Author: Victor Valle (VV)
In Conversation with: José Navarro (JN)
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Description: Transcript of a podcast of the discussion of the book, *Latinx Writing Los Angeles: Nonfiction Dispatches from a Decolonial Rebellion* between author Victor Valle of journalism and ethnic studies and Dr. José Navarro of ethnic studies.

[Music]

Brett Bodemer (Moderator): [Background Music] Welcome to "Conversations with Cal Poly Authors." This episode was recorded on Friday, October 26th 2018 at the Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. The conversation features Victor Valle and José Navarro discussing Victor's book, *Latinx Writing Los Angeles: Nonfiction Dispatches from a Decolonial Rebellion*, published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2018. This discussion explores the erasures of diverse literary voices through both institutional structures and the related cascading effect played out in previous anthology choices. Victor Valle is a former professor of journalism at Cal Poly and as professor emeritus, still teaches in the ethnic studies department. Victor worked on *The Los Angeles Times* for eight years where he and fellow Chicano journalists garnered a Pulitzer Prize. His 2011 book published by Rutgers University Press focus on power in politics in Southern California. But he also has keen interest in literature, civil rights history, and Mexican cuisine. Victor's conversational partner today is Dr. José Navarro, associate professor at Cal Poly in the ethnic studies department. José received his B.A. in English from the University of California at Berkeley, and his PhD in the same discipline from the University of Southern California. José has published articles in *The Journal of Popular Culture, Latino Studies* and has interest in Latinx literary and cultural studies, exploring gang narratives as well as intersections of race, masculinity, and sexuality [music].

[Applause]

VV: Hello, all. First thing, I'm not a doctor [laughs]. I don't want that story to get any legs since I'm not. The other thing I was going to say is, I did this book for two basic reasons. One of them was—is that we didn't—you know I've been teaching a class on Chicano, Latino literary nonfiction, but really there wasn't one sort of text that framed it all, as a literary genre. People have been talking about these writings for a lot of different reasons. But as a literary form, or forms, an umbrella, how do we organize it? And that was one reason. I think and when you read the book you'll understand why in English—the way we teach English, it's fractured. The way we teach English doesn't have a coherent way of talking about this. But since Crónica, other forms of literary nonfiction are so important in the Hispanic world, this is going back to you know, the arrival of the Spanish. You know the first descriptions, chronicles, the whole tradition chronically, is so important for Spanish-language people throughout Latin America.
Not just here. It's that you know this is—you've got to fix this because in Latin America, they talk about this a lot. They're very aware of the Crónica as both an informational form, like newspaper writing, but also as a literary form. And they're very sophisticated in that, in Spain as well. So, why do we have such a fractured view? I also realized it was an opportunity because we're teaching literary nonfiction writing in English. As we should, because it's a very practical thing to teach. This is a commercial form of writing. And so, but the thing is that we weren't teaching it academically well. We weren't teaching people how to do it. All the books—to write this book I had to go through tons of books, and we realized we teach a lot of how-to, which is fine, there's nothing wrong with that. But we don't really have a coherent way of teaching literary history, genealogy. So that was one thing. The other thing is, the book is intended to have a policy impact. It may take a long time, but it's a policy impact, because people of color, Latinos, we always say we're left out, we're silenced, we're made invisible. That's why we have this book here, this is a fantastic photograph of a Chicano artist. And what he did was, he actually—this is an x-ray of a person inside of a suitcase. You know and it's basically about migrant bodies. It's about the body, in other words, we're all around you as Latinos and somehow our bodies are still invisible, you know this notion—well, you know. So, that was, I said well how do we do that. People have complained about it, we're always talking about it, but my question is well how do we change it? So, part of what I'm doing here is that I did previous work using Foucauldian ideas of government mentality in urban settings, which was very effective. You know, I don't think Foucault ever thought he would be so literal, you could actually use it so effectively to explain how landscapes get created. Right? So, I said, well, can I? You know, and those were all technologies of the state. Not deliberately, but inevitably reinforced the reality of that thing we call the nation state. That's a whole another discussion. But it's a technology. In other words, these are like, they're technologies because they're repeated methodically, usually encoded in law. You know, like water policy in California is like notoriously a good example of this. So, I said, well, are we doing things in the classroom that reinforced that those effects? I don't think that the English classes of what we teach, literature, is the primary culprit. I think they're more reproducers. They reinforce decisions that have already been made in other parts in our society. So, I say, well, what role is English and the way we teach English reinforcing those effects? And I say well, the only way to do that is to say can we identify the technologies as a way we teach English and the way we teach the interpretation of literature, how is that method disappearing, such a vast body of literary text. Because the thing about Latino writing, it's not obscure, or rare. I mean—and the other reason too was that at the same time this is going on, I have colleagues who are Pulitzer Prize winners themselves, they're all friends of mine. And I say, why are we still disappeared, as writers? I said now some of my work—now recently we were talking, there's been a lot of good work recently. Right at the time when this book was being published, all these new studies were emerging. People started asking to anthologize my work. My work has been anthologized at the Library of America, just writing on food and so forth. So, I'm not saying it's absolute. But am, I am saying that—there's—you know, we don't have a coherent method of dealing with this. And so we want to make change because what I'm also an author doing is, I say this is systemic. So, instead of blaming people, instead of accusing people of being racist, or whatever. Instead of questioning their morality, we're saying, by what means are we reproducing this effect? And if we can identify those means, can we stop it? Can we make a change? So that's really what this
book is about. So, I hope it leads to a public discussion and an examination of the way we deal. You know, this is the worst time for me to do this in a way. The humanities is under attack. I know that. But at the same time, for the people who are left out they say and so what? We're still left out. So if it disappears, we were left out of that. So, at a certain point, it kind of reminds me of the people coming up the caravan. You know, it's like these needs are so important. At what point do we continue to ignore them? So, that's really what my impetus is here. So, how can we use this to create change? And if we can identify those technologies, one of them is for example strict monolingualism, right? You know? And an intolerance of bilingualism right and so forth. And so, and so, that's really the logic that I was working with. So, I'll throw it over to you now.

JN: So, yeah, I mean Victor, for those of you who don't know is an incredible writer, incredible journalist. Made a fantastic impact. And he's not going to say this himself, so I'll say it for him. He's made an incredible impact in terms of literary production, especially in L.A., especially for Latinos, and Chicanos in particular. And so, I'm just going to make a quick note that the term Latina, Latino, Latinx is a pan-ethnic term. So when we say that term it's a pan-ethnic term that includes Puerto Ricans, Puerto Rican Americans, Cuban-Americans, Salvadoran, Salvadoran-Americans. Includes those folks, and it also includes therefore Chicana and Chicano people. Chicana/Chicano as a term is a very specifically ethnic term that refers to people of Mexican origin in the U.S./Mexico borderlands who identify as indigenous and who inherit a kind of political consciousness from a period of time in those relationships between the U.S. and Mexico. So those are the two different terms. Chicanos are Latinos, not all Latinos are Chicanos. All right. So, when we use the terms, those are you know one key distinction. For Victor, then, when he was in Los Angeles working both as a journalist Victor began a publication in LA called Chisme Arte, which is funny, it's a sort of smooshing together of two terms. The first is chisme, and if you're Latino, you know what that is. Right, chisme is gossip. And arte which is art, Spanish for art. So, thinking of making gossip artful, or gossip literary. Or thinking about the literary kind of devices of gossip in different writings. So, Victor establishes Chisme Arte in L.A. and he publishes some of the most fantastic writers. And that the connections are one person removed. So for example Victor and Chisme Arte publishes one of my favorite writers, Helena María Viramontes, who writes a famous text later called "Under the Feet of Jesus". But her early text is "The Moths and Other Stories". Fantastic writing. In "The Moths" she writes about L.A. as well, Boyle Heights, the neighborhood that Viramontes and I grew up in. And Viramontes will later become the teacher at Cornell University for Junot Díaz, who wins lots of literary prizes later and ends up in controversy. Either way, Victor is one of the genesis, is probably the genesis for that kind of literary Latino lineage. So he doesn't give himself enough credit, but this is who he is. So it's a privilege to be in conversation with him. Now as far as this book is concerned, I think Victor is outlining some different very complex, theoretical ideas about how it is we come to think of L.A. writing and Latino writing as invisible. And how we get to meet invisible by certain people who are making judgments about what literature is. So those are the two central questions he's trying to ask. One is, how do we think about what literature is? Who defines literature? Who gets to define it? In this case, it’s people in the English departments who say this is fantastic literature. And then they assign it to all you students. And then they force the library to buy it. And then, [laughter] that's how the machine works, right? The
machine of validating certain literatures above others, certainly writing as literary, as high art over others. It's not that the literature and the writing is in and of itself inherently beautiful. Sometimes it is. All right. It is that what becomes literary, and literature, and great, is often filtered through particular people's tastes and judgments. And so, this is the central point—kind of critique that Victor and Ignacio Lopez-Calvo are making in this book. What he says is what's central to the argument of the book is thinking about whether the nonfiction writing that Latinos produce, the Crónicas, the letters, the journalism. Whether there is any literariness to that writing, and we know there is. And then the second question is, if there is a literariness to nonfiction Latino writing, it is literature. And it is literature because we say so. Just like other things are literature because other people say so. In this case, these are racial divisions, they're structural divisions, they're English departments, old faculty going you all must read Chaucer, in the Middle English. Why? Because this is great literature. And then you sit to read it and you're like [speaking in Middle English]. And you're like what the heck is this? No one's breaking the door down to read Chaucer in the Middle English [laughter]. But you're forced to do it. This is the intervention that Victor and Ignacio Lopez-Calvo are making in this book. What they're saying, these works are valuable. These works are literary; therefore, these works are literature. And as literature they've been excluded and rendered invisible in all of the anthologies of L.A. literature, mostly by a group of white dudes who say, this is L.A. literature. And who look at the terrain of L.A. literature and think of the terrain at this vast desert, this wild savage kind of desert that only gets any kind of form of literariness or highbrow literariness, or literary identity from the outsiders who come in to write about L.A. This is a very limited vision of literary Los Angeles. It's a fantastic intervention.

VV: Thank you. I was going to add. I forgot—ask me a question, would you? I was going to add something to what you were saying, and I forgot it so [laughter]. Literally, it came in and came out. I only have so much temporary memory. I'm like a very old computer. You add a new ZIP Code and something, you lose it [laughter].

JN: So, my first question for you then, if you need a prompt is, so when you read the book, I mean the book is very complex. I mean you know it's really sophisticated. You know, you have to sit there with the text and think it over, and think it over, and think it over again. Even for me as a scholar. But one of Victor's arguments is that disappearing Latino literature, and this is what many chroniclers of L.A. literature do, is they disappear Latino literature. Your main argument is that there are six ways in which they do this. You call them six literary technologies that render Latinos and their literary production invisible. Can you tell us what the six are, in layman's terms, for the general audience? And then give us examples of how the six technologies are used to render Latino writing invisible?

VV: Okay, well, I mention strict monolingualism, right. Which one of the; you know and one of the remedies would be for example, for me, this may sound crazy, but I would say English departments should be places of translation. They should be dedicated to translating all the invisible languages. Because what happened to Spanish is happening to Cantonese, it's happening, I mean, you know, to many other languages. And here's the point I was remembering. I situated this in the city for a reason, because that's where you have, where sort
of the reality of the nation state. The story of the nation state is the most undermined, is the 
most ignored. Because you know, global cities cannot limit themselves by the logics of the 
nation state. They cannot be ruled by them. We would not have New York. We would not have 
Chicago. We would not have L.A. or San Francisco if we were so strictly nationalistic as our great 
president says. Okay. If that was the logic, then we would not have flows of capital, of people, 
of ideas. We would choke ourselves. We would stifle ourselves. So, I said, well, this is the place 
where, if we want to make change, this is the logical place to do it. Because you literally have 
pluralities of majorities of people who are immigrants. So that's like obvious, okay. So they 
should be heard. So, that's one of the things I was talking about. But the other one has to do 
with the way we imagine cities. Now when I'm explaining this, I want you to realize I want 
people to use this idea, test this idea out with other literatures. Doesn't even have to be about 
Latinos. You could do this with women, you could do this with all kinds of other groups, and say 
can you identify the operation of these technologies of literary secrecy in other ways? Because 
that's the other part. I may be completely wrong. This may work for this, but it may not work 
for anything else. So, I'm interested in saying, how do we play that forward and experiment. It's 
important to be experimental, and to figure out how could it work. Well, one of the other ones 
that's really important. That one that hurts Latinos the most, is the city without history. When 
you read one of the things that's the most—not until very recently, do you begin to get an 
acknowledgment in the anthologies. I'm not saying this is absolute, however. There's beginning 
to be some movement there. But for most of the history of Los Angeles when they talk about 
their past, it was imagined as a city without a history, without a past. The other one, now these 
two go together, because they reinforce each other. The other one is the city against nature. 
And this is not unique to Los Angeles. This is the way the city is imagined as antithetical to 
nature. Well, for Latinos is that they tend to suffer from both. Okay? If the city has no history, 
then they don't exist. Even though their literature is evident, you may even read some, it's all 
over the place. They're writing from the very minute, even before they get here, they're writing 
about California. They're imagining California. So, there's a vast literature that we know exists. 
But when you say it has no history then you don't have to bother to know that. It just doesn't 
exist. The other part is, is that when you imagine the city to be antithetical to nature and 
Latinos and native people are understood to be part of nature. They're sort of also excluded. 
They're other'ed in another way. You know, and that's in the urban imaginary of the city, in Los 
Angeles. So in a sense we're sort of erased twice. You know, it's like so we are sort of, you 
know—and this idea of the native people as being indistinguishable from nature goes back to 
manifest destiny. You know, Frederick Jackson Turner, all those cats. They were very clear 
about that. You know if you control nature, well you control the people who are part of that 
nature, indistinguishable. Well, this idea is a part to Latinos in Texas, and you know I mean, it's 
in L.A. too, but you could go anywhere along the border lands and you see that idea. I'm writing 
another book where I'm talking about you know the progressive era, the so called progressive 
era in the Southwest. It's very progressive. Very deadly period. You know, so this idea then, and 
this is all part of the machinery of colonialism right. That you have to construct the savage, the 
person who is so other that he is a threat to your society, right. Well, this is not new. So, I was 
already aware of a lot of postcolonial theory. And I was doing that. So, I said well let's just look 
at L.A. alone. I chose L.A. too, because there was already a relative small number of texts. It was 
something manageable. Also because I knew the city, as you were mentioning, you know. So,
that was the reason I did it. So, what's another one? The other one, gee I have to go back and look at them.

JN: So, if I can help out just a little.

VV: Help me out. Otherwise, I'm going to have to read it myself and I don't want to start reading, okay.

JN: Don't make Victor read his own book. That would be more fun than I think he can handle [laughter]. So, if I can help out and just annotate a little bit.

VV: Oh, I know, okay, genre hierarchy.

JN: Yeah.

VV: Right, this is the one. You mentioned that one, well just before, so genre hierarchy, in the way we teach English, we recognize as most literary starting with poetry, the novel, and drama, right? Nonfiction is quasi recognized. But the problem with nonfiction in English, and I haven't gotten to Latino literature, is that it's not supported by great critical literature. Because its inclusion is very recent. So, we haven't had a lot of people theorizing literary nonfiction in a very coherent way. It's sporadic. There are some articles I looked at them. But it's very recent and it doesn't have the gravitas that poetry and novels have. We have theorized Gazoo out of those subjects, and well we should. There's no reason we shouldn't, but then if sort of a literary nonfiction what they call the fourth genre has a very sort of weak pedigree. What happens, and this is why these are institutional things, this is not intentional. If that doesn't have a lot of standing, what happens when Latinos do most of their writing, especially in the in the 18th, 19th and early 20th century in the Crónica form. If they're mostly writing in that form, and your discipline is given very little credibility to that, and it's not even credibility. It doesn't even have the tools to do it. If you don't have the tools to talk about it critically, well then, you just don't get to it. It just disappears. It's not visible. It's not critically visible. And so, that's number four. Five I think, now I probably left one out. Okay, five was the way we just sort of, what do you call it? This is the idea of discipline that Foucault talks about. How our profession construct us. We get rewarded for doing the things in our profession that our colleagues say are good to do. And we get even pleasure from it. You know? And so, in a sense that's also another factor that in a sense, all the accumulation of these technologies. And this goes against Trump's idea of the deep state. The state is not deep. It's very superficial. It's the cumulative effects of many technologies running at once. So no one is thinking about this and sort of this standing back and say well how did we get here? The geology of the present. No one is doing that. Instead what they're doing is they say, well you want to advance in your career. Well do these things. You know what I mean? And so you do it and you get advanced in your career and everybody is happy. So, that's one of the other technologies. And this one is not some grand scheme that people did. It's just how we got to where we are. Because I don't want the conspiratorially at all. It's not conspiratorial. You know there are people are encouraging us to think that way, but it's not conspiratorial. It's just the accumulation of all these technologies over time, and they
produce an effect. Now I would also say this is primarily at state universities. At middle rung universities. I would hang out at the Mahindra Center at Harvard and that was not going on. I mean Homi Bhabha runs the program there, you know some of the great theorist of postcolonial theory. People were speaking multiple languages. But those are elite universities. You know Stanford you could see things going on this way, Berkeley. But at the state universities where most people go to school at your second, third-tier research universities, we have a problem. That's where the problem is. So, I don't want to be so gross in saying oh that everybody is, you know, no. It's not that complete. But the question is how can we get these new kind of ideas to filter down a little more quickly into the university's most students attend? And that's really the other issues. So, I left one out and I forget which one it is.

JN: You left the sixth one out.

VV: So, you're going to have to go read I real quick and I will only find that one if you open the book.

JN: So, let me just annotate a little bit of what Victor is outlining here, the question of English multilingualism. That is, again, we have a system in literary studies and English departments were it's dominant in other places, but especially in English departments where it's dominant where the notion is then, as an English department, they only value works written in English. Not necessarily works written in translation. So other departments develop because of this tension, we call them comparative literature department. So they develop because of this, or we call modern language departments they develop because of that narrow kind of focus of English departments as strictly monolingual. Part of the critique, however, is that even if you grant there is a kind of language barrier or difference when you begin construct the literary value system based just on this kind of privileging of English multilingualism, you leave out people who are bilingual. And you also then leave out people who do what would now call could switch. Even NPR now recognize code switching, right. They have a fantastic program called "Code Switch", NPR's "Codes Switch". And so they understand the value of code switching in different sort of registers of levels, even within a same language of English. So now English departments are coming into this realization like oh there are multiple levels of English. If you take my example from earlier, there's Chaucer, and the Middle English. And English was so varied early on that until you get Ben Johnson's dictionary you don't have a standardized version of English itself. You have many different spellings of different names. There are like four or five different spellings of Shakespeare's names when you go back and look at the original text. Based on different centuries. And even still, there are different other registers of English, even within English. I'll give you an example. Women do not talk about the same topics, same things, same tones, same words, same code switch when it's all women versus when you're in mixed company, men, and women. You have different conversations, different topics, different tonalities, different pitches. Same with men, right? And so what we get here is a social linguistic understanding of the code switch, even within what you think of as one language, English monolingual. What it does for Latinos is it excludes writers like Victor and others who create what we call neologism. This is the beauty of Chicano and Latino literature is we create neologisms. Neologism is just a fancy academic word for we created a new word. That's right.
And so you talk to Latinos and you talk to Latinos in the United States, and they'll use words like “marketa”. “Marketa” doesn't really exist in Spanish. It's making Spanish the English term market. So you ask a Latino, “where are you going?” Voy a la marketa. “Marketa” is not a proper Spanish term.

VV: My grandmother would have scolded me if I used that.

JN: Oh, yeah, you know. Yeah, you’d get your ears pulled [laughter]. Yeah, you know? Yes. Or, one of my favorites parquear el carro. “Parquear” is not a Spanish word, the proper Spanish word is estacionar, to station the car. To park the car. So, when Latinos say “parquear”, it's a completely neologism. It's an invented word. One however, that is invented out of the hybridity, the crossing over, the mixing of cultures and languages and everything else. But if you're in a literary system at an institution that values, very arbitrarily, certain language over another, or certain high-level dictions versus another. Then you ignore that body of work. Other forms of course Chinglish, Chinese-English. And the overlays there. This is the way in which language and culture relate to one another. This is the way in which language points to an identity. And this is the way in which systems begin to disappear people because a language will point to their identity. In that case, when you start privileging one language, English multilingualism over another, you symbolically and linguistically disappear of people. That's Victor's argument in multilingualism. He says it's the flattening, the flattening out of things, right, it doesn't make a diversion.

VV: Well, what's interesting here is that when you look at the writers, one of the things that stands out, I will always think of José Martinez you know living, what 15-20 years in New York right, one of the most important innovators in the Spanish language, both in poetry and in the essay. He does not appear in conversation with Walt Whitman or Emerson, who he critiqued. He liked some of their ideas and did others. So other words, so what's funny is that it's not merely this flattening as if the writers themselves are the product of translation, are the product of movement. In other words, you know, they cross borders. This is a theme that's seen over and over again. They are exiles. Many of them are political exiles. So, it's that these people are people of movement and their literature is a product of that. And is been going on for a long time. It's not recent. You know, so I think for example, I imagine a book like this for New York. Or, because I don't think the significance of José Martinez in postcolonial studies—he's hugely important, very important. We study the hell out of him. Right? Why isn't he so important you know when you look at antitheologies of New York? He never appears. That's unconscionable. Really unconscionable. Because strictly from a literary point of view you have more than you know, the first inklings of modernism in Spanish, even before Ezra Pound and all those guys is in Spanish. So from a strictly, if you just want to deal with poetic technology if you want to look at that very literal way, those people, all that generation is really important, [inaudible], and when you study Spanish, you have to study all these people. I mean they're very important. And then, in the essay, which is only now beginning to take hold is that he was not just an innovator in poetry, he was an inventor of a new kind of Crónica. The Crónica is literary nonfiction, is continually being reinvented by Latin American people. So, it's not like a fixed thing. Every 15, 20, 30 years, it's re-imagined. He reimagines it from a postcolonial
perspective. And what I can't remember his name, Ramos? No, it's another one. Forget the name, I'm terrible at names, okay. She basically says what's going on here is a literature of translation. That these writers are writing from an acute awareness of being bilingual and bicultural. Of being in between this reality. He's writing in New York—he's writing dispatches to people in Spain and Latin America about what's happening in New York. About race riots in Chicago. About the trial of Lucy Gonzalez Parsons when she, this anarchist gives her defense of women. At that moment, he realizes that women can be political actors. He had been very patriarchal and traditional. And he says, “Oh my God I've been totally wrong.” You know, imagine if we had known this, you know, how would this change our view of Latinos, Latinx people about who they are? You know, and that's why I wanted to read a little thing from, can I go ahead and read it?

JN: More importantly, I think Victor's work raises the question of how do we conceive of American literature?

VV: Yes. Exactly.

JN: This is the central question, is how do we define American literature and how do we conceive of it if we're disappearing these people? I would just add before Victor reads that with his work focusing on L.A., one of the other technologies he says is whenever you look at works about L.A., he quotes Mike Davis. Mike Davis is one of my favorite theorists. And Mike Davis, he does urban geography, urban studies that kind of thing. Mike Davis once noted that in Hollywood, I mean when you look at Hollywood apocalyptic films. You know the end of the world, that kind of thing, destruction. He says Hollywood has destroyed in film—Hollywood has destroyed Los Angeles in film almost 1000 different times. More importantly, Mike Davis says in every film that destroys L.A., whether it's "Escape From L.A.,” or “Earthquake”, or whatever it is, in every single film that destroys Los Angeles, when you think of the end of the world, the way in which Hollywood reimagines after the point of destruction, you look at the people on screen. Latinos have been disappeared. Black folks have disappeared. Most people have gone away. Most people of color have gone away. So in a post-apocalyptic film of Hollywood, this is literary as well, right. These are stories we tell about a place. L.A., the unconscious sort of impulse of reimagining Los Angeles after its destruction is literally getting rid of all of the people of color. So, this is done in this book, both before in the literature and literary value of LA, and after through Hollywood with regard to rendering people of color invisible. So, you know, I thought of Davis because it's central to Victor's argument here.

VV: Well, I was just going to read, I'm going to tell you who she is a little bit. This is a Colombian journalist Blanca de Moncaleano, a firm supporter of women rights and revolution. And worked for the Mexican Leftist weekly, Tierra. And was married Juan Moncaleano, a Colombian educator, and Partido Liberal Mexicano member. That was an anarchist, it was kind of a crypto anarchist organization. So that's the other thing was these people. These people are out there. I mean, they're real players, okay. As Emma Pérez explains in The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History, Blanca de Moncaleano began publishing essays for Regeneracion in 1913, often condemning, from a feminist perspective, women's subjugation to the patriarchal family.
So, in other words so she's talking about things that we're still talking about. I'm not going to go—you should read all of this because we say more about her. Even the way—Okay, now the paperback edition will be available in the spring. Unfortunately, so you have to wait. This is what she writes—this is to womankind in manifesto. And this is kind of a distillation of a stump speech she would give L.A. And she's giving this right as the United States is deciding to join World War I, all right. So, this is the context, you have to remember this. "I direct these words to you, sublime human form of which the Vedas called mother of humanity some 10,000 years ago. To you, whom the church fathers denied a soul. To you, of the unending source of life. The key to all that exists. To you, the slave of priests, governors, and the rich. Go my words to you, who makes innumerable sacrifices to raise your children. And when they are all grown and robust with you at the doors of happiness, tyrants tear them away in the name of the father land. Throw them into battle, where they are ripped to pieces by deadly lead. Where they will become food for worms and crows. Such a sad end for that immense treasure of your love." This is on the street. You can imagine this in Wilmington or in San Pedro. You know, when the Wobblies and the anarchist, because this is also. The other thing about this language it's very oral, it's very performative. It's meant to be said in public, right? Yet, it's also—this is a person of great skill. You know, that's the other thing you see in her use of language and you go through this. This is a person who’s read—who knows the Veda, she makes all kind of literary reference to Sappho. I mean she has like a knowledge of classical literature. And so eventually what's really interesting, when there's a crackdown, when the Palmer raids and the raids against the anarchist, when Otis Harrison Grey, the owner of the, The Los Angeles Times begins his campaign against the left, right? After the McNamara brothers blow up The Times. You're talking with some really hairy times. She goes underground. She basically changes her name and she lived in L.A. for the rest of her life. And I would love someone to find her descendants, her children. I would love to know her story. Because that's the other thing we want to do here. We want to encourage—we were just scratching the surface here. What happened? What did she do? One of the things she was doing, she would go to the women's organizations and teach women to read. That was one of her big practices. So, I mean, so—

JN: Latino Literary L.A. is fantastic, and it has this amazing history. Victor's talking about the Partido Liberal de Mexico, the PLM. Led in part by the Flores Magón brothers who were—their followers, they have a following are called Magonistas. Both the brothers, of course, opposed the dictatorial regime in Mexico at the time, in 1910, they're writers. So, the connection between political activity and the literary stuff and the writing stuff is incredible. They were known as you know, the press. When they ran a press called El Hijo de El Ahuizote in Mexico City, they were the enemy of the people, you know, they were declared the enemy of the people by a dictator in Mexico Porfirio Díaz. Porfirio Díaz after he ran for re-election—I mean he was a dictator, he was rigging the system—gets re-elected to Mexican presidency, though he's rigging it. So, he elects himself in 1910, and this is what initiates the revolution. Well, Ricardo Flores Magón and his brother, they, very famously, hang a banner from their newspaper offices in Mexico City that say la constitución ha muerto, the constitution is dead. They declare a constitutional crisis. Which is what the discourse is today. A constitutional crisis with regard to the presidency now. So, these things are not new. We've seen them before. But when they hang the banner from their press building, the presidency and everybody, they go after them.
They go after to arrest them, the Magón brothers. Now, the Magón brothers flee to the United States of all places. And they come here. And that they come here and they're on the run because people are looking for them to persecute them. Ricardo Flores Magón very famously ends up in Echo Park. Yes, that hipster Bastian of all hipsterness, right? Yeah, he ends up in Echo Park, and in 1917, as the revolution is continuing in Mexico, the United States applies for the first time ever, the Alien and Sedition Act of 1970 against Ricardo Flores Magón. They arrest him in East L.A., send him to Leavenworth prison in Kansas. And there in the prison system, as a good anarchist, along with the Marxists, and everybody else they teach all the prisoners to read. Yeah, and he, Ricardo Flores Magón, has one of the best libraries in the prison system. Yeah. He hides, of course, his copies of the Communist Manifesto in the Bible [laughter]. But this is what he's doing. He’s teaching—they’re teaching the prisoners to read. And the anarchists, and the Marxists, and the communists, and everybody else there have a vibrant literary tradition of every May Day, the day of the worker, the International Day of the Worker of hosting debates. So, there’s this fantastic sort of literariness and quite literally efforts at literacy in the prison system, led by someone like Ricardo Flores Magón. Who is part of this literary L.A. tradition now. So, these are some of the uncovered sort of histories and things about American literature, transnational American identity that Victor is trying to uncover in this book.

VV: And then, I didn't indulge my own. You were asking why I didn't put my own writing, some of my work is being anthologized. I didn't do that because I criticize people very directly, individually. So, I don't want to be a hypocrite. But I did indulge one thing and it has to do with Magón. I did put my grandfather's memoir. My grandfather, before he died—I was raised in a family where when all the older men on my mother’s side of the family would start playing poker, they would let—I was still remember my grandmother—well, they would let me hide under the poker table, because my grandmother didn't want to have me hearing their stories, I couldn’t wait to hear the stories. I was raised in a family where people were talking story all the time. Women, men, everybody. So I would go under the table and then they would tell the stories of the revolution. So, eventually my mother heard, also heard them and said, before you know when my grandfather was having some heart issues, she said, you know what we have to get his whole story down. So, what we find out in this by the way is that when he is recruited at gunpoint to join the revolution, he is ambivalent. He is supporting it for the reason you said, the constitución ha muerto. Small property owners in Chihuahua—he wasn’t necessarily a radical socialist, but their property was under attack because the Porfirio Díaz was basically forcing people off the land, through court and through violence, off their land and giving it to Americans, the Hearst, the Chandlers had huge ranches in that area. To the Tarrazas family, the biggest landowners in Mexico at that time and the wealthiest landowners. So, the small landowners are trying to keep their land. So, they support the revolution for that reason. So they take him and guess, lo and behold who recruits him? And who actually knew his family? Is José Inés Salazar, one of the last anarchist generals you know, commanders. I don't know if he was a general in any kind of classical sense. He was a commander, a guerrilla. And so he is taken in the winter of 1916 and spends three months in the mountains. And they took him not as a soldier, they took him because he was good with horses. He was a 16-year-old. He was really good. And he also knew the mountains because they had open range. He was a cowboy in
every sense. And I would watch cowboy movies by the way, and he would comment on them, and say a horse cannot run that long [laughter]. You know? He would say that's ridiculous. He'd say who is going to run a horse that long? The horse would die. You know those old Hop-a-long Cassidy movies. And they go and go and go. He said, how is it possible for a horse to run that long? And when are they loading their guns? They shoot, and shoot, and shoot. He thought that was the most ridiculous thing. But they took him because he knew the canyons, the hiding points. He knew how to run cattle from Sonata to Tijuana, basically and he knew that landscape. So, I included that. But one of the things that's interesting here is that there's this sort of subterranean culture in the Chicano community, where we retell these stories, Ernesto Galarza in *Barrio Boy* talks about hearing the anarchist, you know all this other knowledge of a radical past is in the DNA and the memory of our community and Galarza is another good example of that, of talking about you know when they massacred the strikers with machine guns. So, there's this part. And that's the other reason, this is number six. Is the Cold War. The rhetoric of the core, anti-Communism right. So, Mexicans, you know descendants of those children were all going to want to just stay away from that because that's just a scary thing, you know? Having Blanca talk the way she's talking wow, just hitting patriarchy with its head on. That's pretty scary. You know, so maybe we shouldn't talk about that. You know. And I remember for example my father, when he would go to work downtown, he would buy the socialist newspapers, but he would cover the outside covers out. He's dead now. Nobody can bust him with it. And he was undocumented as well. So, he lived all those things. So, he would cover the outside covers out. So, no one could see what he was carrying. He was a member of the CIO, which was a really good union for Mexican workers. Because the AFL did not want to have people of color at all. The CIO did, it was a very progressive unit. So, in fact he was able to have. So, he's part of the NLU and all his colleagues are Jewish jewelers. So, I was raised in an environment where literacy all of that, but I also saw the danger of it, you know, the fact that dad why are you doing this? And no me preguntas ahoritas, you know. Don't ask me now. Because we'd be walking down, you know, this is on Broadway, you know right across the street from Grand Central Market. So, and then, but I also remember reading Carlos Monsiváis as a teenager, right as I'm getting ready to go to college, I would read one of the most important essays in the Spanish language right. Critical, really great critical essay.

JN: For those of you who don't know Carlos Monsiváis is probably the premier leftist intellectual of Mexico. He just died some years ago. But the premier leftist intellectual of Mexico.

VV: And his journalism was really interesting as he practiced a form of cultural studies in a common vernacular. Because that's the difficulty. One thing is to do cultural studies, in an obscure language, the other one is to do it in a way where everybody can understand it. Now, his journalism was still tough. But nevertheless, you saw that even you what, you see this in Latin America too in the Crónica, as a form of intellectual history, people are doing things, Jameson, Fredric Jameson observed this about the Cubans, for example. I'm trying to think, [inaudible] Tomas. You say well, these guys are talking about stuff that we thought only you know, stuff that occurred after the critical turn. That only critical theory was talking about. And yet they're talking at 10, 20 years before. They're already and they go, oh, yeah. And even Edward Said missed this by the way, so I mean, but in the tradition of the Crónica, is this
incredible, serious intellectual tradition, scholarly tradition, and I read essays by linguists, Gombrowicz, Polish, I'm trying to think of all the different, all kinds of people would write for Spanish-language publications, and they were sold in L.A. and you could get them.

JN: We're going to get to the audience in just a second—

VV: Oh, I'll stop.

JN: —but if I can quickly sum up, Victor, if I can quickly sum up your argument there. Notice we're talking about the disappearance of Latino writing in LA. One of my favorite phrases of course, is “Columbusing”. You all know what “Columbusing” is? You know, it's that something doesn't exist until white folks, but especially Western Europeans discover it. Then all of a sudden it exists for everybody. But we've been here all along. Right, that's—Victor if I can if I can sum up this argument, Victor's argument then is a sort of literary Colombusing. That L.A. Latino writing, that indigenous people and Latinos in L.A. and the literary production doesn't exist until mostly as white folks who discovered them. And then all of a sudden, they come into existence magically. As if we weren't always already here.

VV: But even when you win prizes. Even this still doesn't quite exist. Well the individual exists, see that's where we're at now. The individual will have some attainment. And that's good, obviously. But that's as far as it goes.

JN: All right.

VV: Okay.

JN: Let's thank our guest.

[Applause]

Moderator: This podcast is a 2018 production of the Robert E. Kennedy library with music by Doug Irion.

[Music]