

THE CONFERENCE ABOUT BOOKS IN A CITY THAT DOESN'T READ

An Open Letter to Helena María Viramontes about the 12,000 writers coming to San Antonio in March for the AWP Conference

10 December 2019

Dear Helena,

Maybe you remember me? We met at the Gemini-INK Writers Conference last summer in San Antonio... People say we resemble each other, but I think it's because we're both Latinx and about the same age, who knows. You're definitely the superior writer, and I'm sure the nicer one, too.

I am proud that you're the Featured Writer at the upcoming AWP (Association of Writers & Writing Programs) 2020 Conference to be held in San Antonio in March 4-7, 2020 — over 12,000 writers from around the country will be here! The Latinx writers in San Antonio are especially proud you're getting this kind of recognition. I've read all your books, and have told everyone that *Their Dogs Came With Them*, published in 2007, should have won the Pulitzer. Still don't understand how a Mexican-American story set in Los Angeles with thirteen protagonists facing gentrification wasn't even nominated.

I know your husband, Eloy, is from Texas, and that you are familiar with this state. But, you will be a star among thousands of writers, agents, publishers, teachers, students, and your story will have a distinctive impact.

I'm probably too dazzled by seeing someone who looks like me sharing her acclaimed stories with an audience who doesn't know us very well. As a native Tejana, and writer, I know how difficult it is to get our stories published, on our terms, in our language, and I am hopeful that your presence here will expand the window to the American immigrant future we represent, but rarely get a chance to tell at the national level.

People have told me that San Antonio isn't magical reality, but how does a city where one-quarter of the city's residents are considered illiterate host thousands of writers without a single major bookstore in the inner city, no kiosks, an under-funded library, one very recent citywide bookfair, no Xicanx media executives, in a majority Latinx city where the Tex-Mex culture is prominent, responsible for the millions of tourists who come here, with a segregated inner-city public school system, where students are subject to a testing frenzy that boxes them so they read but don't like reading — host the AWP?

What do you call this if not a magical celebration of books without readers?

I know about the lack of reading — because I've taught at



The 2020 AWP Conference at the Henry B. González Convention Center includes an ongoing showcase of over 700 exhibitors at the street level open daily from 9am to 5pm from March 5-7.

community centers, community colleges, and at universities here. Been to Boston, San Francisco, Havana, Central Europe, and know what cities look like, feel like, with a literary life. Here, there are four Catholic missions in San Antonio, not counting the Alamo, which glorify war. Or, as Sandra Cisneros once told me, it's here to remind us that

we won but really lost the war. The military presence hangs over us like a benevolent patron. Guns are sacred, — the Bible, the altar, political confessing that is almost too-late. Many people have been hyped into worshipping the professional basketball team here, the Spurs, with candles, not voting. And yes, we have world-class writers here, but the vast majority of the white writers don't speak, read, or write Spanish. They don't have to. And because of the insane fear of other languages that is part of our tragic history, there are plenty of Tejanx, Xicanx, Mexican-American writers, who don't speak Spanish, either.

The illiteracy of San Antonio impacts everything. Very few writers here have read Elena Poniatowska or Eduardo Galeano, for example, of the Latin-American canon -- equal to John Steinbeck, Comac McCarthy, Edith Wharton, James Baldwin. The results: my students aren't woke to reading, and have little interest in substantive, current cinema. We don't have a Latin American/Xicana arthouse or equity theatre in San Antonio, either. Few have seen the César Chávez film, the James Baldwin film, and barely know anything about Selma. The Suffragettes film? Forget it. Harriet Tubman? I doubt it. Most of the writers I know haven't visited Oaxaca, Monte Alban, the Olmec colossal stone heads in Xalapa. The elite writers haven't ventured into the working-class barrio — the Westside of San Antonio. Illiteracy becomes cultural illiteracy: Haven't seen many sophisticated friends at the annual Conjunto Festival, where Annie Proulx's accordion story rises from the Texas yeast of immigration, war, land.

What is it like to remember a language you have forgotten? I need to read that story.

What do you call a literary loss equal to the urgency of climate change? Over 50% of the 5,000,000 public school students today are Brown and Black, and I'm being conservative. One-fifth of the nation's public school students are of color. What

does it mean when they don't know what the civil rights movement means to this country? When they are cynical about democracy and believe in the military as a way of life? And have accepted metal detectors, abusive police, rape, diabetes, polluted beaches, as normal, even though they intuit something is not right?

And what will happen to us when my students realize differently?

They need your book, Helena. Many books.

San Antonio is over 60% Latinx, and the Tex-Mex culture is prominent, responsible for the millions of tourists who come here and bring their dollars. But the money doesn't go to the public schools, the libraries, though it goes to Fiesta! And the RiverWalk you will surely be visiting.

Will the 12,000 writers become aware of who we are and our storytellers while they're here? My experience with NYC publishers is watching how they cringe reading our Tex-Mexiness, our walkouts and protests, our baile and crossing the border unsexiness. The publishers want stories about borracheras, Frida Kahlo, drugs, the Border Patrol, and tacos, if possible. The novels and poetry and history? We are just too ethnically confusing. Anybody but us. The publishing world understands the Caribbeans, Africans, Haitians, Indians, Vietnamese, the Middle Eastern writers. I love them, too. We Tejanx, Central Americans, are not understood — too familiar and too strange, the cousin who doesn't belong at the family dancing party because? We are agricultural people like César Chávez, peasant-class, half-slaved, with faces that are still foreign. Too Mexican, not enough Mexican. Not Black enough to confront the guilt. Not island enough to make anyone ashamed. Too diverse, mixed, and from Texas? Polkas? The accordion? Really? Where's your cowboy hat and



Helena María Viramontes

2020 AWP Keynote speaker

Thursday, March 5, 2020

8:30 pm to 10:00 pm

Lila Cockrell Theater,

Henry B. González Convention Center

Helena María Viramontes is the author of *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985) and *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), a novel. Her second novel, *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), published in paperback by Washington Square Press, focuses on the dispossessed, the working poor, the homeless, and the undocumented of East Los Angeles, where Viramontes was born and raised. Her work strives to re-create the visceral sense of a world virtually unknown to mainstream letters and to transform readers through relentlessly compassionate storytelling. In the 1980s, Viramontes became co-coordinator of the Los Angeles Latino Writers Association and literary editor of *XhistmeArte Magazine*. Later in the decade, Viramontes helped found Southern California Latino Writers and Filmmakers. In collaboration with feminist scholar Maria Herrera Sobek, Viramontes organized three major conferences at UC-Irvine, resulting in two anthologies: *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature* (1988) and *Chicana Writes: On Word and Film* (1993). Named a USA Ford Fellow in Literature for 2007 by United States Artists, she has also received the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature, a Sundance Institute Fellowship, an NEA Fellowship, a Spirit Award from the California Latino Legislative Caucus, and a 2017 Bellagio Center Residency from the Rockefeller Foundation. In 2015, California State University at Long Beach inaugurated the Helena María Viramontes Lecture. Viramontes is Goldwin Smith Professor of English at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, where she is at work on a new novel.

boots? The invasions and interventions are stored at the Alamo — and we are not allowed to perform in front of it... Yet, we are everyone's future, and bipolar rages.

We are just not the coolest on the block, incapable of telling our own stories. Except that we are the writers four hours away from the Rio Grande, where our primos, thousands of Central American refugees are desperate to cross into a country that denies the American heritage pulsing in their bloodlines, the ancient poetry of languages, coffee, bananas, and corn, on their breath. I can hear their heartbeats from here -- a fado, adhã, a canto ondo.

I've lost count of all the protests, the marches, the debates and chingazos I've suffered standing up for justice in this state. Probably lost every single time. How I have loved this state that I was born in, that now wants to require me to show my passport if I'm stopped. Just try it.

I have loved so many other-American stories, stories by writers who have made me dare to say it, to love fierce, discovering the diamonds in the cottonfields, becoming a writer-witness to books burned before they are even written. Those are the books we have to write about Texas.

It is my magical reality that someone like you will read this letter, explaining what is almost untranslatable about who I am, encouraging those 12,000 writers to find the beautiful in the ugly and the nightmare in the dreaming that is me, us, Texas.

Sinceramente,
Bárbara Renaud González
San Antonio, Tejas



2020 AWP Conference & Bookfair

Henry B. González Convention Center, San Antonio, TX

March 5–7, 2020

www.awpwriter.org/awp_conference