WRITING LATINOS

Season 3 Episode 3

Gerry: Hi, my name is Geraldo Cava and I want to thank you for tuning into season three of Writing Latinos, a podcast from public books. We're back for more terrific conversations with Latino authors writing about the wide world of. As always, we aim to provide thoughtful reflections on Latino history, culture, politics, and identity, and how writing conveys some of its meanings.

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Nicola Medina. Mora is a Mexico City based writer and journalist. His writing has appeared in n plus one, the Nation, the Atlantic, the New York Times, and many other publications. His first novel America Del Norte was published last year by Soho Press. It's a wide ranging work of auto fiction, which follows the migration of his protagonist, Sebastian Art Azar from Mexico to New Haven, where he's with student at Yale and Iowa City, where he was a student in the University of Iowa's MFA program in creative nonfiction.

America Del Norte is about many, many things. Art literature, the social and political elite in Mexico, and the long sweep of Mexican history and US Mexico relations, and not least identity is forged between the United States and Mexico. I'm so glad to talk to you today, Nicola. Thank you for joining us.

Thank you, Jel. It was a pleasure. So one of the themes that. Most drew me in in America Del Norte is how Mexico's past and the history of US Mexico relations. And not to mention the history of Ian's family continues to shape the present. So can you talk about how you see the relationship between the past and the present?

I'm gonna read a quote that opens your book that I think is, is really telling here. So let me do that. The quote is from Alfonzo Reyes, who wrote, what Happened Continues to Happen. It lives on a luminous ghost fluttering in the vastness of the night. This is why a watcher of the skies who stood on a particular star and pointed his most powerful telescope toward our world would see at this very hour, Hernan Cortez and his soldiers gazing over the valley of Anak.

So to tell the story that you wanted to tell in America, the Norte, why did you feel like you needed to go back 500 years into the past? And what is the legacy of that past for us today?

Nicolas: Well, so I think there's a, there's a number of different reasons, right? Um, I think the most, I, uh, the, the most important one, I guess is that, uh, Sebastian has a problem, right?

The protagonist of the novel. Uh, which is that the life that he thinks or he thought he was going to have sort of falls apart, right? And in his attempt to understand why this happened and what he should do, given that, uh, his life project, uh, is not going to unfold in the way that he expected, he, he decides that like the way to understand this is just to go back, right?

And to try to like see what are the deep causes of the. Contemporary dynamics that led to this, uh, this kinda like personal catastrophe, or maybe not catastrophe, but you know, this like series of problems. Um, so there's, there's that, right? And there's the other side, which is, uh, I was interested in the, the ways in which Mexico and the United States are similar and also very different.

Right? And Sebastian, uh, in a way kind of like embodies the, the difficulties that arise. Uh, when you actually think that the two countries or people from the two countries can understand one another and they become convinced that they can, and then it turns out that they cannot. And I think that one of the main differences between Mexico and the United States is that in Mexico history.

Is is very much alive, right? Uh, the past is very much present. You walk around downtown Mexico City, uh, in the Salo, which is the, the central plaza, the main square, and you look to the right of the cathedral, uh, you will see this empty space. And if you walk closer, you'll notice that there's, uh, you know, this sort of like ruined pyramid that is, uh, several feet below street level.

And that's the, the ruins of the, of the great temple of the Mika, which, which, uh, which is how the, the people that we refer to as the Aztecs, uh, call themselves. And if you look closely, you start to notice that the stones that were used to build a cathedral were taken from this pyramid. And if you walk around, you know, uh, you'll see this colonial palazzos, and all of a sudden there's like a, a head of, uh, the, you know, the Mika de jotting out.

From the, one of the foundations of one of these colonial palazzos, right? And so in the United States, you see the opposite, right? The United States, I like to say, is a country that is predicated on amnesia, partially because, uh, the, the

foundation of the country was so violent and awful. And also because, you know, the, you know, indigenous people in the United States, uh, for any number of reasons, uh, that we can go into if you want, were, you know, uh, the genocide was much more effective and complete, right.

And so in Mexico, it's a different story because the genocide for all, you know, I, I, despite all of the Spaniard's attempts to the country, didn't succeed to the same extent. And so in the States, uh, if you ask, you know, uh, like a random person who were your great grandparents, they want people to tell you, you know, maybe they will be to tell you, you know, like, oh, well, you know, his name was Bill, her name was Mary, they were from Germany.

And you ask them, okay, what, what part of Germany? And they're like, I don't know. Um. And so I guess that, uh, that insisting on history, right, and having sebass be somebody who's so obsessed with history and, uh, have him like try to write this book that is essentially history of Mexico for the United States for an for American audience was a way of, of highlighting this, this radical difference.

Um. And so, yeah, I, I think like those are the two main reasons, you know, that, uh, that in Mexico, the past feels very present in the United States. It also feels present, but in a much more ghostly and much more, uh, underground way. And also because, you know, the protagonist is somebody who, who is confused why the charmed life that he was promised isn't going to happen.

And then he tries to go back to find, you know, the moment where it all went wrong. And it turns out that. You know, it's 500 years ago, right?

Gerry: I thought it was really interesting that the backdrop of the story is Saba's failed efforts to write a history of Mexico, and the exact nature of that failure is a bit ambiguous.

Is it Mexico's failure? Is it Saba's failure?

Nicolas: I think it's both. Right. Um, and it's also commentary on, on the foolishness of trying to understand the past right of, of trying to write a history. Uh, Sebastian's failure is fundamentally that no matter how much history he reads and how much, uh, he rewrites, right, and, and how much he reorders it, and how far back he goes, he's still, you know, he's, he's left in the same place that he was before he started writing all of this.

He has understood nothing. He has learned a great deal, but the, the mystery remains right. And by the end of the book, I think that he, he essentially surrenders to the mystery and, and you know, there's this moment at the very end when he's, uh, standing in the soo this plaza that I was just describing. On the day of the election of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the former president of Mexico, who is, you know, a character in the book, A peripheral one, but an important one I think.

And, uh, you know, people are singing and everybody's very happy. And of course, Sebastian, who is, uh, a member of the, of the Mexican elite, this is a defeat for his class, right? And a defeat for his family. But nonetheless, he just, let's go, you know, and, uh, thinks that, uh, realizes that. That he actually cannot explain what is going on, what has happened to him, that the past is a foreign country and inaccessible, and that that's okay.

Um, on the other side of it, you know, besides sort of like the, the, the, the inevitable failure of history writing, there's also, uh, the notion of Mexico as a failure, right? And. The heading of the chapter where Sebastian writes to his teacher, uh, in, at Iowa to tell her that his thesis is a disaster and that he has failed, right?

And that it just doesn't work. It doesn't, doesn't cohere, it doesn't make any sense. Uh, the heading of that chapter is La Melancholia, which is the title of a book by a Mexican anthropologist and thinker called Roger Barta. Barta's thesis basically is that this, this, this notion that. You know, no matter how hard Mexico tries, it is always defeated.

It always fails. You know, it's a critique of that idea, his book, right? He says that this is a, first of all, it's false. Second of all, it's uh, you know, like a pathology, right? Like this, this need to define yourself as, as the looser, right? Um, and I think that, uh. Maybe it's like a little bit more ironized than, than I think, uh, is accessible to, to readers who are not familiar with that.

Right. Uh, which is something I think happens throughout the book, that there's like a number of little keys that are meant to help readers interpret it, but that are fairly esoteric. And so Sebastian is convinced that Mexico is a failure and that Mexico will always fail, and that therefore it is somehow fitting that his history of Mexico is itself a failure.

But that's because Sebastian is trapped in the, in the cage of melancholy. Right? Like melancholia. Um, and then on the other side though, there's the fact that, uh, you know, that if Mexico and the United States are, uh, in some kind of

competition or if there's a question of who's winning and who's losing or who has obsidian, who has failed, there is no question that Mexico has lost.

Right? And so I think that this unequal relationship, this, this partnership that isn't really a partnership where. The United States always wins and Mexico always loses, and where even the most lead of Mexicans winds up becoming a loser and winds up losing and failing even when he tries to understand the causes for his failure.

I think that's actually, that is actually I think a fairly accurate allegory of, of, of the relationship between the two countries. So it's the two, the two things at once, right? I guess the three things, the, the, the inevitable failure of any attempt to write history. Um, the Sebastian's, uh, very Mexican, and I think ultimately, uh, pathological, uh, refuge, taking refuge in, in considering himself a failure.

And then thirdly, the fact that yes, it is a metaphor for, for the uneven and unequal relationship between the two countries.

Gerry: Your prologue is called Mexico City, 1847, and I think too. The point we were talking about earlier about the history already be the history already being written, you write under the title of the prologue in which the outcome of this tale is revealed from the start, which gave me the feeling that this is a kind of original moment of Mexican loss in relation to the United States.

What I wanted to ask you about actually is, um, a really interesting character that you introduce us to in that prologue, uh, because. You know, there's a way in American history or Latino history that you can talk about that as a moment of imperialism and gross expansion, where a much greater power dominates a lesser power.

But you introduce us to this character who in that moment goes up to. Uh, I can't remember if it's Washington or Philadelphia, but to represent the interests of his class. Mm-hmm. Which is a, a different kind of angle on the US Mexico War than I had seen before. And I think it also introduces us to one of the.

Themes of your story is how in the face of the power imbalances between these two nations, you have characters who were still kind of trying to go around that story to represent their individual interests. So I'm wondering if you could tell the audience a little bit about who this character is, what he's doing, going to the United States, and how he kind of sets up a lot of what you want to talk about in the rest of the book.

Nicolas: Sure. Um, so the character's name is Luciano Nando Art Alazar. Mm-hmm. Lucifer. Right. Uh, and he is a distant ancestor of our protagonist, Sebastian Art Alazar. And, you know, he is, uh. The Zion of a wealthy family who gets sent to England to study and then travels around Europe meeting, you know, uh, the great minds of the age and then comes back to Mexico and, uh, becomes a translator.

We're in the, we're the novel doesn't actually say what kind of translating he does, but I think the implication, given what happens later in the book is that he's a kind of literary translator, right? And, uh, and then he gets chosen by this cabal of elite Mexicans to be sort of like their unofficial ambassador to the us.

Um, because they realize that, uh, that their interests as a class don't necessarily coincide with the interests of most Mexicans or of the nation as a whole. Right. Which I think is true. And so the, you know, this young Mexican, educated abroad travels to the US to act a mediator and to negotiate with the Americans and to convince them to, at the very least, spare the, you know, the upper class.

This is an for nafta, partially, right? Because that's exactly what NAFTA was, right. Uh. I think it was a sincere attempt on the part of the Mexican elite. I mean, they certainly told themselves that it wasn't just for their class, but I think in practice that's what it was to find a way to, you know, see eye to eye with the Americans and, and just, you know, prevent the worst catastrophe from happening by making increasingly, uh, intense concessions.

Right. Um, and I think that like this, uh, you know, this character is meant to, uh, to set you to kinda introduce this figure. Of the Creole. Right. And I mean, Creole here as a translation of Creole and which is the term that in the colonial caste system was used to designate the children of Spaniards born in the American colonies of, uh, the Hasbro Empire and later of the, of the Spanish bourbon, uh, monarchy.

Right? And so, you know, these people are, are phenotypically European, right? Uh, but they are not given the same rights as Spaniards born in Spain. The traditional role is that of mediators, administrators, translators, right. Uh, and I, I guess what what this, what the provost is trying to argue, right, is that, uh, the Creole as, as a mediator between the, the two countries is somebody who exists in the Saturn position vis-a-vis the United States, but not vis-a-vis most other Mexicans.

He's, you know. Uh, part of the elite, uh, he's, you know, uh, shielded from like the, the, the worst horrors of, uh, of imperialism. And then, you know, whether,

because they sincerely think that there is a, maybe a way out of like this endless conflict, uh, that begins with the Mexican American war. Or because they're cynical and they just want to like, make sure that, you know, their minds in Guanajuato or whatever don't get, you know, uh, taken over by like American corporations or by American interests.

Uh, they go and they try to make friends with Americans and then they fail inevitably. Right? So the Creole is sort of like this tragic figure and not a particularly sympathetic one. Sebastian, our protagonist is of course the contemporary incarnation of that. Mm-hmm. He gets sent to study abroad. Right.

You know, he, his parents make sure that he grow up speaking nearly flawless English and then he goes to America and uh, he becomes enamored of America and of Americans, I suppose. Then, you know, like when, when, when shit hits a fan, when like, uh, when this new crisis, uh, arises basically because Trump gets elected the first time he tries to negotiate, he tries to be the translator, and, uh, it doesn't work out right.

As it turns out, even though he, he can translate baroque poems into English with the woman he loves, who's an American, he can't even understand her and she can't even understand him.

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That's P-U-B-L-I-C-B-O-O-K s.org. To donate to public books, visit public books.org/donate. One thing I was gonna ask about Sebastian, I mean, he learns a lot about, I mean, this is a podcast called Writing Latinos. Mm-hmm. It's about all of the ways in which writers have thought about the subject of Latino da and what we can learn about Latino identity from the ways in which authors have written about it, and I, in really subtle ways, I think.

SE learns a lot about Latinidad and his own stance in relation to it from a character named Mayali. Mm-hmm. Who is another student in, um, the University of Iowa's MFA program. And so I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what. Sebastian learns from Mayali. And what, what, who is Maya Lee and what is her relationship with Sebastian like?

Nicolas: Sure. Um, so Mayali Es is, uh, a me, a Mexican American, uh, writer

Gerry: who

Nicolas: is Sebastian's classmate in the program. Right. And when he shows up at. He's introduced to my, and you know, they're told by a classmate, you guys are both Mexican, you should talk, and they're the only two people who, I mean, Sebastian is white, but you know, like they don't, the Iowa ones don't know this, right?

Uh, they're the only people who are seen by their classmates That's not white in the entire program. Uh, which is true to life for whatever it's worth. And, uh, and so they're kind of like put in this position where they are asked to, to be something for one another that they very soon discovered they cannot be, um, male is an American citizen, but her parents are undocumented immigrants from Guerrero, right?

Uh, and very working class people, right? Like, uh, and at first Myi, I think extends to Sebastian, uh, this vote of confidence that is. You know, based on what we could call like, the big tent of Latina, right? Saying like, well, you know, okay, like, you know, seems you're, you're different but not that different.

And you should come over to my family's house, you know, in, uh, in Mississippi, uh, for, you know, for Labor Day because I, they have become very close though. Uh, but at the same time, Sebastian from the start or very soon begin to develop this giant anxiety. Which is that male is going to soon realize that he's actually nothing like her.

That he has much more in common with their white classmates, even though he's Mexican. And I think fundamentally it's a question of class, but also of past, and we can, we can talk about that in a second, right? Mm-hmm. Yeah. Then they, you know, they both go to, to MA's, uh, family's house. And uh, and then there's a couple of incidents that, that highlight this, this difference between and Sebastian and essentially destroy their friendship.

Um. And so what I think what Sebastian learns, uh, there, you know, at MA's family's house, you know, the, the family owns a restaurant, a Mexican restaurant, and at one point Sebastian is like washing dishes at the end of the day. And he realizes that this kinda like bittersweet joy that he felt for a moment as he was like varying bowls of menudo and Ria to the tables.

To, you know, where like all of this, like very tired looking people are sitting because they have had to drive for a long time to get to this Mexican restaurant. He's the only Mexican restaurant in many miles. He gives this bitters oft joy at feeling that he has this bond that links them to all these strangers, right?

But then, you know, immediately after that he, he realizes that this is solution, this is an illusion. He has nothing in common with him, and this is, you know, like a, a disillusionment for him and a disappointment. And I think that's the moment where he realizes that no matter how large and how big the tent of Latin that is, he cannot, could only live within the stent.

If he were willing to, to commit a great dishonesty, right? If he were willing to lie and hide things about himself as he has been doing to his friend Mai, who very soon realizes that, you know, this guy's actually very wealthy and comes from a very powerful family and, uh, you know, he's white and, uh, and that's the end of their friendship, right?

So yes, I think like, you know, Sebastian learns a number of things, right? He learns that in the is of white Americans. He's not white in the eyes of, uh, at least some Latinos. He's definitely white. He feels increasingly, and I think, uh, at the end entirely, that, that he's not a person of color. He's not a, a Latino, and yet he's a subaltern, you know, not a per, not like a real subaltern in the sense of, you know, somebody who, who has been reduced to their life, but for all of his wealth and for all of his, uh, his cultural capital and for all of his, uh, his talent, even if you want to, and for all of like his, uh, work at, uh, at playing the meritocratic game, he won't even be able to stay in the country.

Where he wants to live. Right. And of course, his return to Mexico is nothing like, uh, no, nowhere near as painful as the return to Mexico of most Mexicans who live in the United States. Right. Who return either because they're deported or because they give up, or because, you know, even if they succeed in everything and they come back to, to their, to their town, to their pueblo, and realize that they have been changed and that they're no longer at home anywhere.

Gerry: Yeah.

Nicolas: Sebastian lives like a very elite version of that. But even like that commonality, you know, like the, the, the, the horror of return or like the, the pain of return still isn't enough because Sebastian isn't the Latino, he's a cyo. Right. He occupies this role of mediator for the elites of the two countries.

And when the elite of one country decides that they have no use for him anymore, he's back to Mexico.

Gerry: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I mean, for what it's worth, I think that that distance that Sebastian feels from Ali. You know, when he recognizes that he's actually

much more like wealthy Americans than he is like Ali. Um, I think that that's an experience that Latinos who are US citizens can have with one another as well.

You know, I mean, I think, you know, I think it's in, it's an interesting wrinkle to think about, you know, the transnational elite. Mm-hmm. But it's, you know, I think it's such a kind of fractured community. Uh, and I don't necessarily mean broken, although I might mean that too, but I, I mean just, uh, diverse and multifaceted that, right?

I think between Latinos who are US citizens, you can also recognize that kind of distance as well. Sebastian is also like Lee's parents because they're both, you know, they're co nationals, they're Mexican citizens, um, which made me want to. Ask you about, you know, what, what the kind of, um, status of the undocumented Mexican is within Mexico, and how are they regarded by Mexican elite?

Are they recognized as kind of Mexican co nationals who are similar to all other Mexicans?

Nicolas: Well, so, you know, I think like the, the Mexican lead regards undocumented Mexicans in the US and Mexican Americans more broadly, you know, uh. Kind of like with the schizophrenic, uh, you know, ambivalence, right? On the one hand there's like a great deal of condescension and a great deal of, uh, you know, sort of, uh, pity, right?

It's kind of like oh s right? Mm-hmm. Or poor country people, you know? Mm-hmm. They really treat the mouthful in the states. We should like, show them solidarity and then, you know, like if, if you talk to Mexican politicians until, honestly, quite recently, they would often say things sort of like the hope. Of this country, NA of the Americas is in the Dreamers, right?

By the dreamers, you know, they, they didn't just mean anybody who was, uh, eligible for Baca, right? Like, they mean sort of like people who are, who had also managed to beat the odds of the great meritocracy and become, uh, you know, accomplished in this very narrow sense that to them read as those Mexicans are the best Mexicans, right?

Both of which are very condescending, right. That's the other side of the coin, which, you know, I think the prime example is, uh, you lio passes the labyrinth of solitude, right? It's like seminal work of Mexican literature in the 20th century. There's this, you know, long essay where passed, uh, you know, doing arm term, arm chair, anthropology, and sort of like, uh, you know, uh, out of

his, uh, out of his ass philosophizing tries to like define Mexican identity in some sense, right?

And the book opens with a long chapter on what he calls pachucos, which is, you know, I. A perspective, the rise of derogatory term for Mexican Americans, and perhaps for what, you know, in some contexts, and for some people, uh, we might know as Chicanos or Chi X people, right? Um, and past says, you know, that, that the Pachucos have no identity.

They're neither Mexican nor American. They have no culture, and they're, you know, no wonder that they're so violent and that they're drunkard and that they wear those horrible suit suits, right? And I think that like, that, that sort of, uh, spite right, like that, uh, that, you know, that, uh, that hatred even is also present and often coexists with the conversation that I was just describing.

Um, so, you know, like, uh, right, like insofar as like she's a student that like this, uh, very elite MFA program. Would likely, you know, if you were to come to Mexico and uh, shake hands with like, you know, the secretary of Foreign Relations or whatever, he would be like, you're doing good. You're, you're going good.

My Mika, you know, like, you're making us all proud. And then, uh, you know, she would go back and her parents would still be undocumented and everything was shitty. Right? That's the thing. More or less the attitude and one that I, you know, that I really don't like. I, I think that, uh, that we, you know, like the Mexicans.

In Mexico should, uh, should think of, uh, of Mexicans in the United States, whether or not they're Mexican nationals, you know, as you know, uh, at the same time this part of the nation, if you will. And also as, as they're doing the wrong thing and you know that they shouldn't be. We should never fault them for not being Mexican in the sense that like, people here are Mexicans, right?

Yeah. Uh, they get to have their own thing and uh, and it's just as valuable, right?

Gerry: I'm a Latino historian, Latinos in the United States primarily, and I think there's emerging a really interesting conversation about Latinos in race here in a way that there hadn't been even 20 years ago when I was a graduate student, you know, when I was a graduate student under my.

Reading lists included books about Afro-Latinos or indigenous Latinos. It was just like Chicanos and other, uh, Latino Americans. And it was a kind of undifferentiated race, but I don't know exactly what prompted it. I mean, part of it might be the murder of George Floyd, where. Which created tensions between Latinos and African Americans that caused Afro-Latinos to say, well, we're a, we're Latino too.

Um, it might also be the 2030 census, which for the first time is going to make Hispanic and Latino a race, which has caused Afro-Latinos to say, Latino is not a race. Latinos can be of any race, black, indigenous, Asian, et cetera. Um, but that has led to this discourse of like white Latinos, black Latinos, and it seems like there's this parallel discourse in Mexico.

About whites. Mm-hmm. And I was even thinking about like Noor's character. I can't remember the name of the actor who played Le Naor in the Black Panther movie, but he was kind of very upfront about indigeneity, or I'm thinking about movies like Roma and the portrayals of Indigeneity. So I don't know, I mean that, that's a kind of like observation, I guess.

But the question is, first of all. Can you help me draw any kind of connections between the discourse of like white Latino in the United States and White Sicken in Mexico? And is white Sicken really a conversation within Mexico?

Nicolas: Yeah. I mean like, so lemme put it this way, right? Like, I think whiteness operates under different logics in different contexts, right?

In the US I think that the easiest way to understand whiteness is that it emerges from a political economy based to Russia tell slavery and the one, the one drop rule, right? And so like any single one, you know, like, not that like this actually works, not that it actually works this way, right? Like blood, blood quantums are, are fictional, right?

Like I am a big fan of the of the Field Sisters book, uh, racecraft, right? Uh, which, you know, like where they argue that, uh, that, you know, we shouldn't talk about race, racism exist, but what certainly exists is racism, right? In any case, in the US the logic of whiteness is any single, uh, you know, smidge of non-European ancestry makes you either not white at all or less white.

And in Mexico is the opposite. Every single smidge of additional European ancestry makes you white, right? And so in the US you have like a, a binary system almost. In Mexico, uh, you have like this like gradient, uh, where you can actually kinda like become wider, right? Uh, obviously through generations.

There's this awful phrase that I think Sebastian quotes at one point in the novel, za, you're going to improve the stock, right? Which is something that like, you know, like your racist aunt will say to you if you happen to be dating a blonde, right? Um. You know, the, the issue here of course is that, uh, these two logics are intention, right?

And so eos, right? Creoles, like Sebastian, present a problem for the American racially imaginary, because on the one hand, they are quite obviously white, right? Not only in terms of, uh, their skin color, but also in terms of like their, their cultural capital class position, all kinds of things, right? And on the other hand, they cannot be white in America.

I think the term white second is actually very telling in that sense, because the very fact that you have to modify it, right? That it's not just like that they're white, they're white sen, right? It means that they're not exactly white. Right? At least you know, in, in English, in in, in the sense of term white.

I think Blanco is, you know, yeah, sure. You can be blanco. In Mexico and yet not white. I will say also, you know, that, uh, this is why I insist on using colonial caste vocabularies to speak about like Mexican racial imaginaries, right? Or caste imaginaries, because I think they make more space for class because I think they, uh, make more space for gradients, uh, for like different relationships to like indigenousness or indigeneity, right?

Um. You know, of course, like Sebastian shows up at Iowa and he tries to tell them that he's a cyo and this doesn't make any sense to anybody, not even to Myi, right. Um, so yeah, I don't know, like is white a thing in Mexico? Yes, absolutely. You know, but it's mostly a meaning, you know, there is definitely an increasingly Americanized discourse about racial identity in Mexico that I think, uh, is on the one hand, like very.

Long overdue because this country is just as racist as the us. It's just racist in a different way. Uh, and then on the other hand, very annoying because, um, it, you know, it doesn't actually, it is actually just very different. And American racial vocabularies don't really work to describe Mexican political reality.

Um, and I think Sebastian is supposed to be sort of like. You know, at the level of ideas the character's supposed to, to dramatize this by showing how these categories don't actually work, you know, to describe, uh, both, both places at once, and that whenever you have somebody who is occupying both places at once, they, they fit nowhere.

I think that Latin ad as a political identity as in, you know, like something that people call themselves to, you know, build solidarity to, you know, find community or just because they want to is a great thing. I think as a description of reality, it runs into problems, right? So for instance, there's like this statistic that people throw around, which is that 55% of all Latino men voted for Trump, which is horrifying.

But then you start to wonder, maybe the problem is in the category, right? That is not actually like a description of material reality. What it is is an imaginary community, an imagined community that actually can have like a lot of potential for for political action. But we shouldn't, uh, take the categories of the US Census Bureau mm-hmm.

As nature rather than history.

Gerry: I wanted to ask quickly, you know, this novel of yours has been identified as auto fiction. Mm-hmm. And I'm wondering if that is a term. That you also apply to your novel and how you feel about it and why you chose that genre as the best genre for what you wanted to do?

Nicolas: I absolutely think that America and Norte is a work of art fiction.

I. What I mean by that though is something maybe that is not identical to what people have in mind. And I recently published actually an academic paper about this in the journal, uh, studies in the novel. Oh, cool. Because I actually think, I think that like outer fiction as I understand it, you know, uh, doesn't actually come from like France.

I'm from like, uh, the Brosky and like ethno and like, you know, like the, that wave of like French Autobio, autobiographical fiction or auto writing, I think it actually comes, uh, and I'm talking not just about like. American out fiction or like, uh, Hispanic of an out fiction. I'm also talking about like contemporary American out fiction.

It comes from ano and I think that Likeno Eno's notion of, of autography, which is deeply ironic and deeply, uh, bookish, right? It's about, it's not so much about living as it is about reading and writing. It comes from. Borges, you know, we forget that many of his stories and poems and essays are narrated by what we could like identify as an fictional narrator, a guy called Jorge Boche that shares many of the authors, uh, biographical details, his blindness, et cetera.

Um, but of course the in Borges, it's not a question of confessing, right? But rather of, uh, of hiding right out of fiction. Not as autobiographical fiction, but fiction. About, uh, fiction that meditates on the fictional nature of the self and the construction nature of the self. And I think that the moment that you have a, a text that is fictional, that that is, you know, that doesn't actually claim to represent reality and you can't tell whether the protagonist is the author or not, you know, whether I made Sebastian more or less pleasant than I actually am.

How much of this actually happened? You are actually thrown into this like hall of mirrors that is very perian, right? Like you no, no longer know what's real and what's not. Then the only conclusion you can come to is that there is no world, there is only the book, there isn't a self outside of literature.

You create the self in the process of writing out fiction.

Gerry: Nicola, thank you so much for joining us. I everyone go pick up your copy of America Del Norte. It's a really rich book and really provocative and it's beautifully written. So thank you Nicolas, for joining us.

Nicolas: No, thank you so much, Rao. It was, it was my, it was my pleasure.

Gerry: Thank you for listening to season three of Writing Latinos. We'd love to hear your suggestions For new books that we should be reading and talking about, drop us a line at Per geraldo@publicbooks.org. That's G-E-R-A-L do@publicbooks.org. This episode is brought to you by public books. It was produced by Tasha Sandoval.

Our music is City of Mirrors by the Chicago based band Do Santos. You can follow us on Blue Sky Instagram, and X to receive updates about season three of writing Latinos. I'm her Geraldo Cava. We'll see you again soon.