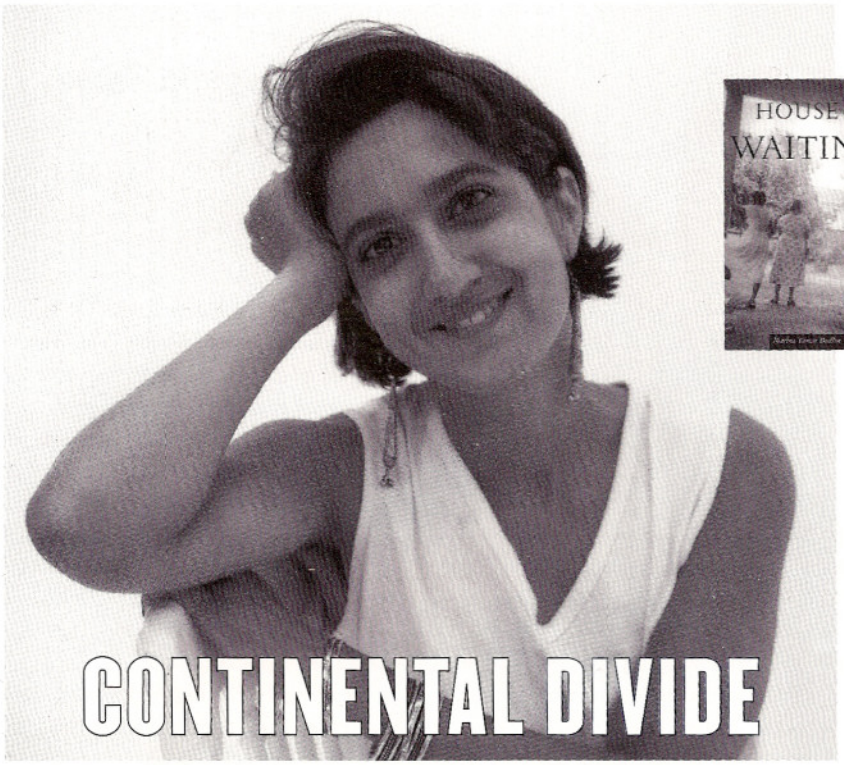

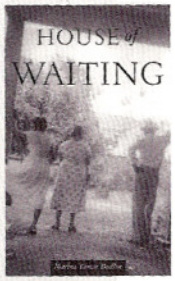

House of Waiting
by Marina Tamar Budhos
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CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

Marina Tamar Budhos doesn't flinch from epic motifs—family, country, and all that comes between. Contributing Editor Luis H. Francia catches up with the author of *House of Waiting* in this excerpt from a recent interview.

In Marina Tamar Budhos' debut novel *House of Waiting*, Sarah, the adopted daughter of New York Jewish émigrés, meets and marries Roland, an Indian from Guyana. From there, the revelations of immigrant experience—filled with ambivalent irony and the inflections of sun-drenched speech—explode. Set in 1950s America, the work resonates eloquently with the themes of a diasporic literature: racism, displacement, utopian longings. Budhos' subtle lyricism makes Sarah and Roland, modeled on her parents, into vibrant and memorable creations.

Q: *In your novel there's an awareness of how different streams of migration have changed our ideas of home.*

A: What I wanted to write about was the seeds, the first generation, the beginnings of a postcolonial world. The way people think about the 1950s in America—conformity, home, the suburbs—I wanted to push against that. There was a group of people who were small, but they were the beginning of something, for whom all those "givens" about America were not givens.

Q: *Sarah is the classic American who believes that you should have whatever you want. Her émigré mother tells her otherwise. And of course this is one of the quintessential immigrant conflicts.*

A: It goes back to the stories I heard, that my grandparents were very Old World and didn't like America, the values. I even saw the same thing mirrored in my father, also an immigrant: having real misgivings about American values, about losing the past. Even though outwardly I've embraced a lot of the "can-do" spirit of America, I was always interested in writing from a place where you don't forget the stream that flowed into you....

Q: *One of the things I like about the novel is that racism is recognized but muted; it's part of the milieu.*

A: Race is part of the atmosphere we all breathe in. [Racism] has become almost fetishized, trendy; you do it in this confrontational, flat way. I'm interested in looking at the textures and nuances of daily life and psychological life and how they leak into that experience. I don't like unsubtle things. I also don't think it's as accurate to the experience. I wanted to capture all those things that I particularly was observant of as a child, when [we] would walk into a diner, [we'd] feel the tension. People would stiffen and look at us and stare.

Q: *Your father was a strong influence. Did he talk to you about where he came from?*

A: He was not verbal. This is very true of the men of that generation, where they didn't talk about the experience of race or "outsideness," but it was in them.

It was in the rage that burst forth now and then. It was in their sense of not always feeling comfortable in a room when they walked in. So I learned how to read my father at an early age. Sometimes he would talk and it would come out. A charming kind of recollection, and yet there was a lot of pain that he experienced.

Q: *You've captured the lilt, the cadences of their Indian Caribbean speech. Was that through your father?*

A: The voices were very easy. The first ten years of my life, our house was peopled with Guyanese and Indians walking about. It was not very American. By the time I was a teenag-

er, that had ebbed away. But my earliest memories were of those people. And I think they fascinated me more than anything. I just remember being scooped up by all these men, and they were all like uncles. Those very early years were populated by those cadences. So, yes, it was my father, but it was definitely all of his friends. They were always chatting as if there was a veranda everywhere. And waiting for their *roti* to appear.... [laughs]

Q: *What about your sense of Guyana, since you'd never been there? What did you draw upon?*

A: It's a site of imagination for me. I don't know if it's because it was through my father, hearing the stories. I really feel as if I'd been there. Some would say that's the way I feel diasporic. There's this far-off place that's central to your psyche, and yet it's inaccessible. And people don't understand when you say, "Yes, I am connected to this place." But there are other ways by which we can know a place. I devoured anything I could read on Guyana. I had the photographs, the stories, and I couldn't get enough of it.

Q: *Roland disappears for a while from the novel. What made you decide not to include a section where we see him in Guyana?*

They were always chatting as if there was a veranda everywhere.

A: I played around with that in earlier drafts, and it never seemed true to the book because the book is so much about Sarah's arc. The heart of the book also deals with his absence, and how do we write about absence? Because the book is about waiting, about how women experience politics so often. The men are off in the middle of the action; [women] learn of things indirectly. Sarah has to read all the signals. And since [the novel] is about waiting, about her understanding the marriage and the world she's in, I realized I had to wrestle with Roland as an absence.

Q: *Roland is caught in the place many immigrants are caught. They've tasted part of the American dream but see how bitter it can be. They go back to their homelands but are also disillusioned there. Was that true of your father as well?*

A: He was very bitter about home. The immigrant story is always about coming over and dealing with staying here. The reality is that the diaspora is a lot more back-and-forth; it's never settled. We're much more fluid and more uneasy with our choices than we've explored in our literature. It's not a linear trajectory, assimilation. It's a constant flux. All those characters are in some way dealing with that unrest. ■