometimes feeling a little bit lost without guidance, just walking without any direction, feels good.'

— Claudia Rivera

Echevarría

[Music]

Presenter: Claudia Rivera Echevarría on how she sometimes unconsciously dials down her Puerto Rican vitality while living in the UK. This is *WritersMosaic, What We Leave We Carry*, the series that tells the true-life stories of migration to the UK.

[Music]

Claudia Rivera Echevarría: My name is Claudia. I was born in Puerto Rico, in San Juan, but I am from Utuado, which is in the mountains, and I lived a very happy

childhood there. So growing up in Utuado was a very safe place to be as a child. I knew everyone, and I had all my family nearby, so it was a very healthy place to be at to be a child. So my mum had a travel agency, and my dad was a lawyer. They're very open-minded parents, and it was fun, very fun growing up with them. So I had a bit of a balance between my mum and my dad. My dad loved roosters and countryside, and my mum was very—she loved the Beatles, she was very active in her community, and she was a very fun person to be around.

[Music]

When I was a bit younger, we used to do many things on the weekends with my parents. We used to get together with their friends. I remember my dad going to the river at night, and we used to have headlamps, and they used to go to collect crabs. And then they get together, and they—everybody cooked, all the families. And I also have memories of my mum with her friends in my house. They—all her lady friends, they play poker at night on Fridays. And so I have all these memories of them having a lot of social life with their family. So I was always part of it, which is something that is different than the way I live my life here in England as a family with my children.

[Music]

My teenage years, well, I was a little bit, not a rebel, but I wanted to explore always a bit more. And living in a town that there was not much to do, it's a very small town, I always had the urge to explore. So I would take the car and just go to another town and just trying to explore other places. And you get your licence, your driving license,

when you're 16, so that was a plus. I would come out of school. I would bring friends home. We would gather at home. I would take the car. We would drive somewhere. We would go and have a passion fruit shake. We would meet up in a place to have to eat something. So there was always—after school, there was always a social gathering with friends. So that was really beautiful. And it's something that, looking back again, I don't see that happening. And sometimes I feel a bit guilty that my children cannot have that.

[Music]

As an adult, I went to study in Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, for three years. Then I went back to Puerto Rico, and I finished university there. And then from there, I moved to South Korea. After I graduated university, I wanted to travel and do something, so I went to South Korea to teach English for two years. After Korea, I went back to Puerto Rico to study law. And after I graduated, I started my career there. And then I married a British man that moved to Puerto Rico with me that I met in Korea. So we started—we settled back in Puerto Rico.

[Music]

He was not happy there. He was not—feeling after six years he wanted to return to the UK. And we moved. I had no expectations. He was unhappy after all those years, so we decided—he decided to move, and I came with a daughter that was nine months old. And we moved to Derby. He went before and he settled in Derby. He had a job offer, and he started working, and I moved five months after with my

daughter. So my transition was finishing leaving my job, leaving everything behind, and starting a new life. But like I said, I really didn't have any expectation. It's like, *okay, we move, and we start from scratch*, but without thinking much of what was going to happen.

[Music]

I didn't bring much. I had a few things that we sent by boat. And we moved to a very —to Derbyshire, which is kind of in the countryside. And I came as a mum. And Derby was a very beautiful place, but I was very secluded. I didn't—I heard someone in Spanish, speaking in Spanish, and I would say, 'Hello! Hi!' And they were looking at me like, *okay*. I'll get very excited when I heard someone that was from another country. And I met a few people from other Latin American countries, from Venezuela, from Costa Rica, and they became my friends. But there was not a big community. And because I was by myself there, I didn't have a job when I came, so I was just in my house with my baby daughter. So it was very difficult because from being—from coming from Puerto Rico with a job, with family around, with friends, with everything around me that was very familiar and very good, I was happy back home, very happy, it was like, *okay, this is it*. And I remember having the pushchair, and I was walking, and my hands were completely frozen, and I couldn't move my hands. And it was March when I moved, and it was very foggy. I was in the morning, and I said [exhales]. I was pushing the pushchair, thinking, *okay, maybe there is a monster is coming out of this fog* [laughs], *but the sun will shine tomorrow*. But the days kept passing, and there was no sunshine.

[Music]

I like to explore, so as soon as we got there, we went exploring to different sites. So it is a very beautiful—because there is a little bit of a mountain, given that England is very flat. So there were a few, for me, mountains, and that got me excited because it remind me of my hometown. So I went to a few hikes, and there is a place called Matlock, and it's really beautiful. And it was very, very pretty, very, very green, very nice. And then the summer came, and it was completely beautiful because one of the first things I remember moving to England, I went to visit a friend, and she had this British friend that was married to a man from Argentina. And she offered me—this is my first impression of something that I really enjoy, she offered me this juice, and it was an elderflower cordial. And I said, 'Wow, that's so exotic. I love this taste.' So she showed me the flowers, and it was the elderflowers. And that first taste of something floral would be, for me, like having a passion fruit back home. So that was my first sensorial thing that I felt, *oh, this is nice*. And it was spring, and everything was blooming, and everything started feeling a bit more lively.

[Music]

I met someone that is one of my best friends from here. She is from—she's English, but she was born in Kenya from British parents, and she spoke Spanish. That was my first friend, and her daughter was the same age as mine, so we became friends. And I immediately invited her over, and it was that bonding where you bring someone to your house, and we became very close. And we would talk about the same things, like she felt that even though she moved to England when she was 10,

she had the same thing of belonging. She told me, 'I have been trying to connect with the earth here, going for walks.' Actually, she does barefooting walks. And she's saying she's trying to connect. She doesn't like the weather as well; it's too cold. And I felt the same way. So we start doing lots of walks. And that's how, in Derby, I started connecting with things to do around nature, so walks, learning about flower, learning about trees, and doing all these things outdoors.

[Music]

Two years after I moved to Derby, I had my second child. The first thing I missed was the weather, and the second thing I missed when I had my child was my family around. And when you have a new child in your life, you need community, you need family around. And I felt very lonely because I didn't have any of that, even though my mum came to be with me, but she had to go after. I was a full-time mum with both of them, a baby and a three-year-old. I spoke to them in Spanish. I had my traditions, so we celebrate Three Kings Day. I celebrated everything that is celebrated here, so the tooth fairy, but I had also the Ratón Pérez, so I had everything double, to the point that some of my friends were like, 'Why do you celebrate so many things? Because my children are asking why the three kings are not coming home and why you have all these things.' I said, 'Because I celebrate my traditions as well.' It was important to have the custom because they are part of who I am, so it came naturally. I have my children, and I do what I've learned all my life. And those traditions, I have very good memories of them, and I wanted to share them with my own children.

I didn't feel that I belong in Derby. It was a nice place to start, but there was nothing around. There was nothing to do, really. We tried going everywhere on the weekends, but there were no places to go to feel more connected with other things. And I miss that. I miss a sense of community. So I thought London would be a place that I could feel more at home. We settled in South West London. My first impression, I made friends very quickly. I met people from different places. I think the second day I went to one of these, again, playgroups for mums, I met some of the people that still have become my friends. So it was quick. I didn't feel once that I didn't belong. It was fast.

Also, because I've lived in South Korea, we moved to a place that there was a Korean community, so that felt exciting to have something so close that meant something for me. I was always meeting people, and I felt that I had a community around. The people that I've met in all these groups, they were from Peru, Argentina, Italy, France, Iran, Egypt, from different parts of the world.

[Music]

At home, I would cook for them Puerto Rican food. I would play some children's music in Spanish. I would do the traditions, like birthday parties. I would do it the way we do it back home with a piñata. I would do the parties, and they were like if I was living back home but here. I would have my family, always. We were all very close, so they came once a year, and I would always go to Puerto Rico every year. So we had that connection always there, like twice a year we would be connected to my family. Going back always reminded me who I am. So I always recharge to come

back again. Usually when I go in December, the first thing, I love to feel the humidity as soon as I come. The door opens at the airport, and I love the feeling of the humidity in my face, like [sighs] I'm home, that warm. And also, having my first shower because the water there is very soft, so you come out of the shower, and it's like you've put moisturizer in your face. So those things I've never noticed until I started going to Puerto Rico. Very simple things like that.

[Music]

I feel when I go back that I don't need to follow anything in particular. It's very freedom of movement. So there is no planning. I feel nobody's planning anything like in advance of a month before or play days or—everything flows naturally. You meet people, you make the plan at the moment. It's very free. It feels that nothing is on the calendar. In the UK, if you don't plan in advance, and you don't have it in the calendar, and you tell the person you want to see—I have friends that we plan two months in advance. 'When is the next time we're going to see each other?', and we put it on the calendar. If I do that in Puerto Rico, they say, 'I'll be dead by then. How can we plan in advance?' So that natural thing of planning on the go, I kind of miss it. For example, last Christmas, I went home, and I visited this new place. It's a beautiful river in my hometown. And it was wonderful not to have signs to where to go. So it was a trail that you go into these beautiful caves, and then you end up in this river, but you have to kind of get lost. And I am so used to walking here, doing my trails in England, and everything is by the book. There's arrows; it's impossible to get lost. And sometimes feeling a little bit lost without guidance, just walking without any direction, feels good, and I miss that part. And I feel like that at home. I'm

driving, and there's no cameras, so you have to use your common sense, not necessarily it always is happening, but it feels natural to be doing that without so many things that when I'm driving in England, I'm like, *a yellow junction, the camera*. This—I feel like everything it's—everybody's watching you, and if you do not comply with everything, you're going to have your ticket on the post, you're going—and things work because everything is in place, and it's great, but at the same time, there is a part that I miss sometimes just going some place that it's basic, and it still works. It's more relaxed.

[Music]

When I go back home, there are things that I'm used to the British way that I kind of miss. For example, when I am walking, I walk here in London, I walk, I go to the park, and I get lost, and I don't feel—I'm always watching around because I'm walking by myself, but I feel safe. So it's nice to be able to do that and feel safe. In Puerto Rico, it's a bit more difficult to feel that safe on your own to just be wandering around.

[Music]

This summer, I just came back from Puerto Rico, and they start school there in August. So I have my nieces, and I took them. They wanted me to take them to their school, and they were very happy, so I took them in the morning, and I went with my son, he's 13. And we went to their school, and he was shocked about the dynamics of going into the school. We got out of the car, everybody was hugging each other.

'Hello. Good morning', but with hugs. We go inside the school, and then you can take your child to the classroom. My son was like, 'Wow, you can go inside.' Yeah, so the teachers came to say hello to everyone. Everyone was hugging each other. And I thought, *is this normal? I forgot about this way.* We both were like, 'Wow, that is amazing.' In the UK, it's very different. When you go to do the school drop-off, everybody's in a rush. So you go to the school, and everybody's, not running, but in a rush to take their train, to go to work, to do all the things, and—except a few moms that stay talking. But the children themselves, there is a lack of touch. And I don't do the kissing anymore because I think it was too much here. Every time you see someone, so I don't do that. But I—while I was visiting now, it felt good. And I have forgotten about how nice it feels and how normal it feels to just hug people and say—every single day to say good morning to everyone with a hug.

Being polite, it's a very British thing, which is a very nice thing. But sometimes it feels like it's not natural for everything to say sorry for everything, even if you don't mean it. I've always had like, *is that real or is not real? Or is it just like when you say good morning, that it comes naturally?* And sometimes the way I say things is just the way I'm feeling them. And it's not a reaction. It's just—if I see something that I don't like, I say it like, 'Oh, I don't like that.' And it feels like here, people tend to repress that. But it will come later, maybe in another way that you feel like, *okay, but I didn't read that.*

I don't think British people have a specific impression of Puerto Ricans because I always have to explain literally where in the map we are. We get confused with Costa Rica, always. So I have to always explain what a Puerto Rican woman is. 'Oh, that's very exotic.' [Laughs] And they always ask me, 'What are you doing here?'

We are very expressive. The Puerto Rican culture is a very expressive culture. We say exactly how we're feeling, and it's not necessarily a reaction. It just—it comes with a natural passion. And sometimes, living here, it feels that, unintentionally, you start suppressing those feelings. And then when I go back home, and I see that everybody's expressing themselves in a very normal way, I say like, 'Wow, so much passion, which I have inside of me, but I have started to adjust with the rules over here that you are not that loud or you're not—' And it's not even loud, you're not that lively, you're not that—'Ah, it's so good to see you!' [inaudible] That passion is a normal and it's a beautiful thing, and it seems like it goes—like it's getting quieter as you live here.

Because of the nature of where we live, chaos is part—you have to get used to that because it happens quite often. And here, we see things like a hurricane. So you are trapped in your car, and something is flooded. So people just park their cars, and you ask someone else, 'Hey, what's going on?' You talk to other people. People just lay down quietly, just waiting, because it's a normal thing. I have been here stuck in traffic, and nobody is being nice to each other. Because there's always a way that everything moves according to the rules. When something little happens, [exclaims], everybody gets really angry. It's like anger. I feel that there is a lot of anger that comes from things that are not that chaotic. It's not chaos. It's just something that didn't work out. Everything has been thought about. Everything. If there are constructions on the road, there is a sign telling you, which is very helpful, 'There is constructions ahead, be prepared.' They are preparing you for everything. But in life,

there are things that come naturally and can be chaos. And living in Puerto Rico, it's a natural way to deal with those things without anger.

When I think of Puerto Rico, I think of a sound. And the sound, for me, is the water, it's the coquí, it's the loud music every now and then, it's the people on the streets, it's sounds of the people, it's sounds of nature. That's for me, when I think of Puerto Rico, and actually when I go, I have a few sounds that I record on my phone because they're very beautiful. And I know when I'm having my moments in the winter, I play them, and it's a good way to connect.

For me, the sensory thing that I enjoy in the UK are the flowers. I love the gardens. I love flowers. I love the nature. And the green in England, it's a very different green than in Puerto Rico. In Puerto Rico, the green is lush green. It's that tropical green that I have always been used to. And the green in the UK, it's very—it's a bright green. I have made it my home, [music] but I don't want to live here forever. I am hoping to return in a few years.

I have learned to enjoy every single day when the sun is out. The first years I used to go back, usually for Christmas, every day I was waking up early telling my family, [claps] 'Let's go out. Let's go.' And they're like, 'Relax, it's going to be like this every single day.' So for me, they were taking for granted how beautiful and sunny and blue skies were, and that happens every day. So I have learned here that when I see—I look at the weather. That is something—okay, something very—that I feel very British is that I look at the weather every single day. It's normal for me. I look, and I plan ahead. I plan my day according to the weather.

[Music]

Presenter: Claudia Rivera Echevarría was talking to Amanda Vilanova.

[Music]

A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

© Claudia Rivera Echevarría