

Austin American-Statesman

‘Between two worlds’: A fantastic new anthology spotlights Mexican American literature

By Michael Barnes
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I found the book that was missing from my bookshelf.

A fantastic new anthology of Mexican American literature, “Nepantla Familias,” plunges into the memories of writers who have experienced a culture that hovers between cultures.

Not all the writers are Texans, but it belongs on any up-to-date Texan’s bookshelf.

Sergio Troncoso, resident faculty member of the Yale Writers’ Workshop and president of the Texas Institute for Letters, edited this slim yet essential volume from the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University in partnership with Texas A&M University Press.



I recently interviewed him.

American-Statesman: The Aztec “Nepantla” is a beautiful word. Tell us why you chose it for the subject matter in this anthology.

Sergio Troncoso: I wanted to create an anthology that focused on the liminal existence that is so essential to the Mexican American experience: living between worlds, languages, cultures and even psychologies. This “middle ground” of Nepantla deserves its own authenticity and recognition, and is a place that can unleash as much creativity as it does frustration when navigating and choosing your identity. Nepantla is also a universal experience, so this idea of the middle ground should appeal to readers even if they are not Mexican American.

Almost all the stories — fiction, nonfiction and poetry — are intensely personal, and often told in the first person. Did you seek out that quality?

I asked these writers to write new work — 25 of the 30 works in this collection are appearing in the anthology for the first time — and to write about Nepantla as it happens within families. Because it is in these personal spaces that identity is negotiated, thwarted, created as you balance many

different worlds, including the traditional values of parents and the new values you might adopt as an “American.”

So the "intensely personal" nature of these narratives, whether nonfiction, poetry or fiction, is due to the subject matter. Writing about families is about as personal as it gets for any writer.

Some of your contributors are familiar, but many are not. How did you find them?

I asked. Which means, I asked writers I knew, and I told them about the anthology and my idea of finding new work on Nepantla but through families. I asked writers to recommend other writers. I read writers I did not know. I wanted the best contributions on this complex and rich topic, because it is a topic that plays out in so many important ways, from tragedy to comedy and back.

The book seems very up to the minute in terms of Mexican American writing. What’s the best way for the general reader to keep up with the best in the field?

“Nepantla Familias” is a very forward-looking anthology. I wanted writing not just for my generation, but for my children’s generation, and what they might experience in the future as Mexican Americans.

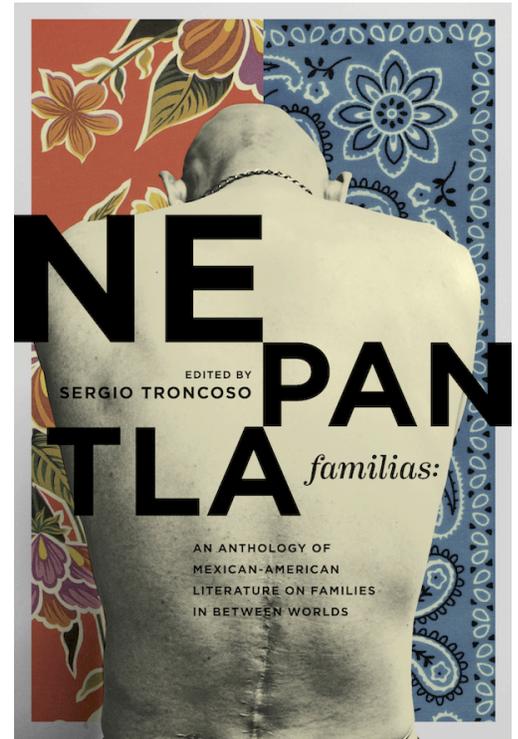
I think the best advice is to read widely. Mexican American writers are publishing in small magazines, in *The New Yorker*, and everything in between. I meet writers at conferences, I invite them to speak or teach at Yale, I meet them online, and I am constantly asking for recommendations.

Who should I be reading now? All of us are overworked, but I get a certain thrill whenever I discover a great new voice in literature from our community.

I am reminded how much El Paso in particular is a literary center. Why do you think that is so?

The best writing from Texas, in my opinion, comes from El Paso.

First, I think El Paso has had a long literary tradition, from Mariano Azuela writing his seminal work “Los de Abajo” in El Segundo Barrio in 1915, to Benjamin Alire Saenz working on “Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club” in the Sunset Heights neighborhood during the current literary period.



Second, El Paso has been a crossroads for how the United States approaches, interacts and even vilifies Latin America and its immigrants; the city is the Ellis Island of the South. This place is rich in linguistic creativity, the contradictions and possibilities of immigration, and the liminal existence of Nepantla, living in between worlds.

Third, living in Nepantla allows those on the borderlands to see the need to choose who you are, rather than to take any identity for granted. Living in Nepantla, as I have often said, is living philosophically, living with questions to be answered, living with your identity as an immediate issue to decide.

Fourth — and I could keep going, but I won't — El Paso is the place where the West meets the South in the United States.

A few of the stories deal with tough topics, such as gang rape. How do you prepare readers for that kind of subject matter?

There is one story, “The Hole in the House” by Sheryl Luna, that mentions a stepfather’s abuse of the author in the first sentence, and goes on to describe the difficulties as well as the resiliency of the author and her mother in overcoming this abuse.

So I don't want to sensationalize or mischaracterize what's in the book.

There are other essays, like “Losing My Mother Tongue” by Reyna Grande, that explore linguistic discrimination against children to stamp out the use of Spanish in schools. Or Alex Espinoza’s “In(toxic)ated Masculinity,” that focuses on alcohol abuse and sexuality.

All of these works are part of the Nepantla experience, just as much as the works that are humorous, thoughtful, tragic, or life-affirming. Readers should be adults, and if they want a book that will be deeply meaningful to them, whether or not they are Mexican American, then they should pick up “Nepantla Familias.”

Here in Austin, the Ransom Center and Benson Latin American Library at the University of Texas both appear to be collecting Hispanic archives at an increasing pace, while the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University in San Marcos is doing the same with a different set of authors. What role can they play in promoting Mexican American writers, and which other literary archives in Texas are doing a good job at this?

The Wittliff Collections published “Nepantla Familias” in partnership with Texas A&M University Press. So that's one fundamental way these archives can promote Mexican American writers. The Wittliff also created a long-running exhibit of “Nepantla Familias,” in which many of the authors in the anthology donated material on their families, including dozens of photos, music and other items.

These archives, like the Wittliff, need to take Mexican American authors seriously, as the best of Texas literature, as the future of our state. For too long, the literary powers of Texas only gave token nods to Mexican American authors, or completely ignored them.

How long did it take for Mexican American literature to be considered one of the richest veins of Texas literature at the University of Texas? I would say that the Wittliff is leading the way in doing a good job of focusing on Mexican American writers in Texas. I thank Steve Davis and David Coleman for that leadership.

You help lead two prestigious groups that promote writing — the Texas Institute of Letters and the Yale Writers’ Workshop. How can those groups encourage, train and promote fantastic writers like the ones represented in your book?

By paying attention to them. By reading their work. By promoting them and putting them in positions of power. It’s not that complicated.

Many literary institutions in Texas, and beyond, have ignored or stereotyped Mexican American writers. “Nepantla Familias” shows the literary talent we have in our community, talent that is winning national and international awards and fellowships, that is selling hundreds of thousands of books, that is being published in places from *The New Yorker* to *Ploughshares* to *The Yale Review*.

In the past few years, the Texas Institute of Letters has inducted more Mexican American writers than ever before, and they’ve won our lifetime achievement award, including Pat Mora, Sandra Cisneros, Benjamin Alire Saenz and John Rechy. But the reality is that these writers should have won the top award years ago.

So the Institute is changing, but it’s playing catch up to today’s reality. Which is: We have great writers who happen to be Mexican American in this country. The literary institutions and publishers on the East Coast, particularly in New York City, are even further behind than the Institute, but suddenly there is more interest in Mexican American writers in New York, too. I hope that’s a permanent relationship, and not a short-term fling.

We will see.

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