

AWP 2020 Panel: Writing in Spanish in the Land of the Free

https://www.awpwriter.org/awp_conference/event_detail/17467

Room 214B, Henry B. González Convention Center, Meeting Room Level

Friday, March 6, 2020

3:20 pm to 4:35 pm

Event Title: Writing in Spanish in the Land of the Free

Type of Event: Artistic and Professional Stewardship

Event Description: The USA houses a community of 41 million Spanish speakers, the world's 2nd largest, yet its Spanish literary production is abysmal. Why aren't more Latinx authors writing in Spanish? How can we support them in order to improve? We'll examine the cases of Seattle Escribe, Kansas's LWC and Latino Book Review, nonprofits that have spurred publications, literary events, workshops and media projects, all in Spanish. We'll discuss how their models could be improved and even replicated. ¡Sí se puede!

Statement of Merit: In these times of rampant xenophobia, writing in Spanish is perhaps the single most rebellious political act for writers in America. We hope that learning from our collective experiences will inspire Latinx attendees to write in Spanish and create their own thriving literary organizations. Ultimately, we want to spur a call to arms to defend the Spanish literature tradition of our country, a proposition particularly significant given that AWP will take place in the land of the Alamo this year.

Panel Outline

- **Welcome and Introductions (5 min)**
 - José L. Montero is a bilingual writer and president of Seattle Escribe, the largest Spanish literary organization in the Pacific NW. He holds a Master in Narrative from Escuela de Escritores in Spain and a Certificate in Literary Fiction from the University of Washington. He interned for Copper Canyon Press and is currently an associate poetry editor for Narrative Magazine.
 - María de Lourdes Victoria is a bilingual, award-winning author who has published internationally. Her first novel was finalist for the Mariposa Book Award. Her second book took third place at the Planeta Book Award (2012). Her last novel was finalist as best novel in Spanish at Latino Book Awards.
 - Claudia Castro Luna is WA State Poet Laureate and winner of the Academy of American Poets first Poets Laureate Fellowship. She served as Seattle's first Civic Poet (2015-2017) Publications include This City, Killing Marias and Seattle Poetic Grid - a digital project. She also writes non-fiction.

- Gerald Padilla is the founder and director of Latino Book Review, founder of Jade Publishing, and founder of the Festival Internacional de Poesía Latinoamericana (FEIPOL). He is the co-author of the first children's book in Náhuatl in the U.S., Noyolkanyolkej.
- José Faus is writer, performer and visual artist. He is a founder of the Latino Writers Collective and sits on the boards of the UMKC Friends of the Library, The Latino Writers Collective and Charlotte Street Foundation. His writing appears in various anthologies including Primera Página: Poetry From the Latino Heartland, Cuentos del Centro: Stories from the Latino Heartland, Whirlybird Anthology of Kansas City Writers, Poets & Writers, Luces y Sombras Journal, Raritan, Plug Project 8x10. His chapbook This Town Like That was released by Spartan Press. His second book of poetry The Life and Times of Jose Calderon was published by West 39 Press.
- **Framing the challenge (5 min)**
 - Spanish-speaking population in the US has had a long presence, becoming significant and still rising
 - Spanish language has had a long presence in the US. In 1528, the Spanish explorer Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca led an expedition that claimed what's now Florida, Texas and the Southwest as a territory of Spain. Spanish became the official language of those territories for the next 300 years until Texas was annexed to the Union in 1845 and the rest of the territories that used to be part of Mexico in 1848.
 - According the US Census Bureau, the US had approx. 58 million Spanish speakers in 2018, 17.8% of the total population, making the US the country with the second-largest population of Spanish speakers in the world only after Mexico (125 million speakers).
 - To put this in perspective, here are some population figures for other Spanish-speaking countries and regions:
 - Colombia: 49.6 million
 - Spain: 46.6 million
 - Argentina: 44.5 million
 - Peru: 32 million
 - Venezuela: 32 million
 - Central American region: 47.7 million
 - Caribbean region: 25 million
 - In 2018 there were over 8 million students of the Spanish language across the US, ranging from elementary schools to universities. This number is higher than the population of several countries in Latin America.
 - By 2060, the US Census Bureau estimates that the US will have over 119 million Spanish speakers, 28.6% of the population. Or, to put it in other words, about 1 of every 3 inhabitants in the US will speak Spanish.
 - Spanish literature's share of the US market is abysmal

- The overall book market in the US was about \$25 billion USD in 2017, according the Association of American Publishers¹, however it is estimated that only \$65 million USD of Spanish books were sold over the same period².
 - According to a survey from 2019, 59% of Hispanic Americans had read at least one book over the last year vs. 76% for non-Hispanics³.
 - According to Spanish newspaper El País, only 4% of all books published in the US are translations, out of which only a quarter are “literary” books (no textbooks, manuals, etc.).
 - Spanish literature is indeed a viable business
 - According to the report “El español: una lengua viva” published in 2018 by the Cervantes Institute, Spanish is the native language for over 480 million people around the world, however over 577 million are “potential speakers” (natives + Spanish students, etc.), which translates to 7.6% of the world population. This makes Spanish the second most popular language after Mandarin.
 - According to the International Publishers Association, in 2015 there were 339,000 books published in the US compared to 185,000 books published in all of Latin America and Spain (~29,000 México, ~76,000 Spain).⁴
 - Spain is considered the 3rd largest book exporter in the world (€331 million), after the UK (€1,500 million) and the US (€1,000 million).
 - Latinx culture needs increased and improved representation in the American book industry
 - The “American Dirt” controversy is the latest example of this
 - “Radical change is needed in the publishing industry, not simply with respect to Latinx writers, but all marginalized writers who have important stories to tell”⁵
- **Group discussion (30 min)**
 - What brought us to this present state of Spanish literature in the US? Why do we have so many people who speak Spanish in this country, yet so very few publishers and organizations that promote Spanish literature?
 - Why aren't more Latinx writers writing in Spanish? Is it a market demand (readership) problem? A lack of publishing venues? A language problem? An education problem? A cultural problem? Something else?

¹ <https://publishingperspectives.com/2018/07/us-statshot-publisher-survey-2017-estimates-revenue/>

² <https://www.idealogy.com/blog/lots-of-spanish-speakers-in-the-united-states-but-not-so-much-of-a-book-market-for-spanish-books/>

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/249791/book-readers-in-the-us-by-ethnicity/>

⁴ https://www.internationalpublishers.org/images/reports/Annual_Report_2016/IPA_Annual_Report_2015-2016_interactive.pdf

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/30/american-dirt-book-controversy-latinx-writers-angry>

- What has each one of you or your organizations done to improve the creation of Spanish literature in your own communities? What have you seen other people/organizations do that works (or doesn't)?
- What are the obstacles you have encountered during the course of your mission and how have you overcome them?
- **Searching for solutions with the audience (15min)**
 - What can we do, as individuals who speak Spanish and live in the US, to detonate a boom in Spanish literature in our country?
 - Panelists start responding, then we open it to the public to hear their suggestions
- **Final question (5 min)**
 - What would you suggest to someone in the audience who wants to create their own literary group in Spanish? What steps should they follow if they wanted to get out of here and carry the mantle?
- **Q&A (15min)**
- **Closing quote and farewell (1 min)**
 - Salman Rushdie, when he was president of the PEN American Center, said during the opening of the World Voices festival in 2005: "The United States needs more than ever to listen to the voices beyond its borders. Writers are indispensable intermediaries in this international dialogue and the guardians of a unique and artistic legacy represented by each language. We cannot pretend that this conversation takes place only in English"⁶
 - Those "voices beyond its borders" are actually already here amongst us. They are talented, unique and vibrant, but we won't realize this unless we're willing to listen to them, to give them a chance to establish a dialogue with us.

⁶ https://elpais.com/diario/2008/06/14/cultura/1213394401_850215.html