

[MUSIC - "City of Mirrors," Dos Santos]

Gerry: Hi, my name is Geraldo Cadava, and this is Writing Latinos, a podcast from Public Books.

Latino scholars, memoirists, novelists, journalists, and others have used the written word as their medium for making a statement about *latinidad*. We'll talk to some of them about how their writing illuminates the Latino experience. Some of our episodes will be nerdy and academic, while others will be playful and lighthearted. All will offer thoughtful reflections on Latino identity, and how writing conveys some of its meanings.

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Now, for the show...

[MUSIC - "City of Mirrors," Dos Santos]

Gerry: Thanks again to everyone for joining writing Latinos today. We are really excited to talk to Alejandro Varela. Is the author of two books, *The Town of Babylon*, and *The People Who Report More Stress*. Both were published by Astra House. Both have absolutely beautiful covers. So kudos to the designers.

The New York Times Book Review said of *The People Who Report More Stress*, that it is a quote masterclass in analyzing the unspoken as a collection. It delights in the layers of human interaction and what might lie beneath them. I think the same could be said of *The Town of Babylon* and Varela's writing in general.

*The town of Babylon* was a finalist for a National Book Award and long listed for the Aspen Words literary prize. *The People Who Report More Stress* came out in April of this year, so who knows what acclaim lays ahead for that one, but it certainly deserves all the praise it gets. And so, Alejandro, thank you so much for joining us.

Alejandro: It's a, it's a real pleasure to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Gerry: I've been asking people, do you have preferred pronouns?

Alejandro: I go by he, him.

Gerry: And what about Latino, Latinx latine? We'll just jump right in there.

Alejandro: Yeah, I jump between the three by the way. And, uh, I fully respect and endorse the, the move to sort of neutralize. Gender in the language. Mm-hmm. I think it's been a long time coming and I'm fully supportive, uh, from time to time because I have spent the first 40 odd years of my life saying Latino/Latina.

It slips out and sometimes when I am referring to myself, because I go by he, him, I think it's okay. And I'm comfortable with saying Latino. I will say that I, um, I say Latin-ex and not Latinx, because Latinx sounds to me like an over-the-counter medicine. And I feel like if, if we're, if we're known for anything, it's for having some spice or some rhythm, and sure it's a trope, but it Latinx doesn't roll off the tongue for me, like Latin-ex.

Gerry: You said that sometimes you let Latina and Latino slip. How do you feel bad when you say those words?

Alejandro: I feel bad only in as far as that I'm still ignorant about how I, I like to kind of roll with the times. You know, I, I, I've always joked that like my, my political inclinations or my politics, uh, are a lot like tofu. I kind of just absorb whatever, if there's a, if there's a more liberatory path, I'm gonna, I'm gonna go for it. If I sense that that over there is more inclusive, more respectful. I'm gonna incorporate that as soon as possible. So if someone said to me, you know, even just saying Latino kind of reinforces this idea, and it, there's an, there's a kind of a, a solidarity in just sticking to Latine or Latin-ex, you don't have to say much more. I'll try harder. But, uh, but, uh, Latino is, yeah, I guess I, I slip up in that, like, I'm trying to move over to Latin-ex and Latine. Uh, almost exclusively. And, um, and so yeah, sometimes Latino just kind of slips out. Yeah.

Gerry: So maybe we can start by exploring the relationship between your two books, *the Town of Babylon*, and *The people who report More Stress*. As I was reading both of them, I kind of had a series of different thoughts about how they were both similar and different. And so I think you are in both books kind of circling around a similar set of themes like silent killers such as diabetes and stress. Um, but there are also differences, not the least of which is place. One book, *the town of Babylon* is set in, uh, some suburb somewhere. Um, and then *The people who report more stress* is, uh, mostly New York, I think. And so, um, and there are different possibilities and prohibitions for your characters in each of these places.

So, I guess the question is, um, how have you thought about the similarities and differences between these two books?

Alejandro: Yeah, so I, I tend to borrow, uh, from my life in as far... I always tell people that I borrow the shapes of things and then I fill them with my creations. So I borrow, in some cases

the shape of my mother, but it's not my mother. But, my mother will read the book and see herself in it.

Um, I brought the shape of my best friend from high school, but I haven't talked to her in 27 years, so, you know, I'm creating a lot more in that. But the one place where it is absolutely my experience and I'm drawing from it, is this idea of class jumping. I was raised or reared on a particular wrong of the socioeconomic ladder in this country. And I am living a life several wrongs above that one right now. And with that comes a certain degree of disorientation and acclimation and, and frustration. And so I, I always say that, if *Babylon* is a book about about the conflicts and the issues one faces when they try to go back to where they came from, the people who report more stresses about that awkwardness of, of feeling unwelcome in the place where you land and making the best of it. And that was the arc that I was going for with both books. And it is an arc that I'm gonna continue to explore in the next few books. But it, it is about, this kind of, the, the downside, the myth, but also the downside of this American dream, this climbing at all costs. And with that, there are trade-ins. You, you cannot be a, a community-minded or community-oriented person and chase, chase the American dream.

Gerry: It's amazing in your opening statement here, you touch on so many of the dilemmas that the characters in both of your books face.

So, let's dive into one in particular, which is, kind of growing up and spending a lot of time in predominantly white places. What is it like for a Latino to be living in and simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by non-Latino spaces? And what are the challenges that your characters face in these situations and how do they deal with them?

Alejandro: I want to first acknowledge that like we are a spectrum *Latinidad* is complicated. And I know that's something we're gonna talk about later. Um, and so we can, we run the gamut in terms of race and appearance and, and color and all of that. And I, first and foremost, wanted to talk about how bad it is to be taken out of your community. And I think that merits a bit of unpacking. Because you can have a community, a multicultural community. You can have, um, you don't have to look like everyone in order to be healthy and happy. But not in the United States because we're not there yet. Maybe that works better in Canada. I can't speak for Canada. But we still have so many divides and barriers that were, you know, sort of created from race and, and have been enforced by class.

And so to pull out a Latin American immigrant family or for them to leave a community or a city where they look like everyone on their block and then to, in order to provide better education and more opportunities and a house and space and all of that for their family, thinking they're doing the right thing and transplanting to a place where they look like no one and don't share any cultural history, is is bad for their health.

It may feel good in the moment and it may provide some benefits that in the long run could buffer you from all of those negative health effects, all of those slings and arrows of, of being dislocated, you know, uh, or mis or feeling misplaced. But in the moment, um, it's not good for your health to feel like an outsider because the currency of humans is being social.

Before we know anything, we make eye contact. We see each other. We process that information, and if you feel threatened or unsafe, that correlates to a tick in cortisol and epinephrine and the chemicals that then increase the wear and tear and speed up death. And so, uh, it's not, it's not good for us.

And then psychologically, sure, some of us “make it out.” So “make it out” I put in quotes, right? Like we get the better life that we were encouraged to have and more money and the mortgage and, and the degrees. But what do I think of myself? What do I think of my face and my hair and my body and my place in this world? Did I spend a lot of time observing and am I, am I a smart kid in the class who has some natural abilities and you know, is, or is naturally bright, a little bit lazy, makes it to an Ivy League school, but is never really participated because they didn't really think they had a voice and so spends most of their life not participating and observing. You know, it, it messes with your psychology and that that then makes it harder for you to do lots of other things in life.

Gerry: I wonder if you would distinguish for between the different kinds of being ripped from your community. So for example, you know, an Apache child in the 19th century being taken captive by a Hispano family in New Mexico... or you know, Spanish colonizers, uh, forcing you to not practice the religion that your community has practiced for a long time. That strikes me as one kind of being ripped away from your community, but. The kind of community that being the kind of being ripped away from a community that you are talking about in both of your books is also, I mean, not to say that the kind of being ripped from your community that I just described is entirely absent from your books, but in your books, you have other kinds of being ripped away from your community as well, where your parents make that choice for you by migrating to a particular place or when you yourself make that choice by choosing a college that is predominantly white.

So, does that kind of, um, being ripped from your community differ somehow than a kind of, um— I'm hesitant to call it a more violent ripping— but a kind of forced ripping apart from your community?

Alejandro: Absolutely. I mean, they're, they are very different. Uh, but ultimately I think it's on the spectrum and it's about degrees.

Gerry: Mm-hmm.

Alejandro: So, um, forcible movement, like refugees, people escaping civil war, uh, death threats, um, being, um, uh, being, sort of having your culture physically and emotionally and psychologically ripped from you, regularly being beaten so that you, you know, sort of undo cultural practices, uh, that is sort of an extreme form of that dislocation and of being robbed of community.

And the effects are also different by degrees, right? Like the character in the book, his parents have a mortgage and a home. And they struggle day to day to survive. And they don't have community per se, but it's very different than like, than the examples that you just shared. So absolutely they're different, but we're still talking about some chemical and physiological processes that are happening within your body that are very similar.

Gerry: Staying on this theme just a little bit, I mean, another way in which we sometimes rip ourselves from our community, if you can put it that way, just to stay with the language of being ripped from your community, is by choosing to be in a kind of interracial or interethnic relationship with a white person or anyone, I guess, who doesn't share your same ethnic and racial background. And for your characters, what kind of challenges and dilemmas does that decision present?

Alejandro: Yeah. Thank you. Um, listen, I think all relationships are difficult and love is complicated and I never meant to argue in any of my work— cause I've had some people ask— I never meant to suggest that uh, there has to be a racial or ethnic congruence in a pairing in order for it to succeed. But I won't lie, it helps. Because it's just one more barrier. Let's take a heterosexual couple. The typical man and woman outside of their home, there is a power dynamic.

There is absolutely a hierarchy of gender. Men are powerful. Men own things, men control things. Women don't, relative to them, right? Not, you know, it's not 50/50. And so I think it would be, it would be naive to believe that in a home, those differences disappear. They're there. But what you have is two people doing the best to not let those differences dictate how they treat each other in the best of situations.

And so that, that's a barrier, that's a barrier. Uh, you can't escape the politics. You can do the best you can. Ass race, so now there's racism in your household. It could be subtle, it could be unintentional, it could be fleeting, it could be super minor, micro, macro, you name it. But it's there too. And, throw in ableism, throw in, uh, uh, you know, uh, I can't even think of, uh, other isms, but just all of them, they don't disappear.

But I think what love does is it can make it so that two people work really hard to, to reach a point of equity so that everyone gets what they need in order to be healthy and happy in that relationship. But I, I've always found it fascinating that, um, that people bring those, those, those dilemmas into their lives and they do make life a little bit more stressful.

I believe Gus and Eduardo who are the sort of the two protagonists of, of *The people who report more stress*, they have race, class, and um, race, class, I think immigration, I mean, they just have all of these differences between them. They don't have gender to contend with, which isn't to say that, there isn't a spectrum of gender, you know, um, in, within, for, for men, right?

Like, you can sort of express in many different ways and still identify as male or as a man. But these two guys are kind of in a similar boat. They're pretty bougie, uh, col... or higher educated gay men and their differences still get in the way. And, uh, and so that makes for a kind of certain degree or caution of stress in a, in a relationship that they have to navigate.

And I've always been, yeah, I'm just curious about how. The interpersonal can sometimes solve the problems that the, the larger society cannot.

Gerry: Right.

Alejandro: And I like to use that as a, to juxtapose that because love can go far in fixing these problems, but there isn't a kind of a greater community or societal love. And so that's I think, what prevents us from solving our problems.

Gerry: Yeah. And I love the example in the people who report more stress, where one of the things that Eduardo calls Gus on is when they use Eduardo's credit card at a restaurant. Uh, the waiter takes the card from Gus because of course the, the white partner and the couple is going to be paying for this meal.

Alejandro: Right.

Gerry: And, and actually when Eduardo decides to call him on it, Gus, I don't know. Why don't you characterize how Gus responds to that? I think Gus is initially in that story. He's sort of, he's taken aback cause he didn't realize that he hadn't noticed, but he's quick. To, to hear him and acknowledge and, and repair and to say, I'm gonna, I'm not gonna let this happen again.

And that sort of solidarity, cuz that's what that is, is, is something that is missing I think outside of the individual home unit, you know, these sort of little armies that we've all created in our country where our family is like our first and foremost, most important community. Like, I make

a decision for my kid based on what my kid needs, best school, best situ... but never, it's, it's very rare about like, oh, I'm gonna think about this entire community of children when I make a decision for my child.

And so, but yeah. So Gus is, Gus is quick to. It's quick to, um, to auto correct.

Gerry: Mm-hmm.

Alejandro: And, uh, and I think, yeah, I, I guess I, I, there's a part of me that wanted to model that because I think it's possible. I see it in my own life. I've, I've seen it many times. I think it's easy for people, easier than we think for people to just say, wow, I hadn't seen it that way. I'm gonna do better next time, or I'm gonna try.

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Gerry: You know, I feel like one of the things that Eduardo is wrestling with throughout that book, the people who report more stress, is the temptation to have an affair or explore, um, options outside of the relationship with Gus that would put him in closer communication with a fellow Latino or something like that.

Alejandro: Yeah.

Gerry: Someone who shares his experience. Um, and that's just kind of a, a perennial temptation that goes throughout the book. But one thing I was wondering, I mean, and I don't know how you imagine it, but does Eduardo at least know about Gus, from the beginning of their relationship that he got into a relationship with the right kind of white person, with the kind of white person who would express very quickly, express remorse about a particular interaction and want to repair... you know, it strikes me as difficult to imagine that Eduardo wouldn't, even if he's, um, got, uh, critiques of his current relationship with Gus, that he would've at least not known that they would be on the same page about, I don't know, you know, the interracial dynamics of their own relationship.

Alejandro: Yeah. I mean, that, that's a, that's a really good question.

And then maybe I'll, I, they've been together for a long time and I, and they got together when they were young, and I do believe that some people, and I explored both sides of that Right. With the final story mm-hmm. In comrades. When you start young together, I think there's a lot of growing that happens, I think of like a vine sort of, you become entwined and you learn from each other as you go.

Uh, in the best of cases, I do think in a lot of the gravitated towards someone who. Would be patient and would absorb a lot of the things that he was feeling. You know, someone who would care for him. I, I'm, I'm certain of that.

But I also think they have it to their advantage that they were growing politically and emotionally at the same time. And so learning from each other, things were sort of bouncing off of one another. I, I wrote *Comrades*, for example, the, the, the penultimate story, I think. Yeah, to show the opposite of that, which is that I have a lot of friends in my life who are on the apps and are dating and you know, they'll come over for dinner and they'll be like, "Okay, help me. What do you think?" And we're swiping through these apps and they're showing me not this guy, not this girl, not this girl, not this. And I, "Why not?" Well look at that thing that he says there. That sounds kind of racist." Okay, next. "What about this other thing?" "Oh, well, I don't know." If, uh, you know, and I think that if I had been on the apps, you know, or if I may never met my partner, and so I started to wonder what happens, what would happen if suddenly I was middle-aged and I was wanted to meet someone, but I didn't wanna waste any time growing with them or educating anyone, or learning. I wanted to hit the ground running, as I think the narrator says in that.

Gerry: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Alejandro: Um, And I think it's much harder that, which isn't to say that uh, people should lower their standards just because they're 43 and they're trying to meet someone. But it did strike me as kind of an interesting, um, change in our society that now we get to be so picky that we may not have given a chance to someone we would've given to in our twenties or when we were much younger before our political identities and ideas were, you know, solid.

And, um, yeah, there's a hopeful part of me that thinks that if we were more open-minded, we might be surprised at how quickly people will grow.

Alejandro: But, but I fear maybe they wouldn't. Maybe we are all sort of set in our ways.

Gerry: Yeah. And let's dive right into that chapter "Comrades," which I loved.



I mean, it's just a series of profiles of someone that. Profiles of different people who the character is considering, might I be compatible with this person? Might I not be compatible? And one of the things that comes up over and over again is the, the stated politics of the potential partners. So what's interest, what was interesting to me was how they were a set of politics that we're all on what you might describe as the left, but with really important distinctions for the narrator.

So, one person was an anarcho-syndicalist, one person was a Marxist, one person was a Bernie Ho, one person was an "I'm with her" Hillary Clinton supporter or someone supported Bernie Sanders politics, but Elizabeth Warren's pragmatism. And for the person for, for your protagonist, considering whether they can date one of those people, those political distinctions on the left became almost make or break matters, you know?

So, um, how are you thinking about that as a statement about both dating and kind of, uh, how politics shape our understanding of the people we want to be with, or decisions about the people we want to be with?

Alejandro: Yeah. So, um, I was drawing a certain type of narrator, which, uh, Eduardo and Andres, I think have in common. I think maybe Eduardo is more so there's a, there's an anxiety and a bit of a neuroticism to, to how they view the world. Which I believe is in line with how a lots of people operate in this world. And I tried to get that on paper, to show that like we are const....we are every day walking around with double consciousness, you know, the situation at hand and then all of the doubts and fears about that situation at hand and all of the politics that led to this situation.

And I, uh, I am simultaneously very interested in left politics, uh, because I see how we sort of cannibalize each other and, and you know, a perfect example is, is New York City. I believe that almost 60% of the vote went to a very progressive candidate. Unfortunately it wasn't the same progressive candidate, so we ended up with Eric Adams, who is a former Republican cop and he is running New York City. You know, this quote unquote bastion of progressivism and it is quite miserable.

And uh, and so I was just thinking about how much variety there is within this quote unquote left and what that means. And I wanted to heighten for the purposes of this story the narrator's voice, you know, make it even sort of more intransigent. Although I think there's an arc for him in that story, so I don't want to throw him under the bus, but really decide that like, you know what, I'm not gonna waste any time. Because in the ways that like we might say that the answer to global warming is electric cars. But then in 25 years we'll realize that finding those lithium batteries underneath Bolivia is actually also bad for the environment, and so then we'll have to come up with a new version. And then the new version, until someone somewhere comes, realizes that what we need is to use to drive less. Right?

And then how do we design a world in which we drive less? Not drive a more efficient car, but drive less. And that is a frustration I think, in the way we think as, as a, as humans, we always think one generation and not seven generations and policies should, I believe, have taken to account what. How things will change, but we always want a quick fix to please whoever is, you know, anyway, so I, I was trying to explore that in the story.

Gerry: Mm-hmm.

Alejandro: And to look at it from the terms of a relationship. He wants the perfect relationship, right? He wants the drive less relationship, and he, and the process is maybe missing out on the electric car relationship. And so I was trying to do both of those things at once.

Gerry: Earlier you were talking about, you know, the potential of a white person dating a Latino or a Latino dating someone else who's not of their ethnic or racial background.

And you said that you always try to make very clear that you do not believe that interracial relationships, interethnic relationships are impossible. But they do come with challenges. And I'm wondering if you would say something similar about politics. I mean, an anarchosyndicalist doesn't have to date an anarchosyndicalist but if an anarchosyndicalist dates a Hillary Clinton supporter, it does pose challenges.

Alejandro: Yeah. I mean, I don't know how Kellyann Conway, oh my goodness. You know how those two people, for example, uh, they're famous for that, but they're even, but they're both on the right anyway, but Yeah. But they have such extreme, uh, well, not extreme, but they differ on their opinions and they're famous for it.

I. Yeah, I would find it very difficult to have breakfast every morning with someone who fundamentally disagreed with me about the future of this world and how we should get to it. That said, we are talking in the scheme of things about a sliver of the population. So at that point they probably have- the anarcho syndicalist , and, and, and the Marxist, which I don't think they're mutually exclusive, maybe they aren't to see this is where my ignorance comes in, but I think they probably have much more in common than they don't. And um, and, but yes, yes, I do think, uh, a difference in politics and worldviews is another. Is another barrier in a relationship that you can, it's surmountable but it is another barrier that that comes up.

And so if, if you're keeping track and suddenly you're a transracial, like heterosexual, uh, politically divergent couple, that's a lot. That's a lot of those are a lot of hills to climb every morning.

Gerry: I am wondering, in light of these comments about what you said at the very beginning about these two fundamental irreconcilable differences of impulses toward collectivism versus individualism or community versus individualism. Maybe that's a difference that no amount of conversation and intimacy can overcome.

Alejandro: Yeah, I mean, it's a big question. I, I think we have, my partner and I. We've been together a long time and we have those conversations still and they come out in different ways. We have kids and, and we talk about how yeah, how much when we check ourselves like we are, are. Sometimes one or the other of us is thinking very much about like just ourselves and just our kids and just our family.

And we have to remind ourselves that we're part of a bigger community, whether that's the school community or the neighborhood or even the city or, or family. And so I, I think that's a constant struggle.

Gerry: Yeah.

Alejandro: The way, the way someone, I don't know who said this, some sort of honor personality that like anti-racism work isn't like getting your, it isn't like getting an appendectomy where you just remove the racism and then you have this you know, hallelujah moment and you're suddenly not racist anymore. It's more like having your teeth cleaned every six months. It's like dental care. Like you have to... because society is pushing us in, in a, in a direction that actually runs contrary to who we are as humans. Um, to be social. I think our nature is to be social.

Gerry: Right, right. Um, another, another dilemma that one of your characters faces, they certainly felt like a, a dilemma that resonated with me is when you witness or experience something that you think is racist and anti-Latino, But, others try to convince you that it's not all about race or there might have been something going on there and your character is really struggling with this incident that happened at the playground in particular.

Alejandro: Hmmm

Gerry:... with their kid and a white person's kid. Um, first I guess I would ask you to, um, Maybe just describe that scene so listeners can be familiar with it.

And so I guess the second question would be like, Who was right? Alan? The therapist? Or, uh, the friend George?

Alejandro: So, um, The narrator is in a park with his two year old, and the narrator is, they're both Latinos or Latino. Um, but uh, the narrator is mestizo, a mix of South and Central American, and his child is, uh, adopted and is a, is uh, uh, I don't remember if I make it clear what type of...

Gerry: Darker. Darker, but I can't remember.

Alejandro: Yeah, yeah. He's, he, he, yeah, he's black, but it's from, he's, he was adopted to this Latino program at the adoption agency is what he says. Yeah. Um, and they are in the playground and he notices at some point that Jules the child, is pushing one of those, you know, baby strollers, the doll strollers. And then he sort of gets lost in his phone and then he overhear his, uh, father talking to his wife next to him, whispering. He starts saying that their daughter, Taylor, that this black kid had tried to like steal his stroller. And he, and then he affects like this, this, uh, this, the voice of like a black woman. And he's just like, and finger snapping. And then the narrator's like, was he trying to affect a drag queen or a gay man or a black woman? He can't tell. And, um, He's just, he's, he's furious because he, what he hears is these people kind of talking about his son and as if he were like a, a villain and he's two.

And the way in which they're talking about him really upsets him. And instead of doing something about it, he like finds his inner peace and remembers what Alan, his therapist tells him. And like just gets outta there. Like says, I'm gonna buy this, but he starts to shut down. And he is like, I don't wanna participate in these spaces anymore.

I want to get out of these spaces. So he, when he's with his son, he just starts playing with him at home. Uh, anyway, so over a series of, of, we, we learn what his relationship has been like with his therapist for almost 10 years. And the advice that he gives him tends to be towards the, give people a second chance.

Gerry: Yep.

Alejandro: Take the civilized approach. Don't get so upset about these things. You're not even sure if this is what's really happening and. Always kind of being very, uh, uh, I dunno what the word is. He's, he's almost trying to break him a little bit, I think. Whereas George, George is, is, is a good, very good friend.

Also a dad, straight, black, and he gives him sort of the opposite advice. He's like, you need to be angry, you need to... A, you need to find a new therapist and that person needs to be a person of color and you need to prepare your black son to, um, He's gonna face much worse than what you heard at the playground. So you need to be more proactive. You can't wait. You can't just be kind

and sweet. You need to, you know, effectively defend your child. And I would say that there are things that Alan says, which are useful and helpful.

Gerry: Mm-hmm.

Alejandro: You know, one of the visits is about being afraid to fly. One of the visits is about fights he's having with his husband.

But, ultimately I drew that because I wanted to show that although George and, and the narrator, I don't think I named the narrator. It's a lot of, though, mostly, but although they are, there's racial discordance between them. Mestizo, so, and Black, they're not both Latino and they have something in common about what it's like to live in the United States, different differing degrees, but they have something in common and he's reminding him that like, you know, the world is against you.

Like there is an active effort to silence you and to keep you down. And, uh, Which is not what Alan thinks. And so I wanted that because I think that is the tension of living in this country, is trying to survive day to day without your head exploding, but also picking your moments and defending yourself. You know, not always running away from conflict and being like, you know what, that's their headache. Because that can give you some peace of mind in the moment. But I think if you're constantly pretending these things aren't happening and giving everyone the benefit of the doubt, at some point you lose yourself in your voice.

Gerry: You know, for what it's worth, I think that your narrator came up with a really elegant solution in the end for how to deal with that situation.

If the options were, say nothing, aggressive confrontation... Those are not the options that the narrator chooses. What they do instead is they had read a really impactful article in the New York Times about how people perceive the ages of people of color to be much older than they actually are by somewhere between four and 20 years or something like that.

So, um, you know, part of what, what your narrator is working through then is how one of the questions he asks is how, um, you know, is it even possible that this white person had misperceived his son to be like a 20 year old instead of a two year old, or a 12 year old instead of a two year old? So what you do, what the narrator does is actually posts that article in a laminated folder, like at various parks. To try to offer some instruction instead of direct confrontation or saying nothing. And I feel like myself as a teacher, that is often the position I default to is like, instead of aggressive confrontation instead of doing nothing, I'm gonna take it as a moment to teach.

Were you satisfied with that kind of solution to the problem as well?

Alejandro: You know, that story, um, has been gnawing at me for five years, six years. I wrote it in 2017 or 2018. And I want, and I thought I wrote a good story. I never think, I'm never super confident about my work, but I thought I had written a pretty good story. And it was rejected from several places.

And I thought, I don't, gosh, I have no sense of what works and what doesn't work. Because I thought this was a, this will be my big story. And, uh, I remember the feedback from at least one person was, hmm, the ending doesn't quite land well. And it was a, it was mostly the same ending, but a little bit, a little bit more.

I, I kind of made it less pat at the end. And, but I'm, I kind of stuck with the idea because for the reasons you just said, I thought for this character, he wouldn't choose direct confrontation. It would take a lot for him to do that. And, and not doing anything would just torture him. So he needed to do something and these are the tools that he had.

And because he tends to think of upstream and big, big picture and policy, I thought this is the way he would educate people. But I, I, I, yeah, so I, but I struggled with that ending for a long time because I didn't know how to end that story in a way that would be satisfying. And I'm glad and I'm, I'm thank you for saying that because I'm glad I stuck.

I'm glad I stuck to it. It is true to the narrator.

Gerry: Um, so the last question I have for you, and thank you so much, you've been already so generous with your time, but, um, I guess the, the big way of asking the question would be to say or to ask, you know: to what extent do you consider both of your books and all of your writing to be contributions to the genre of Latino literature are these, are these Latino books? As we've been discussing, you know, you work through these very big issues through interpersonal relationships. Some of them, some of the characters are Latino, some of them are not. The spaces they inhabit are Latino spaces in some cases, but in many cases they're not.

So, it's not like, um, you know, the opening pages of either book would lead you to believe that these books are going to be statements about that have a place in the cannon of Latino literature yet. I think, at least for me, the version of Latino literature that I'm drawn to, they very much are. So, how do you wrestle with those kinds of questions about whether these are Latino literature or not, or what elements of them are or are not?

Alejandro: I think the very fact that I'm centering, uh, Latinx protagonists in all of, all of the work, uh, makes it part of Latino literature and I'll say, I'll explain why, because I think there is

such a variety to our experiences that to not allow, you know, sort of my writing or these protagonists' experiences or the way they view the world, to enter that sort of cannon, would be to say that would be to do what has been done to me essentially all my life, which is to say, you're not from here, you're not from there, you're not from anywhere. And so that is essentially the point I'm trying to make is that for a lot of us, uh, children of immigrants or recently arrived folks, or what you name it, we, we trade in a lot in order to do what's right by what the United States tells us to do. And in the process, lose ourselves sometimes, In the process, turn on our own community. You know? We end up voting and supporting for people and policies that, that, um, that wouldn't have allowed us to be here in the first place if, if they had been supported from the beginning.

And so, um, I think it's a, it's an important part of the, of the conversation of the arc, of the Latinx experience in the United States at least. And if we're being generous, the entire kind of, uh, Latin American experience because immigration is, is, is so huge. It is such a part-colonization— is such a part of like what has happened to the Americas and, and, um, people arriving that didn't need to come here and then ultimately leading to generations of people leaving where they should have been allowed to stay all along, is, is, is part of it. And then landing in this center, this center of power, a power that destabilized an entire region that then led to the immigration that then leads to me being here, writing about that entire experience, um, is very much a part of the, the long-term conversation, I believe.

Gerry: Thank you so much Alejandro, for talking to us and again, this was Alejandro Varela, the author of *The Town of Babylon*, and *the People Who Report More Stress*. These are two books that you are all going to want to read. So thank you so much for tuning in.

Alejandro: Thank you

Gerlaldo: And thank you Alejandro.

Alejandro: Yeah, thank you very much, Geraldo.

[MUSIC - "City of Mirrors," Dos Santos]

Gerry: Thank you for listening to this episode 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 [geraldo@publicbooks.org](mailto:geraldo@publicbooks.org). That's G-E-R-A-L-D-O at publicbooks.org.

This episode is brought to you by Public Books. It was produced and edited by Tasha Sandoval.

Our music is "City of Mirrors" by the Chicago-based band, Dos Santos.

I'm Geraldo Cadava. We'll see you again next time.

*[MUSIC - "City of Mirrors," Dos Santos]*