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**INTERVIEW**

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Gerald Aguilar Padilla\*

# Voices beyond Borders: Latino Book Review and the Fight for Chicano Literature in the U. S.

## A Personal Journey

As a Mexican born and raised in the United States, I wish I could share an anecdote about how I discovered Chicano literature through a teacher in Central California during the '90s, or perhaps while studying Spanish in a South Texas college in the 2000s. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case. This absence is not just a personal oversight but a reflection of a broader systemic issue in American education.

It's important to recognize that public school policy in the United States is determined by individual states.

Although California and Texas are thought to be on opposite sides of the political spectrum, the narrative of the largest Hispanic civil rights movement in the country was presented to me in much the same way—superficial and incomplete at best and distorted and misleading at worst.

The Chicano Movement, for the most part, was reduced to a brief mention in history textbooks, reflecting what the states deemed necessary for us to learn. Typically, this involved a few paragraphs about César Chávez and his advocacy for farm workers' rights, with little to no exploration of the broader significance of “El Movimiento” as it was often referred to. The Chicano movement has been too large to ignore, yet too uncomfortable for main-

\* Gerald is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Latino Book Review*. You can contact him at [latinobookreview.com/contact.html](http://latinobookreview.com/contact.html).

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stream American society to confront in depth. These textbooks have omitted the many struggles and injustices Mexican Americans faced, such as school segregation, corporal punishment for speaking Spanish, lynchings, massacres, and the “No Dogs or Mexicans” signs that once littered public spaces.

Regrettably, I didn't discover Chicano literature until late in my college years—and not through my Spanish professors, who primarily focused on Iberian literature, despite teaching in classrooms filled with Mexican students. Instead, I found these voices through peers in the Mexican American Studies Program. The literature and first-hand accounts of Chicanos had been deliberately excluded from my education and from public knowledge at large. These stories were only accessible to those who pursued specialized courses or degrees in Mexican American Studies.

This realization sparked a deeper understanding of how not only Chicano literature but also the broader spectrum of Latinx narratives have been marginalized in the United States. Motivated by a personal quest to highlight the often-overlooked Latinx narratives in the United States, and in response to the prevailing anti-Mexican political rhetoric, including the marginalization of contemporary Chicano literature, Dr. Rossy Lima and I set out in 2016 to create a multimedia platform that would ensure these vital voices are within reach to be appreciated not only in the United States but globally. This is how Latino Book Review was born.

### The Current Uphill Battle Of Chicano Literature in the U. S.

The urgency to bring Chicano and other Latinx voices to the forefront is pressing, as these vital narratives face increasing threats in today's socio-political climate. Chicano literature, in particular, is under unprecedented attack, targeted by radical politicians and entrenched political

systems determined to silence these voices. These forces are not merely attempting to marginalize Chicano narratives—they are systematically erasing entire communities' stories by weaponizing the legal system to ban Chicano literature and its powerful accounts of struggle, resilience, and identity.

### Arizona House Bill 2281

On May 11, 2010, the governor of Arizona, Jan Brewer, signed into law Arizona House Bill 2281, which ultimately banned the Mexican American Studies program from public schools. This law also led to the banning of books by esteemed Chicano authors and scholars, including *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* by Sandra Cisneros, *Borderlands* by Gloria Anzaldua, *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, *So Far From God* by Ana Castillo, *Curandera* by Carmen Tafolla, *The Devil's Highway* by Luis Alberto Urrea, among others. Additionally, it also banned books by other Mexican and Latino authors such as *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, and *Zorro* by Isabel Allende. The justification for this sweeping censorship was the claim that these books promoted resentment against a specific race and encouraged the overthrow of the government. Some titles were later labeled as sexually explicit and deemed inappropriate for high school students.

In August 2017, a federal judge determined the bill was motivated by discriminatory intent, and struck down the ban on ethnic studies as unconstitutional. The judge determined that the legislation had been enacted “not for a legitimate educational purpose, but for (i) an invidious discriminatory racial purpose and (ii) a politically partisan purpose.”

### More Book Bannings In Schools across the U. S.

Although the Arizona House Bill 2281 was ultimately struck down as unconstitutional seven years after it was signed into law, its destructive effects have spread detrimentally throughout the country. A study by PEN America found that in the fall of 2022 alone, there were 1477 instances of individual books being banned from schools,

affecting 874 unique titles nationwide. In the six month period, this equals to over 100 books removed from students every month. The study also revealed that these bans overwhelmingly continued to target stories by and about people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals. With the inability to ban books explicitly for reasons of ethnic or gender identity, those pushing these bans have increasingly resorted to claims of explicit content, offensive language, or ideological bias as a pretext for censorship.

## Texas Senate Bill 17

On January 1st, 2024, Texas Senate Bill 17 became part of what is regarded as one of the most bigoted legal waves in modern American politics —Diversity, Equity and Inclusion prohibitions in public universities. Texas Senate Bill 17, which is currently in effect, prohibits public universities, professors, and staff members from engaging in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) activities. The Office of University Risk and Compliance Services at the University of Texas at Austin currently has an article on their website titled “Texas Senate Bill 17 - Prohibition of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Activities,” The article states that the “law prohibits diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices, and the programs, activities, and trainings, among other things, traditionally conducted by those offices.” It also states that the university has taken “measures to reach compliance with the law,” and emphasizes that “vigilant on-going efforts are necessary to ensure the University’s continued compliance.”

DEI Texas is not alone in its current prohibitions against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Florida was the first state to pass anti- DEI legislation, and as of March 2024, ten states have enacted anti-DEI laws in public universities, with over a dozen more states introducing pending anti-DEI legislation. These laws primarily target ethnic, cultural, and LGBTQ+ groups, aiming to demolish any resources available to them. A quick online search reveals headlines such as, “Colleges Comply With Anti-DEI Mandates With Firings...And Finesse,” “Alabama Anti-DEI Law Shuts Black Student Union Office, Queer Resource Center at Flagship University,” “Dozens of UT Employees in DEI-Related Roles to Be Laid Off,” “University of Missouri Dissolves DEI Office,” “UNC’s Systems-Con-

trolled DEI Demolition,” “DEI Ban Prompts Utah Colleges to Close Cultural Centers, Too,” among many others. These examples reflect the sweeping impact of these laws, which aim to reshape the landscape of higher education by stripping away academic freedom and intellectual diversity, and destroying support systems for diverse groups.

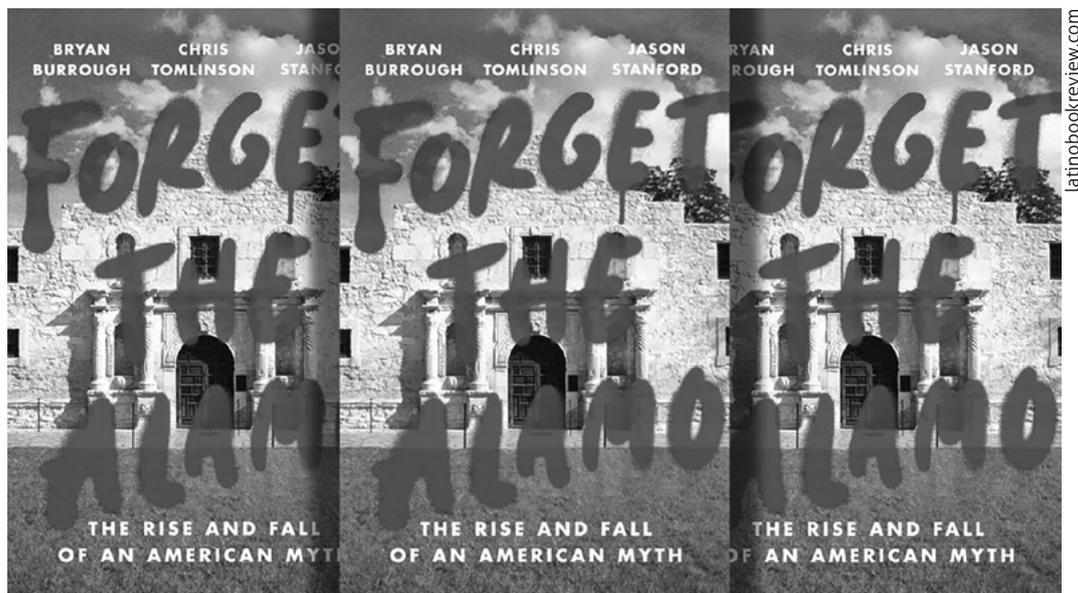
What might seem like a dystopian society from a science fiction novel is currently a stark reality throughout the country. These laws not only target intellectual and cultural diversity in universities, but they also criminalize any efforts by professors and staff who promote the very principles of empathy and social justice.

The urgency to protect and promote Chicano literature is now more pressing than ever. The reason it continues to face bans across the country is precisely because it is a blueprint of the struggles fought and won by our ancestors in times like these; because it teaches our communities to unite and fight against injustices and systems of power that try to silence us and other marginalized groups; because it provides an example of collective resilience and inspires our younger generations to do whatever it takes to protect the civil and human rights of one another. This is what the Chicano Movement continues to stand for.

## Building a Literary Platform for Change

Since its foundation, *Latino Book Review* has drawn upon the ideals, strength and resilience of our Chicano ancestors, working tirelessly to preserve and promote the voices of hundreds of contemporary Chicano and Latinx authors. What began as a personal, single-handed initiative has blossomed into a vibrant, community-driven movement. *Latino Book Review* now serves as a dynamic platform that inspires and challenges writers and readers alike, both in the U.S. and around the world. With a growing network of dedicated editors, we continue to champion a vision of unity and social justice that characterize the spirit of “El Movimiento.”

**Chicano literature, and those alike,  
continue to inspire future generations  
and shape the broader social fabric,  
fostering a society grounded in justice,  
equity, and understanding.**



Today, we are proud to have highlighted the work of more than 500 Latinx authors and artists. Our platform includes a podcast titled *Latino Book Review Presents* and an annual literary arts journal with current institutional subscribers such as Stanford University, MIT, Cornell University, Johns Hopkins University, DePaul University, New Mexico State University, The University of Texas, The University of Wisconsin, The Library of Congress, among others. We have had the privilege of interviewing iconic Chicano figures like Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Felipe Herrera, Luis Alberto Urrea, Cherríe Moraga, as well as other Latinx literary pillars such as Isabel Allende, Julia Alvarez, Cristina Rivera Garza, to name a few—individuals who have earned accolades like the Pulitzer Prize, MacArthur Fellowships, and presidential recognitions, and who have dedicated their lives to their craft. At the same time, we remain committed to promoting the work of emerging writers and artists who bring fresh perspectives and immense talent to the literary landscape.

Looking forward, our mission is to continue amplifying Chicano and other Latinx voices on a global scale, breaking down borders by sharing narratives and universal themes that transcend cultural boundaries and foster cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. As the founder and editor-in-chief of *Latino Book Review*, I am immensely proud of what we have achieved together as a community, and I am excited about the future we are building.

### A Call to Resiliency and Unity

As I reflect on the rising tide of political extremism and the widening rifts within American society, it becomes increasingly difficult to envision an end to the cultural and political persecution of Chicano literature, identity, and the social justice ideals it represents. The forces seeking to ban our literature and criminalize diversity, equity, and inclusion in public spaces are fueled by the same oppressive spirit of those who once persecuted our ancestors in decades past. Yet, just as our predecessors stood resilient in the face of adversity, and continued to produce literary works to document their fight, we also carry within us an enduring spirit of resilience and commitment to preserving the dignity and legacy of our communities through our literature.

As we confront the challenges of our time, the role of Chicano literature becomes increasingly vital. It is not just a key element of Mexican American history and cultural identity, nor merely a body of work with intrinsic literary value. Chicano literature stands as a living compass in the ongoing struggle for social justice. We must remain unwavering in our support for Chicano literature, championing platforms like *Latino Book Review* which amplify these voices on a global scale. By doing so, we ensure that the powerful narratives of Chicano literature, and those alike, continue to inspire future generations and shape the broader social fabric, fostering a society grounded in justice, equity, and understanding. **MM**