

Season One, Episode Four: Latino Voices in Book Publishing with Francisco Aragón,

Intro: Welcome to Red Hen Radio, a podcast brought to you by Red Hen Press. We're a nonprofit publisher fostering diverse stories every year. On this podcast, you'll get to hear from the people who are inside the literary world — the authors and publishing professionals who are working hard to keep independent literature thriving. Stay with us as we introduce you to today's segment.

Kate: I'm Kate Gale. I'm the publisher and CEO of Red Hen Press, and I'm excited to be here today with Francisco. Red Hen Press has been publishing for thirty years. And in 2002, we had a booth for the first time at AWP in New Orleans. We only had two of us there, Mark and my friend, Steph. At the time, I was a little concerned that Mark wouldn't be friendly enough to talk to people, and I was gonna be off trying to do meetings and set up connections for Red Hen.

I was at the booth, and I saw this guy walking towards us. And he was very directly walking toward our booth with a purpose, and I could see he seems to know that we're here. And he walked up, introduced himself, and he said: "I'm Dana Gioia. I've heard about Red Hen Press. I have heard what you're doing in Los Angeles, and you should keep going because Los Angeles is a good place for a publishing company."

And I said, "really? I don't think so." And he said, "let's go out tonight." So that night, we went out for dinner. We went out for drinks. I think we were out until two or three in the morning, and I found out that I did not like hurricanes. I actually didn't like most of the drinks that were in New Orleans, but we ended up kind of bonding. After that, when he became chair of the NEA, I visited Washington quite a few times and kept having this long conversation about poetry and literature. He wrote this book *Can Poetry Matter?* because poetry matters a great deal to him in his core, in his DNA. Which brings me to I'm curious what was the origin story for you of meeting Dana and also sort of the founding of Letras Latinas?

Francisco Aragón: I love that story. And the reason why I love that story is because 2002 was my very first AWP. I'd never been to one. I was a grad student at UC Davis at the time.

In 2003, I started my time at Notre Dame. I finished my MFA. In the fall of 2003, right after Dana was selected to be the chair of the NEA, he came to Notre Dame, and I figured out a way to broker a meeting between him, the director of the Institute for Latino Studies, and myself. It was at that meeting where I really began to make my case to him about the need for more representation of Latino and Latino voices in more mainstream venues.

Little did I know that Dana, after that meeting, began asking about me. Dana asked if I wanted to come join the NEA as a fellow, and I had to decline because I just started my job at the institute, and I felt like I just couldn't uproot myself for a one year fellowship. But that meeting was so meaningful. So I started Letras Latinas in 2004 and was trying to get it off the ground in those years when I was living in South Bend. But in 2007, I made a very strategic decision to

ask to be transferred to our office in DC. Between 2007 and 2012, I was running Letras Latinas from Washington, DC.

So Letras Latinas is a constellation of programs that serves to amplify our community's storytellers, and we do this through various ways. One of the first big-ticket items was the Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize, a first book prize for Latinx poets, and our publisher was the University of Notre Dame Press. One of our other early big-ticket items, which has a relationship to Dana Gioia, was something called poeta sipintores, artists conversing with verse. Because at that breakfast meeting with Dana, he encouraged us to pursue initiatives that foster conversation between disciplines. And we took that piece of advice to heart, wrote a grant to the NEA, got the grant, and that's how we did this.

One of Letras Latinas' hallmarks, and we've been doing this since day one, is initiatives that foster interdisciplinary conversations.

K: That's amazing. Yeah. I remember that meeting in Guadalajara. We had gone down there, Red Hen, because the Los Angeles Pavilion invited LA presses. Tia Chucha was there. They brought a lowrider car. The people in Guadalajara were very excited about it. And Pete Fairchild read a poem about rolling cars. You were there and you were helping translate.

FA: My job was simply to be floating around the pavilion and being sort of like a translator. But one of the things I did when I got there is I began to wander around the pavilion just to look at the presses. I knew about Red Hen Press as a name, but I didn't know who ran it. I didn't necessarily know that they were in Los Angeles, and I got to your table.

And I slowly began to notice something. I don't recall seeing any Hispanic surnames. At that period of time, I was obsessed with representation or underrepresentation of Latino voices. And I asked myself, how is it that this press, which is in one of the most Latino cities in the world, doesn't seem to have many? I couldn't remember seeing any authors. What I don't remember, maybe here you can help.

I don't remember how I broached the subject or the conversation. I just remember we were sitting around a dinner table, you and Mark. We were drinking beer. And by the end of the week, you knew what I thought because I wanted to be very tactful and diplomatic. And what I remember admiring about your response was, on our last day, you said something like, "You know, Francisco, I've been thinking about what you've said, and we need to collaborate. We need to collaborate somehow to address this." And the fact that you actually just extended that welcoming hand to start a conversation, I thought, was good. What is your recollection of how I let you know that Red Hen Press needed to do more with Latino voices.

K: What I remember was we were at dinner, and you said, do you feel that you're doing a good job of representing Latin voices? And I said, no.

At this point, we had published Doug Kearney. We were publishing Camille Dungy at that point. We published a couple books by Chris Abani. And I said, I feel like the point we had published Chris Abani, we started getting more African American poets sending us work, and we were quite poetry-heavy at that point. But I said, you know, we've published, like, a couple Latin writers, but we're not getting a lot sent to us.

I said, it's not like I'm rejecting a bunch of stuff. We're just not getting much sent to us. And I'd like to change this, but as the editor, I don't really feel like I know how to change it. I said I'd be open to any suggestions that you have. I look back on that, and I think about all the pieces of that because I think that sometimes people will criticize an organization for not being more inclusive.

First of all, the organization has to be willing to say, I'd like to change this. I'm open to suggestions. The door is open. I might be doing something wrong here. You know? There might be something that I could be doing differently. You know, I think back of when we were approached by Peggy Shumaker, who was like, you should be publishing more writers from Alaska. I'm like, got it. How would we go about that? You know? Because Alaskans aren't sending me work right now. And she was like, well, let's start an imprint. Okay. Let's do that. You know?

So it isn't always that the organization itself is trying to ignore some particular group. What the organization itself is usually doing is trying to keep its head above water. At that stage, we were certainly just swimming along trying to survive. And I remember even at the Guadalajara Book Fair, we had shipped a lot of books down, and we suddenly realized we were not gonna get them back. And it took Mark a minute to realize we were just abandoning these books in Mexico. We came to that conversation with this open heart of we're ready to change. I always like to think of Red Hen as a kayak. You know, it's like ready to just change directions and that you had an open heart and that you were willing to facilitate change. You were willing to jump in and be part of...

FA: So what happened then is I went back to South Bend, and I thought about our encounter. And I need to insert here that part of this was that we had a good time. We went out. We drank beer. We went and ate beef, and all this to say that we began to forge a bond just as two people having fun and hanging out.

So I think what happened is I went back and I noticed that Cave Canem had started a second book prize. And I thought Latino poetry needs a second book prize. That's it. Somehow, I learned that you were gonna be in New York to do your galley drops, and so I emailed you and I said, let me come up to New York and let's have dinner. I have an idea.

We were just catching up. I said, "Kate, Letras Latinas would like to explore doing a second slash, third book prize. And I'll administer this one. I'll select the judge. Red Hen Press could be the publisher." That's how we got started.

K: Out of that prize, of course, Dan Vara and William Archila. Dan Vara's book is one of the most beautiful books Red Hen has ever published. William Archila is still at my house every year for the Christmas party. He comes to the benefit every year with his amazing wife, Lory Bedikian, and their twins. And the two of them have just gone on to be poetry stars.

One of the things that has come out of this, which I think we were hoping for, was that more and more Latin writers came to realize that Red Hen was publishing Latino/a writers. We began to receive books for other prizes. So, of course, Felicia Zamora ended up winning the Benjamin Saltman Award. Now we are publishing Florencia Ramirez. There have just been a continuous group of writers who have been sending us manuscripts. A quarter of our list one year was Latin writers. The shift has been enormous.

FA: My recollection is that you took to heart this conversation. You promptly went back in one of your board meeting speeches, said, "we need to do more for Latino poets." And that gesture on your part is what prompted you to connect me with Rob Casper.

Connecting me with Rob was transformative. At the time, he was at PSA, and that led to a series of events with PSA. And then that led to a multiyear initiative where I brought Latino poets to Harvard, Georgetown, Macalester College, the University of Arizona, and then Notre Dame through PSA with Rob. It was your intervention on our behalf with Rob at the PSA that got that rolling.

William Archila: This is William Archila, and I will be reading my poem "Three Minutes with Mingus".

When I read of poets & their lives,
son of a milkman & seamstress, raised
in a whistle-stop town or village, a child
who spent his after-school hours deep
in the pages of a library book, I want to go
back to my childhood, back to the war,
rescue that boy under the bed, listening
to what bullets can do to a man, take him
out of the homeland, enroll him in school,
his class—size ten—unfold the fables
of the sea, a Spanish galleon slamming up
& down the high waters. This is why
I write poems, why I prefer solitude
when I listen to your lazy sound
of brass on the phonograph. You give
language to black roosters & fossil bones,
break down phrases between the LA River
& the yellow taxi cabs of New York.
I picture you in Watts, the 240-pound

wrath of a bass player building up steam,
woodshedding for the strictly segregated
hood, those who seek a tiny shot of God,
digging through hard pan, the hammer's
grunt & blow. I need a gutbucket of gospel,
the flat land of cotton to catch all those.

Chinese acrobats bubbling inside your head.
When I think of the day I will no longer
hold a pencil within my hand or glance
upon the spines of my books, I hear
Picasso's Guernica in your half-choked
cries, a gray workhorse lost in a fire's
spiraling notes, a shrieking tenor sax
for the woman falling out of a burning house.
I want to tell you if I wrote like you pick
& pat in Blues & Roots, I would understand
the caravel of my childhood, loose,
without oars or sails, rolling on the swells
of a distant sea. That's all I got, Mr. Mingus.
I give you the archaeology of my words,
every painstaking sound I utter when I come
to the end of a line, especially the stressed
beats of a tiny country I lost long ago.

K: You know, one of the things I think that you and I have in common is that through our organizations a lot of the work we do is connecting.

I flew to Chicago, and I was flying there because Red Hen wants to change a lot of what we're doing in terms of sales. I was meeting with a press called Haymarket, and I met with the founder of Haymarket. And you could say, you know, why not try to see if you could just call this person on the phone? But if I wanted to change the game in terms of what we're doing, to me, it was, like, worth a trip to Chicago to spend two hours with the founder of Haymarket and do a deep dive into what they're doing. Those kinds of connections are life changing.

Also, of course, we've done events at the Poetry Foundation. Wanted to know if you could say something about the Poetry Foundation events, which have been so successful.

FA: I'll just share you a brief little origin story. I was in South Bend, and I began to get invited to things in Chicago at the Poetry Foundation. One day, I found myself sitting next to Steve Young, and it was right around the time that I was beginning to track how many book reviews by Latino poets Poetry Magazine was publishing.

Sitting next to Steve Young, I had a similar moment as I had with you at Guadalajara, and I began to ask Steve Young, “do you know how many books Poetry Magazine has reviewed, not poems, but book reviews between 2003 and say 2007?” “No. How many?” “Zero.” And he was taken aback.

And two weeks later, he reached out to me and said, I wanna do an event in Chicago with Latino poets at the Art Institute of Chicago. Could you think about two other poets in addition to yourself who will read with us. And I invited Blas Falconer and Brenda Cárdenas.

Another time I was sitting next to Emily Warren. I had the same conversation I had with her that I had with Steve Young. She turned around and wrote me an email and said, we wanna do something for your *The Wind Shifts* anthology. We want to invite you to get some poets to select poems and write little micro essays about six poems. So the Poetry Foundation, Emily Warren, and Steve Young had a very similar reaction as you did, and we began to collaborate.

In contrast, the editor of Poetry Magazine at the time, silence. The one time I emailed him, he just didn't respond. It wasn't until they hired Don Share, and he finally reached out to me and said, “Francisco, I see what you're posting. I get it. I try to get *The Wind Shifts* reviewed. And whenever I approach prospective reviewers, they would say things like, 'I don't read Spanish.' And he'd have to say, 'oh, the book's in English.' 'Oh, well, I don't wanna say the wrong thing.'”

So it was very useful to hear Don Share because I was getting an inside story. He was actually trying to make a difference, but reviewers didn't wanna go near it because they were afraid they were gonna say the wrong thing. So then Don Share and I began a really fruitful dialogue. The pinnacle of that dialogue was when we did our ekphrastic initiative with the Smithsonian on an exhibit called the Latino Presence in American Art. So those are my Poetry Foundation stories, and it underscores that it's the relationship.

K: You know, I just stopped teaching in June, but I would always say to my grad students who are Latino, you know, write reviews. Get into the reviewing business because we need more reviewers of color.

FA: Assumptions that get made. The idea that someone looks at a book and says, “I don't read Spanish.”

K: What?

FA: I've had experiences, Kate, where I've given a poetry reading, and other Latinos have had this experience. I will have given a poetry reading where 100% of my intervention was in English and have someone in the audience come up to me afterwards and say, “do you write in Spanish?” “No.” “Oh, I was just wondering.” after giving a reading in English. So it's analogous to someone looking at a book and saying, “I don't read Spanish.” How about opening the book and starting to read?

K: Yeah. I mean, I've had people ask about Latino writers that we've published, whether they wrote it first in Spanish and translated it. It's like, no. This person's been living in The United States since they were eight. They're writing in English.

FA: One of the things that I did in the early years was I ran a small press for ten years called Momotombo Press. Momotombo is the name of the most famous volcano in Nicaragua. We published chapbooks, prose, and poetry in English.

And every now and then, we would get queries from libraries. Our titles began to gain some traction, and libraries began to contact us and ask us for copies. And one time, I got an email from a library in Indiana asking specifically for Red Hen author Brenda Cárdenas asking for Brenda Cárdenas' chapbook, and I sent it. And I just said, "just by the way, can I ask you how you found out about Momotombo Press and why you were interested?" And she wrote back and said, "well, we're trying to expand our list of foreign titles."

K: What do you do with that?

FA: One of the things that we're dealing with is still hundreds of years later trying to say, we belong here. We're part of this country. We're not foreign.

Adela Najarro: Hello, my name is Adela Najarro. This is my poem "What Poetry Told Me".

What Poetry Told Me The week Poetry stayed at my house, she kept a razor in a wooden box. Poetry refused to abandon her ancestors

and paid homage to the octagonal black tourmaline rising up from underneath the burden of boulders. She joined in song with La Virgen and burned down the barriers between us. She was interested in rhyme and the metaphorical. Her rhythm shattered glass, but she did not finish what she began to carve into stone. She was fickle. First she drank mead, then preferred a matini. Poetry wore a new necklace every day. Still, she prayed for us. Words as omens and talismans. But she couldn't really do anything. She never made dinner or even brewed coffee. She was horrible at baking. Soon enough, Poetry abandoned everything, left flour all over the counters, the dough proofing unbaked in the oven. On her way to the airport, she texted one last entreaty, something about an old oak tree

unfurling leaves, glossy and new
but with sharpened points
that can make a poet bleed.

K: I wanted to come back briefly to the Guadalajara Book Fair because I just got back from there. What's my favorite thing about the Guadalajara Book Fair is that when you get there, the schoolchildren are all pouring into it at 02:00 in the afternoon. We always like to think if the Javits Center, when the BEA was there, opened it to, would New York schoolchildren pour in to buy books, which is what the Guadalajara school children do. What they'll do is in little groups of eight or ten, they'll agree to each buy four or five books, which they're gonna exchange. So someone has bought some poetry books by Anne Carson that they're gonna share with the other kids. So it's a book fair that is both a rights fair, but also a book fair where kids can buy books. Of course, adults are too, but just all these kids are so excited about buying books. It's just really amazing to watch.

In terms of who's there, it's mostly publishers from Mexico City and South America. They ask, as they always do, where the rest of the American publishers are. And their assumption is that most American publishers just don't wanna come to Mexico. I've also been to the Sharjah Book Fair in Dubai and to the Beijing Book Fair, and the same situation is true there. There aren't Americans there. There's Europeans, but not Americans. One of the publishers I was talking with from Mexico City, big Mexican City Publisher, said, "is it true that Americans mostly just like things that are in their own country?" And I said, "well, many Americans, yes."

In Mexico, in terms of what people buy in terms of books, about 25% of the books that they're reading came from other countries. So they're interested in the stories from writers in Venezuela and in Colombia. They're reading Márquez. They're reading stories from Brazil, and Argentina, and from Europe, right? They're reading Ishiguro. They're reading from Japan. In Europe, most countries, 30-40% of what they're reading are books in translation.

In the United States, we're at three. Three percent of what we're reading are stories from other countries. So when you ask yourself why we don't understand enough people other than ourselves, it's because we don't read enough stories. We don't read enough from people outside our own little bubbles. As we move forward, you and I were just talking before we came on mic that I want to publish more books in translation. That's part of the reason I feel like I feel compelled to do that.

Red Hen is at 30 years. We're not going anywhere. In the beginning, I kept thinking maybe we should leave Los Angeles, which is a very challenging city to run an arts organization. We've had a Writing in the Schools program here since the beginning. I think of our twin pillars as being literature and literacy, but it's a very difficult city to run an arts organization. New York or Minneapolis would have been better. San Francisco would have been better. But we're here, and we're gonna make it work in LA. All of us here at Red Hen are committed to publishing books that reflect the city we live in. When I think about who we are as a publisher, we wanna

publish LA, the LA demographics, the LA feeling, the grit of this city. And most of the city is pretty poor and hardworking.

FA: And this might be a good way to segue into one aspect of our respective organization's future. I am a big admirer of Tia Chucha Press. They're a small press, and it's been a struggle for them, I think, to do their work because it's been a one-man operation for so many years in the same way that Letras Latinas has been a one-person operation until recently. I'm looking forward to the three of us joining forces and trying to help Tia Chucha continue to live up to its legacy. Do you have any thoughts on that?

K: One of the things that I think both Tia Chucha and Red Hen have in common, and you can tell me whether you think Letras has this in common, is that the reputation might be bigger than the organization. One of the things that's different between Tia Chucha and Red Hen is that Tia Chucha has a really robust community center and a small press. Red Hen has a fairly robust press and a community center that we've only begun to really utilize. Tia Chucha has this very impressive community space and bookstore.

I think that working together, we will help grow Tia Chucha, and I hope to spend some time over at their community center and learn from them in terms of what they've done with that community space, what makes it so central to that community, and be able to do some of the same with our community space.

One of the things that I wanted you to say something about because I think you know Luivette better, but when we first started chatting with Luis about this, I wanted to make sure that he was choosing an editor. Because I felt very strongly that we could help with marketing, with publicity. I felt like our team working with PGW could help them with getting books out. To me, the soul of it is who's acquiring and editing those books. I've asked you on occasion to jump in and help us with editing. I finally met this young woman, Luivette, who's helping with editing. Can you say something about her?

FA: I met Luivette Resto at CantoMundo. CantoMundo is a Latinx poetry organization that does a summer retreat, sort of like Cave Canem. I met her like 2010. Been a long time admirer of her work. Her first two books were Tia Chucha Press books. So I've been reading her, then I got to know her at CantoMundo. She's gonna be instrumental. I sort of view her as Luis' deputy. William Archila is also key to that in terms of reading manuscripts. **While Luivette** is a powerhouse. What I hope Letras Latino brings to the table is some of this curatorial, editorial acumen. And, the goal is for us to do with Tia Chucha, what we've been doing with Red Hen Press, is identifying manuscripts and writers. The first seventeen years was basically me alone. I have a team now of three people, Laura Villareal, Brent Ameneiro. And this year, we have a poetry coalition fellow named Cloud Cardona. And what I envision doing is little by little giving more responsibility to my younger staff on these questions of identifying, evaluating, and even editing manuscripts.

Brenda Cárdenas: This is Brenda Cárdenas, and I will be reading from my book *Trace*.

Placa/Roll Call (after Charles “Chaz” Bojórquez’s Placa/Roll Call, 1980) “If the city was a body, graffiti would tell us where it hurts.” —Chaz Bojórquez And this block would shout, “Nos diste un CHINGAZO, cabrón. Mira esta cara rota, these baton-cracked ribs, this black-and-blue street dizzy con gente: BLADES, KIKI, LARRY, SNOW, ENRIQUE, CONNIE, ELTON, KING, DAVID, KELLY, JEFF, RAT’ON, CHAZ, los de aquí, los de abajo. This roll call won’t be silenced, not by Glock, not by chokehold. This is our temple of runes, our tomb—its glyphic curve and flow, calligraphic code writ acrylic. This, our relic, our scroll unrolled in catacombs, our flecks of subtext still buzzing después de que vayamos con La Pelona. ¡QUE LUCHA, LOCO! Ven, baila con nosotros to the aerosol’s maraca y hiss, al punk en español’s furious sweat. Hang your head out the window y dale un grito tan lleno de duende that it cracks the pavement, summons our dead to dinner. Turn the tonal kaleidoscope. Then pause, catch your breath, so you don’t miss the illegible moment where all the mystery lives. There, de-cypher that!”

K: I wanted to, in our last few minutes, just talk a little bit about what we see as the future of this relationship, not just with Tia Chucha, but just also with working together. And so I wanted to throw out one idea that I have, particularly because you are gonna have all this help. And so I know you’re gonna have all this free time.

I really am looking forward to having more and more books that we are going to be working on from Latino/a writers. And I would love to have more of an editorial collective that we kind of nail down. At Red Hen, I really feel pretty solid about our LGBT collective because I have both Tobi and Piper. And so we have a book, for example, coming out called *Dreams in Which I’m Almost Human*. It’s by a young writer named Hannah Soyer. When I first read this book, I was madly in love with it. But I immediately knew it’s by this young queer writer that Piper and Tobi, one or the other of them, would be able to edit this. And so I feel like I’ve got this strong collective, and I’d love to feel like we have this same kind of situation where I would call you up and say “This is what kind of shape I feel this book is in, that Red Hen’s wanting to accept. Who could we have looked it over? Who do you think would be a good editor for this?”

And again, I now have a couple Vietnamese writers who do this, Lily Hoang being one of them. So after we published her, she’s helping us edit another Vietnamese writer that we accepted. Because I really feel very strongly that it’s fantastic to have someone who’s editing a book, who

understands what the writer is working toward. Sometimes, I think you know Andrew Lam, his second book was just so clean. He's been working on it for years. It's not like you're always gonna need that. But sometimes, if the writer is a younger writer or newer writer, it's nice to have someone like what you did with Jose's book. And so I love the idea of there being sort of an editorial collective.

I'm just very excited about the future of Latin books coming to Red Hen, and I want each of those books to be treated with great care and for us to have conversations about how we're marketing them, how we're getting them out into the world, and how we're working with the authors to create audience. Because the thing is, Tobi and I both teach at UCLA, and one of the things we say to our students is that finding readers for books is not something that happens by accident. Every time you find another thousand readers, you have to work for those. If we are gonna build an audience, we need to have a group of us thinking about how that's gonna happen. It's worth doing because we are building change, and I think we need change now more than ever.

FA: And I'll close by saying my little tidbit about something I'm aspiring for in the future, and I'll share this news now since by the time this podcast airs, it will be public. Letras Latinas is partnering with Graywolf Press, and we are going to be putting out an anthology, and it's going to be co-edited by Laura Villareal and the Afro-Latina poet, Diannely Antigua. This is happening again because of relationships. It's taking place because of Graywolf Press' current publisher, our former judge, Carmen Giménez, who selected Carl Marcum for one of our Red Hen prizes. So we're going to be partnering with Graywolf to put together an anthology of emerging Latinx poets as a sort of a corrective. There'll be a lot of queer voices. There'll be a lot of trans voices. That's gonna be perhaps our big-ticket vehicle for the work that we do.

K: I guess what I would say in conclusion is that encourage everyone that's listening to this who wants change to happen to walk across the room and have a conversation. Change is possible, and I think it's easier to make change happen when you're in conversation with someone, and you're willing to be part of opening the door and building the change yourself.

I thank you so much for coming to us and being part of the change that's happened at Red Hen. It's been an amazing journey. And in the end, I think the journey is not where you're getting, but who you're on the road with. And it's been great being on the road with you, Francisco.

FA: Likewise.

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