



## **Publishing Latino Culture: Marketing Race in the American Publishing Industry**

**Alejandra Gaeta  
Whittier College  
USA**

“How a society orders its bookshelves is as telling as the books a society writes and reads.” (Brown 11)

“Oh it’s going to be one of those,” says Alex Espinoza, author of *Still Water Saints*, paraphrasing of the many responses he remembers receiving from people when discussing his books. Espinoza recounts some of the reactions he received when people learned that the plot of his book centers around the lives of residents in Agua Mansa, (a small town east of Los Angeles) focusing on their interactions with Perla, the owner of a botanica in a small strip mall. Espinoza defends his protagonist when he explains that, “Perla’s not a miracle healer, it’s just something she fell into. She’s running a business like anybody else. There’s not anything magical about it.” He goes on to say how people are still insistent, his tone growing in frustration as he describes how many of his interviewers repeated comments like “your book reminds me of *Cien Años*, have you read Marquez? Oh I love the *House on Mango Street* and it reminded me of this.” Espinoza’s voice, as he recounts this to me, clearly reflects the pressure he feels from the way in which his own work is compared to his predecessors. It can be intensely limiting to work inside the constraints created by the way that the mainstream public has come to understand the very writers that he admires.

Espinoza’s experiences with the way both the press and the public perceive his work is tied to problems within the American publishing industry about race, which reflect those of American society at large. The concept of race in the United States is structured around categorization, individuals need to be identified as a specific category (white, black, Hispanic, etc.) exemplified by the options on the Census questionnaire. Sometimes this means forcing



people to fit into a single category even if they identify with more than one race/ethnicity/culture. This categorization of writers is justified by the marketing departments of many of the larger publishing houses as a way to successfully market a writer's work. Larger publishing houses structure their marketing strategies by targeting a specific group of people that they believe would be the most interested in a specific author's work. Usually this is based on an age range and specific gender that the text is believed to be most appropriate for. When the author is not white, a major aspect that the publisher looks to is the author's ethnicity as it is used to determine which ethnic group they are supposed to be writing for. A writer identified as Latino then would be marketed towards a Latino market. In order to successfully market such an author (or really any author that is non-white) these publishing companies base their criteria for accepting an author on their ability to fit within a clear-cut racial category looking at their characters, the setting, the storyline and the themes in their works. This creates a conflict when an author's racial identity is not clear enough to be convincingly "authentic" according to the stereotypes that the marketing departments of publishing houses ascribe to.

Racial authenticity has become a guiding force in publishers' marketing decisions. This focus on racial authenticity is problematic for several reasons. It both oversimplifies and perpetuates stereotypes while reducing the number of writers to a few "representative" voices. There are major differences in culture, history and physical appearance when it comes to the people of Latin America and their descendants. The gross oversimplification of their identity into the term Latino is illustrated clearly when it comes to the way it is used as part of the marketing strategies for the publishing industry. The preconceived notion is that when a person of color writes, their non-white identity constrains them to their racial perspective. Latino means someone either born or raised in the United States who has a Latin American heritage. The perception is that while Latino authors can authentically be representative of the entire Latino population, they are incapable of exploring the perspectives of non-Latinos.



Thus Latinos are more likely to be published when they produce works with themes and stories pertaining to Latino experiences. Despite strong ties to the U.S., Latinos are not seen as American. The term "American" in the United States essentially means White while anyone non-White needs the clarification of a hyphen or in the case of Latinos, a completely separate word (Golash-Boza 28).

Author and professor Nelly Rosario delved deeper into this issue when she explained, "That the label exists at all means there aren't enough of us out there. The label is reflective of the larger absence of Latinas in the public intellectual imagination. So being called 'American writer' or 'Russian writer' is not as cringe-inducing to those writers as it would be to writers already on the margins by virtue of ethnicity. The white male writer is the default, and his books have the luxury of being categorized by subject matter rather than 'ethnicity.'" The label that a published author is given becomes a defining factor for who they are perceived to be to their audience. Rosario's quote is an example of how the label of Latina author creates marginalization, forcing her and other authors into a category of "Other." Latina/o authors are technically American authors, not only because many are actually born in the United States but also because many choose to write in English. However, the fact that ethnic American authors are given a different category essentially marks them as foreigners within their own country as critic Rafael Pérez-Torres argues, "to employ the terms Hispanic, Latino, and Chicano as signifiers of ethnic otherness (no matter how fluidly or dynamically conceived) empties them of agency and historical meaning" (545). That label of Latino/Hispanic means that those authors will be put on their own separate shelf while the White American authors will have the privilege of being a part of the larger Fiction section. This leads to such questions as to what really connects Latina/o authors, is it their ethnicity and/or background? Is it that they write about Latina/o characters and so share the same subject matter? What happens then, when a Latina/o author writes something not about Latina/o culture,



characters or themes, do they still belong on the same shelf with other Latina/o authors?

This does not mean that the term Latino has a completely bad connotation. As an identifying umbrella term it works to clarify a sub categorical group of the United States' population that do have similarities that tie them together. The Latino population of the United States has been publishing in this country since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but the existence of a Latino literary tradition as we understand it today can be traced back to the sudden flurry of artistic production of the Chicano Movement that began in the 1960s (Kanellos 687). The movement itself was driven politically and at its core it called for a unification of the Chicano population as in his article, "Good-Bye Revolution-Hello Cultural Mystique: Quinto Sol Publications and Chicano Literary Nationalism," Professor Dennis Lopez explains: "Movimiento intellectuals, educators, and artists needed to define and speak for the Chicano community, specifically by developing alternative analytical frameworks with which to study and assess the social and economic problems plaguing Mexican Americans, as well as by crafting more genuine literary and artistic representations of Chicana/o life and culture" (187). There were several important aspects of this political movement ranging from, self-identifying Chicano students staging walkouts in many major cities to protest their school conditions, migrant workers striking and calling for boycotts of major fruit companies in order to gain the right to unionize. Student groups such as Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MECha), United Mexican American Students (UMAS) and more developed, empowering Mexican American youth to join together in order to protest institutional racism that kept them from gaining access to college. The work of these students and many teachers would allow for the foundation for the first departments of Chicano studies as well as many classes focused on the history, literature and culture of Chicanos.

The Chicano Movement celebrated and encouraged a wave of Chicano artistic production. The goal was to fight against the negative stereotypes



attributed to Chicanos, and the movement fed the enthusiasm in producing and distributing these works. There was a strong motivation to forge a new, positive identity that clearly upheld traditional Mexican values. The founding of Mexican American focused literary magazines as well as small presses during the movement gave Chicano writers new outlets for publication. This historical moment also created a certain pressure on picking a filtering system that kept certain voices from tarnishing the new identity being created. The missions of these new magazines and publishing presses clearly outlined the types of works they wanted to distribute to their audiences as Professor Dennis Lopez articulates when writing about one of the many Chicano presses that grew out of the movement. Lopez argues, "Without a doubt, the editorial work and print record of *Quinto Sol* anchored a particular rhetorical image of the Chicano-male, heteronormative, traditional-to a cultural nationalist program for self-definition and self-determination" (200).

The authors writing during the 1960's and 70's would soon become the biggest names in the newly created category of Chicano literature. Chicano authors such as Rudolfo Anaya and Tomas Rivera would become the writers studied in classes reading Chicano literature, becoming big names that even now, still make up a large part of the Latino literary canon. This canon continues to be defined by its emphasis on themes of coming of age, of memoirs, culture clashing, generational differences, migrant stories, and bilingual experiences because these stories aligned with the ideals of the movement and generally shone a positive light on the Chicano identity. These themes and the subject matter of these Chicano works were a success in the sense that the Chicano voice was able to find representation in the literary world. Yet since the late 1960's to the present time, this has become the only way that Latino literature can be understood.

During the heyday of the Chicano movement, the texts that fell within those parameters were revolutionary because Latino voices were not a part of the mainstream media. The Latino voice was especially blatantly missing in



academia, and one major area of impact for the influential writers of the Chicano movement was the universities. This great achievement would only become problematic when it became the only way that Latino voices would get to be a part of the literary discourse inside academia as well as in commercial book publishing. The major goal was to combat the negative stereotyping of Chicanos as illiterate, without history, inferior, lazy and “sleeping under a cactus” (López 196). And in doing so, the movement inadvertently created new stereotypes, ones which would come to limit what Chicano as well as Latino literature could be to the larger American audience. This again illustrates transforming of Latino literature into an oversimplified category that produces a very specific stereotype of Latino experiences.

The immediate impact of the civil rights, women’s rights, and the Chicano movement created a new emphasis on celebrating diversity as well as an increasing attention to texts by Chicano writers. These movements laid the groundwork for the success of Sandra Cisneros in the late 80s when her most well known work was published by Arte Público Press, and its founder, Dr. Nicolás Kanellos. Kanellos was active during the Chicano Movement, first founding the magazine *Revista Chicana-Riqueña* which later became *The Americas Review*. In 1979 he created Arte Publico Press and in 1989 , he published the extremely successful book, *The House on Mango Street*. It successfully crossed over into mainstream American culture, in large part because of the attention Cisneros began to receive from the universities. Cisneros’ work has reached the highest level of attention, becoming easily the most well known work by a Chicana. This achievement was celebrated by Chicanas/os as well as the marketing departments of many publishing houses as Cisneros’ success opened their eyes up to a new marketing category. This also seemed to be a sign that the call for diversification in systems such as higher education and American society at large, was succeeding at last.

Cisneros’ successful crossover into the American mainstream would create the unforeseen consequence for Chicana/o and Latina/o writers would



be that they would then be writing in the shadow of figures such as Cisneros. The work produced by writers like Sandra Cisneros, Rudolfo Anaya and more were so successful that mainstream publishers began to attempt to replicate that success with the works of new Latino authors. This meant that Latino literature would have a “recipe for success,” publishers believing that wider American audiences would only purchase new works that resembled the older established ones. The submissions of Latino writers were meant to become the next Cisneros, or the next Anaya. For Latina/o authors, breaking into the mainstream literary world is attempting to balance between producing original work while also writing what can be recognized as Latina/o literature by its close comparison to famous, past works such as those of Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, and Rolando Hinojosa.

A perfect example is the experience of Professor Michael Jaime-Becerra, who right out of graduate school set out to publish his first book, *Every Night is Ladies' Night* in the early 2000s. He sent out his manuscript with hard copy letters and he grew more and more depressed as he began receiving rejection after rejection. “The replies were basically the same,” he tells me with a wry grin. “They would tell me that the stories are great but not like other stories they read. Basically they’re brown, but not brown enough.” What these editors were telling Jaime-Becerra is that his work did not resemble the established works of Latino authors closely enough, giving them some room to doubt that Latino audiences would not receive his work as well because it was not like the works they had read before. Now with another book under his belt, Jaime-Becerra chuckles drily as he recounts his years of despair because of the continual rejections. The editors just kept telling him that his writing was great but not similar enough to other publications so essentially they were telling him that they didn’t know how they could go about marketing the work. The belief that these publishing houses were holding to is that a Latino writer’s work needs to be in line with the types of characteristics expected of Latino



books, they have to be instantly recognizable as a Latino work or else it is unclear who the publisher is able to market the work towards.

Author Alex Espinoza explained how he felt this pressure for his book to be labeled with the theme of magical realism. This literary method stemmed from the Latin American literary boom of the 1960s and is most commonly linked with the key work of author, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, titled *Cien Años de Soledad* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). The issue Alex Espinoza faces with the labeling of his work as a magical realist text is attributed to the fact that the wider public is not regularly exposed to work like his in the United States so the level of understanding when it comes to what “magical realism” means is limited. Magical realism is attributed “Latin American” and therefore is foreign to an American audience. This lack of exposure to what is considered “foreign” literature is a problem of access, of distribution because then most people only receive a simplified understanding of what it means to be considered a Latin American or Latino text. This is a larger problem with the lack of access and distribution of cultural capital through systems such as the American publishing industry as well as universities. Professor John Guillory deals with academia directly in his book, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), in which he argues that the issue with diversification of the English literary canon is not simply solved by adding or subtracting to the canon itself within the university. Rather, the issue to be analyzed is how universities are the gatekeepers of cultural production.

Guillory argues that “The educational institution performs the social function of systematically regulating the practices of reading and writing by governing access to the means of literary production as well as to the means of consumption (the knowledge required to read historical works)” (Guillory 19). His argument points out that a major problem is that we tend to look at literature as a representative entity, rather than the way that institutions such as schools are formulated to live up to the standards of the higher classes. The issue with looking at certain literature as representative of a group is that it does not





accurately portray that group. The group itself does not have a singular, static image of themselves and the literature produced by them is their response to a cultural struggle, not as a mirror to reflect their experiences. Rather it is the universities themselves that have issues with exclusion, setting apart literature as an exclusive activity as well restricting access to literature as cultural capital overall (Guillory 18). It is clear that historically, Latino literature gained a strong foothold in the American publishing industry because it was encouraged at the university level. The support of the established institution of the university gave Latino literature a much larger audience that would allow them to have a solid market to ensure the publishing of such texts would be a monetary success.

Expanding Guillory's argument more broadly with the concept of mainstream literature illustrates how larger publishing houses act as regulators of "cultural capital" in addition to winning prizes, being reviewed favorably in national newspapers (and other publications). These are all the various methods in which books gain prestige and larger public attention thereby creating a public presence for specific books and authors. For example, having an author's book reviewed by the New York Times and even better, having it make it on to the New York Times' Bestseller's List is a crowning achievement not only for the author but the publishing company as well. Winning prizes and gaining attention from the media is a way that an author's work will be more widely distributed, so that access to cultural capital by the American population as a whole is regulated by these larger, national institutions. If a book by a Latino author is reviewed favorably and gains prizes primarily for being compared to *The House on Mango Street*, for example, then the larger American audience would understand that that is the only reason it is a great piece of literature. The issue with these practices is that Latino works are still barely in existence according to the low numbers represented throughout these media outputs. This is illustrated by writer and critic Roxane Gay, in an article she wrote for The Rumpus, an online magazine. In this article she explains that after seeing the numbers of women writers reviewed by the New York Times in



a study done by VIDA, she was interested in looking at where things stood in relation to race. So in 2012 she decided to take it upon herself to count the number of authors reviewed by the New York Times in 2011 and categorize them by race.

We looked at 742 books reviewed, across all genres. Of those 742, 655 were written by Caucasian authors (1 transgender writer, 437 men, and 217 women). Thirty-one were written by Africans or African Americans (21 men, 10 women), 9 were written by Hispanic authors (8 men, 1 woman), 33 by Asian, Asian-American or South Asian writers (19 men, 14 women), 8 by Middle Eastern writers (5 men, 3 women) and 6 were books written by writers whose racial background we were simply unable to identify.

Gay writes, "The numbers are depressing but I cannot say I am shocked. The numbers reflect the overall trend in publishing where the majority of books published are written by white writers." The lack of diversity in the numbers of this one publication demonstrate the larger issue at hand because they do not in any way represent the diversity of the national population. In the New York Times alone, it is clear that there are some disparities when it comes to how literature produced by persons of color is received by the media so that it then reflects on the way that the larger American population will also react to books written by non-White authors. The question is then how to address this problem and how does the label of Latino literature fit into this issue? Is it that the public is only able to appreciate the work of Latino authors if they are able to relate it to the previous works that managed to initially break strongly into the world of American literature?

Author and Professor Sylvia Sellers-Garcia at Boston College demonstrates the enormity of these issues with her own answer who posed the same broad questions. She spoke openly over the phone about this issue of labeling authors as Latino and her own thought process reflects the overall difficulty in understanding how it came to be. She said, "I have two strong feelings about it...one I'm not sure where the push for that comes from. Publishing or readership? There's a kind of back and forth because publishers



think they are responding to what readers want. Difficult to tell where the origin point is. I do feel a frequent sense of frustration talking to readers, to ordinary people about what they read. There is a narrowness of narrative. Second point I think that to reduce any subgroups to a single narrative...is not representative, not interesting. This is where my frustration comes from. More of we can be doing better, providing far more interesting writing. Fiction could be offering more..." As the biggest and oldest Latino publisher in the United States, Arte Público Press, has made it their mission to increase the presence of Latinas/os in the American publishing industry. Dr. Nicolás Kanellos, the founder of the press, has worked since 1979 to get Latina/o works out on the market as the press' great successes with Sandra Cisneros, Victor Villaseñor and Rolando Hinojosa, all of which has illustrated the enormity of influence that this small press has come to attain over the years. He has also been committed to recovering and digitizing works written by Latina/os in the United States in decades past as part of the "Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage" project. This digital archives project is revolutionary in the sense that it fills in an unknown history, which directly challenges the conception that the lack of early Latina/o authors in the American literary canon was simply because there were not any at all. Kanellos continues on this project with the support of students as the press is connected to the larger institution of the University of Houston. This connection to an institution of higher education is key as in a personal interview, Kanellos recounted the rocky path he experienced at the very beginning when founding his publishing press, "I drove to these events with books in my trunk," he tells me with a smile on his face. Kanellos emphasizes the connection to academia as creating a strong foundation for the continuing success of Arte Público Press, as the books that are published through them are in large part answering the demand made by educational institutions. Today, Arte Público remains a separate, non-profit but retains a strong connection to the University of Houston as it is housed in university owned property.



Despite its decade long history, Arte Público continues to remain a smaller publishing house, only printing up to 30 books a year to the thousands of submissions they actually receive. As the Executive Editor of Arte Público, Dr. Gabriela Ventura Baeza explained how digital platforms are the way that the Press is looking to gain wider audiences for Latina/o authors. "There are books that we know will not do as well in print...they won't sell enough to really make a profit, you know," Baeza explains how the Press is looking towards publishing ebooks in order to increase the amount of texts that Arte Público is able to output. The cost of physically printing a book is expensive, as both Kanellos and Baeza pointed out in separate interviews, thus the growth in popularity of ebooks works towards the benefits of both the press and the authors who may not have been published otherwise.

The positive outlook that many Latina/o authors and the staff at Arte Público Press expressed when I asked them these difficult questions about Latina/o literature gives a light at the end of the tunnel. In Daniel José Older's recent article on the popular website Buzzfeed, "Diversity is Not Enough: Race, Power, Publishing," he argues that there is a need to look at how the publishing industry is structure to solve the major problem of lack of diversity in American publishing as a whole. This issue is not solely a problem when it comes to Latina/o literature as Older's article exemplifies but a major step forward is that this is an issue that is coming more and more into the light.

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The experience of author Reyna Grande had when she was invited to participate in an international writers' conference in South Korea sheds some light on a possible outcome in a digital future. She accepted excitedly when offered her invitation and in the back of her mind she began wondering if she had been asked as a representative of the United States or maybe Mexico. When she arrived at the event, she was handed a packet of papers and it



included a list of all the authors attending with the country they were representing next to their names. Reyna scanned down the list to find her name, right next to which it stated in parentheses, "Latino." Confused, she asked someone in charge of the event why she had not been given a country, the U.S. or Mexico. She was told that she was neither.

Reyna Grande was born in Mexico and raised for most of her life in the United States, yet Reyna is stateless. She chuckles as she tells me her story but there is some indignation in her voice. To be told that you are neither one thing nor the other can be painful because it is being told that you have nowhere you belong. Latino is supposed to be another word for someone of Latin American descent that is born (or lived for most of their lives) in the United States but this identity is drastically more complex. Although this feeling of statelessness, of not having a place to belong is difficult, it may be the solution to the issues with the American publishing industry and Latina/o literature. In taking advantage of electronic publishing to break up the system perpetuated by traditional publishing practices, Latina/o authors can have the freedom to identify themselves as they wish, their work no longer destined for a single shelf but being a part of the larger system.

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