

PÁGINAS RECUPERADAS

POLITICAL ROOTS OF CHICANO DISCOURSE

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The legacy of Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, who died at his home in Denver, Colorado, on April 12, 2005, at the age of 76, is worthy of the highest tribute. It also invites reflection about this community leader’s self-conscious location within the political history that informed the discourse of Chicano identity and provided the cultural logic of the Movement. A brief look at the earliest editions of *I Am Joaquín*, the 1967 epic poem by Gonzales, can enhance our familiarity with the social history of that foundational document of Latino thought, while offering us a privileged retrospective look at the nascent moment of Chicano identitarian discourse. A native of Denver, Gonzales was born on June 18, 1928. He lost his mother when he was 2 years old, and his father, who never remarried, became an important ideological influence on him. A migrant worker who came to Colorado from Chihuahua, his father had a deep sense of history, which he conveyed to his son, telling him about the struggle for Mexican independence against imperial Spain and the armed resistance against the social injustice and corruption of the regime of Porfirio Díaz, the mestizo general from Oaxaca who seized power in 1876 and kept it until he had to resign on May 23, 1911 to flee to exile in the fray of what by then had become the Mexican Revolution.

Gonzales proved well balanced as a man of actions, ideas, and passions. He was an outstanding secondary school student. Graduating from Manual High School at age 16, he had to give up his ambition to study engineering in college shortly after beginning at the University of Denver. However, he went into professional sports and excelled as a boxer, having made it to the Colorado Sports Hall of Fame when he retired from the ring in 1953. He then tried his hand at business and succeeded as a restaurant owner and manager of a bail bond service. Subsequently, sensitive to the socioeconomic



and political disempowerment of Mexican Americans in Denver, he entered the terrain of political activism. Joining the Democratic Party, he became a district captain in charge of leading the Colorado branch of John F. Kennedy's campaign among Latino voters ("Viva Kennedy"). Appointed head of the Denver National Youth Corps, a mayoral appointment during the Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, he soon lost faith in the mainstream party system and began to do the work for which he is remembered as a community organizer and civil rights activist outside the social system's political machine. Thus in 1966, he founded Denver's Crusade for Justice, an organization dedicated to "providing social services, cultural programs, and leadership education, organizing around educational opportunities, jobs and land reform, and building an urban power base for Chicano community control and liberation," according to the chronology of people and events appended to the 1972 Bantam Books edition of Gonzales's *I Am Joaquín*.

The 1967 original edition is a rare title, as we gather from the fact that the New York Public Library system does not hold a copy and that a Worldcat search attempted at the end of September 2006 yielded only two libraries – one in Colorado and the other in Texas – with a copy in their collections. The copy I was able to use is held in the Ethnic Materials Information Exchange collection of the Benjamin Rosenthal Library at Queens College of the City University of New York.¹ Meager in front matter information, the volume is a 20-page chapbook in large format (24 cm). Published bilingually in English and Spanish, the book uses only English in the title, which would seem to suggest that English is the primary linguistic identity of the text, with the Spanish rendition appearing as a translated version. The volume alternates between the two-column text-bearing pages on the right – one column for the English and the other for the Spanish – and the image bearing pages on the left.

The illustrations, done by an artist identified on the copyright page as Yermo Vasquez, are powerful drawings representing diverse aspects of indigenous or peasant life. The agrarian texture of the representation is unmistakable. The image on page "two" (the page numbering spells out the words rather than using Arabic numerals) presents a man and a woman probably exchanging matrimonial vows to start a family and thus continue "the circle of life." The image on page "six" relies on the traditional image of the dove to symbolize "freedom," as it seems to correspond to a section in the poem that refers to Father Hidalgo's insurrection against the Spanish colonial regime and the Mexican Revolution. The image on page "twelve" depicts an armed horseman, the representation of nineteenth-century California outlaw Joaquín Murrieta shown as a silhouette advancing, carving itself out of its pitch-black background. The volume's cover shows the full-length face of an adult male wearing a penetrating look, with the small whole body figure of a peasant boy placed on the lower left hand corner of the large face. One assumes the face to represent the titular character in the poem. At the same time, the resemblance of

1 I thank librarian Sarah Aponte in the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute at the City College of New York for the pointer that led me to the Queens College copy.

the man's face on the front cover to that of the author's photograph on the back cover is simply too provoking to be ignored. The small biographical note accompanying the author's photograph identifies Gonzales as "President and Director of the Crusade for Justice, a Chicano civil rights organization," and the other titles completing his credentials include: poet, playwright, lecturer, political activist, community organizer [sic], and publisher. As a playwright, he is listed as the author of *The Revolutionist* and *A Cross for Maclovio*. The newspaper *El Gallo* appears listed for his work as a publisher (Figures 1–4).

The original edition of *I Am Joaquín* comes unaccompanied by any overt ideological apparatus and without the self-confident meta-discursive adscription that it acquires in subsequent editions. The poem is pretty much allowed to speak for itself. By the time the poem is picked up by a major publisher, Bantam Books, in 1972, the author had already had occasion to conceptualize its significance, its contribution, and its place in the larger expressive agenda of the Chicano Movement, having rendered it a key instrument of the Crusade for Justice. By then the poem has already accrued a social history, which the author undertakes to narrate in a two-page account entitled "About *I Am Joaquín*,"



Two

Figure 1 Circle of life.



Figure 2 Freedom.

whose highlights include the “over 100,000 copies” published by the Crusade for Justice in different formats and “given away or sold to support the organization and Tlatelolco School,” its reproduction in “numerous Chicano newspapers, which print 10,000- to 20,000-copy editions,” its frequent use by “almost every Chicano organization in the country,” its staging by “teatro groups from here to Mexico,” the filming of it by Teatro Campesino, and its pioneering role as a text “written first and foremost for the Chicano Movement,” as the “first work of poetry to be published by Chicanos for Chicanos,” and as “the forerunner of the Chicano cultural resistance.” The author’s “Introduction” self-assertively declares his political poetics, describing the poem as “a journey back through history, a painful self-evaluation, a wandering search for my peoples and, most of all, for my own identity.” The words “my peoples” have the feel of an erroneous transcription of the intended “my people’s”. However, the plural form, irrespective of the author’s intended meaning, has a greater force in that it seems to look forward to the identitarian language used by Latino thinkers a quarter of a century later, when we frown


twelve

Figure 3 Joaquín Murrieta

upon homogenizing discourse, and proclaim with passion our diverse heritages and multiple origins.

Gonzales explains that “*I Am Joaquín* was written as a revelation of myself and of all Chicanos who are Joaquín. The sounds of movement, the literary, and anthropological quest for our roots, the renewal of a fierce pride and tribal unity are the reasons why *I Am Joaquín* had to be shared with all my *hermanos y hermanas*, fathers, mothers, and grandparents.” He closes with the affirmation that “There is no inspiration without identifiable images, there is no conscience without the sharp knife of truthful exposure, and ultimately, there are no revolutions without poets,” a contention whereby he seems to assert the centrality of his role as the necessary poetic voice in the revolutionary agenda of the Chicano Movement. At the same time, in the claim that “*I Am Joaquín* draws on nearly 2,000 years of history in Mexico and the United States,” as we read in the chronology appended to the Bantam Books edition, Gonzales outlines the long human experience that began millennia ago with the cultivation of maize in central and southeastern Mexico, to the US-Mexican



Figure 4 Book cover.

War in the 1830s, to the discovery of gold fields in California, to the rise of the Chicano Movement in the wake of the labor organizing work led by “Cesar Chavez, messianic leader of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC)..., the first agricultural union in the United States.” The chronology tells us about Joaquín Murrieta, a Sonoran miner who suffered unspeakable abuse at the hands of Anglos in California and decided to fight back:

After Anglo miners raped his wife Rosita, drove him from his gold claim, and then whipped him in public on a false horse-stealing charge, Murrieta vowed revenge. He became a leader of a large band of desperadoes, conducting a vendetta marked by daring robberies and narrow escapes. He became a legendary figure, *el bandido terrible*, the ‘Robin Hood of El Dorado.’ The California government offered a reward of \$ 5,000 for him, dead or alive, and – because his last name was not well-known – California became unsafe for anyone whose name happened to be Joaquín. In 1853, Murrieta was surprised and shot by mounted rangers near Stockton, and his head was

preserved and exhibited for many years. (But conflicting stories are told that he died of old age.)

Perhaps mindful of the equally conflicting stories that Murrieta came to California as a labor migrant from Chile, as Pablo Neruda forcefully asserts in the play *Fulgor y muerte de Joaquín Murieta*, Gonzales omits reference to the national origins of the rebel. Tracing to Chile the nationality of a character whom the author has set out to represent as a symbol of Chicano self-affirmation would no doubt have presented a narrative inconvenience.

In the last portion of the chronology, Gonzales emerges as one of the salient figures of the Chicano Movement along with César Chávez and Reies Lopez Tijerina. Indeed, the four milestones listed for 1968 in the chronology consist of the 25-day-long fast by Chávez during the strike against California's table-grape growers, the first "blow-out" by 5,000 Los Angeles high school students, and two other events that involved the leadership of Gonzales, namely the founding of the Chicano Liberation School by his Crusade for Justice and his choice along with Reies Tijerina to join Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Poor People's Campaign, which they continued with Ralph David Abernathy after King's death. The following year, 1969, was a particularly crucial time for the establishment of the intellectual and activist leadership of Gonzales. On March 27–31, 1969, the Crusade for Justice hosted over 1,500 youths from 100 organizations at the First National Chicano Youth Conference in Denver. The best known call for Chicano liberation was made there, through the launching and adoption of *El Plan de Aztlán*, which he drafted. That same year, he founded the Escuela Tlatelolco, the first private Chicano school. Subsequently, other conferences embraced the principles of *El Plan de Aztlán*, and numerous advocates pledged "to work for the Chicano Movement outside the framework of established political parties."

The political urgency and the cultural presuppositions of *El Plan*'s message no longer seem familiar, and it thus behooves us to recall its tenor and texture. The opening section says:

El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán

In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal Gringo invasion of our territories, WE, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, DECLARE that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny.

We are free and sovereign to determine those tasks, which are justly called for by our house, our land, the sweat of our brows, and by our hearts. Aztlán belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops

and not to the foreign Europeans. We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the bronze continent.

Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggles against the foreigner Gabacho who exploits our riches and destroys our culture. With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our *mestizo* nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are Aztlán. POR LA RAZA TODO. FUERA DE LA RAZA NADA.

In the language of an independence declaration, *El Plan de Aztlán* presents itself as a manifesto of nationalist separatism. It closes with a section entitled “Action,” that lists the steps to be taken to advance the aspirations therein proclaimed:

1. Awareness and distribution of *El Plan de Aztlán*. Presented at every meeting, demonstration, confrontation, courthouse, institution, administration, church, school, tree, building, car, and every place of human existence.
2. September 16, on the birth date of Mexican Independence, a national walk out by all Chicanos of all colleges and schools to be sustained until the complete revision of the educational system: its policy makers, administration, its curriculum, and its personnel to meet the needs of our community.
3. Self-defense against the occupying forces of the oppressors at every school, every available man, woman, and child.
4. Community nationalization and organization of all Chicanos: *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*.
5. Economic program to drive the exploiter out of the community and a welding together of our people’s combined resources to control their own production through cooperative effort.
6. Creation of an independent local, regional, and national political party. A nation autonomous and free – culturally, socially, economically, and politically – will make its own decisions on the usage of our lands, the taxation of our goods, the utilization of our bodies of war, the determination of justice (reward and punishment), and the profit of our sweat.

El Plan de Aztlán is the plan of liberation!’

The vision and the aspirations that inform *El Plan de Aztlán* became the controlling ideology of the Chicano Movement, and by the time the 1972 edition of *I Am Joaquín* came out, with the political framework provided by the preface, the introduction, and the chronology of historical events at the end of



the volume, it seems that the poem had to speak in unison with the manifesto. The last entry in the chronology, in effect, appears to offer a progress report on the advancement of *El Plan*'s agenda:

The Chicano struggle for self-determination grows across the country; struggles for community control continue, and Chicano Studies programs sprout in universities from the southwestern states to the midwest and also to eastern colleges. The youth nationalize schools, parks, swimming pools, recreation centers, and housing projects. Farm workers continue their heroic struggle. Chicano press newspapers, *teatros*, poets, writers, and artists flourish, providing the inspirational spark to the flames of revolution. Plans and manifestos provide the ideology, philosophy, and direction for the forward march of the Chicano movement.

Fittingly, unlike the original edition that carried illustrations drawn by an artist evoking the historical and mythical past of the community, the second edition relied not only on pictorial images that represent milestones of the Mexican Revolution, but also, even more prominently, on photographs that document the struggle of Chicanos in the present. They depict poverty, child labor, and actions of resistance (Figures 5–9).

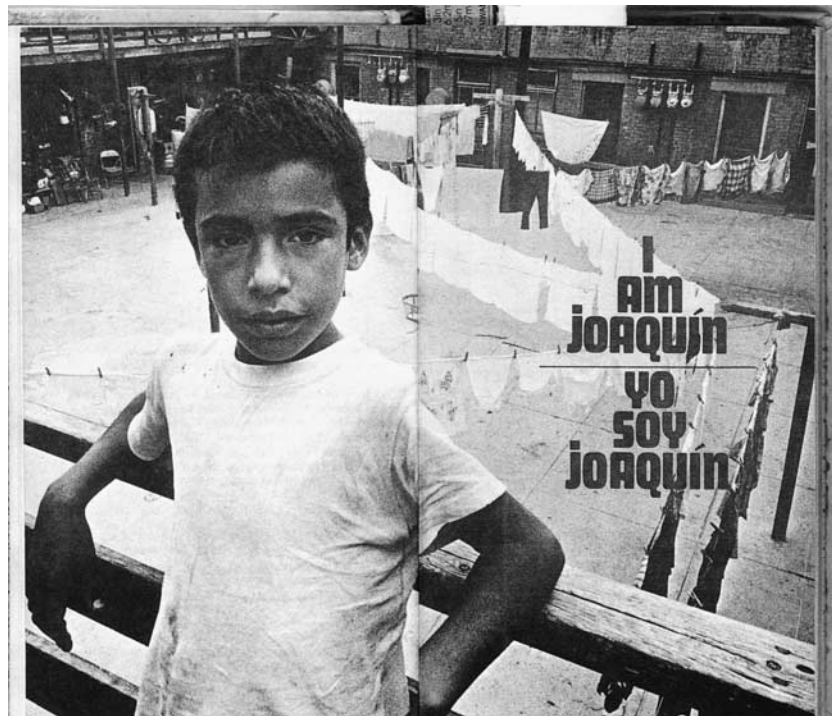


Figure 5 Chicano boy in the barrio of El Paso, Texas.

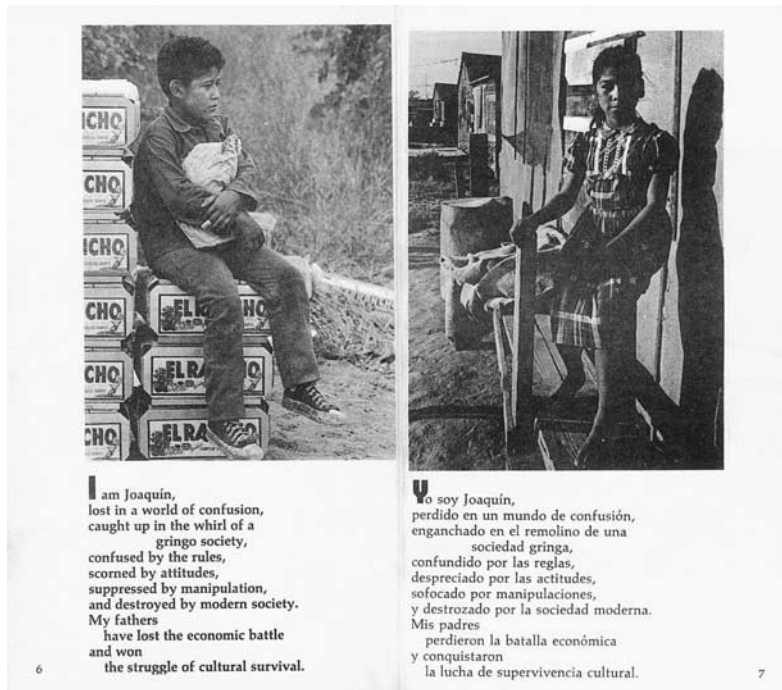


Figure 6 Male child grape worker in Delano, California, on the left, and young Chicana at Three Rocks, California, on the right.

Although mentioned neither in the text of *I Am Joaquín* nor in the chronology appended to the 1972 Bantam Books edition, the spirit of both the political worldview of the poem as well as of the separatist pronouncements of *El Plan de Aztlán*, is prefigured in the 1915 “Plan de San Diego,” a document brought in January of that year from Matamoros to Texas by the revolutionary Basilio Ramos. A declaration of political independence, the document called for an armed uprising against the United States to take place at 2 am on February 20, 1915. As Benjamin Heber Johnson’s *Revolution in Texas* (2003) shows, the “Plan” was consistent with the desire of some radical segments of the Mexican-American population, perhaps drawing on the intellectual inspiration of the influential political exiles Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón, to bring to US soil the social transformation espoused by the Mexican Revolution. The manifesto committed its advocates to seeking “the liberty of the individuals of the black race,” and the “independence and segregation” of the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California, of which “the Republic of Mexico was robbed in a most perfidious manner by North American Imperialism.” Interracial in principle, the new order proclaimed by the document proposed to return ancestral lands to the Apache and other Indian nations in exchange for their support. The military branch of the projected

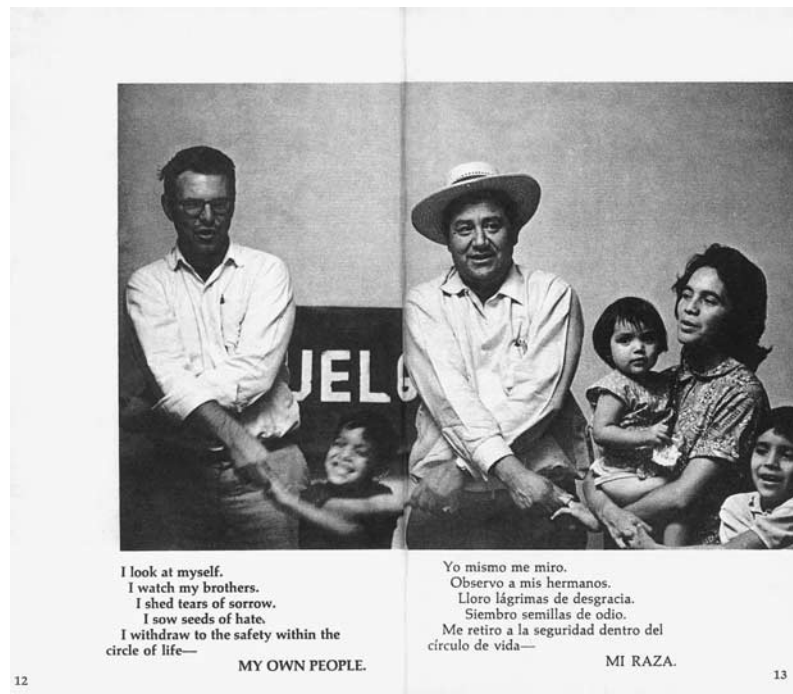


Figure 7 Family members in a workers' strike in Delano, California.

autonomous Republic of the southwestern states, the “Liberating Army for Races and Peoples,” would operate under the command of a “Supreme Revolutionary Congress” based in San Diego, Texas. Betrayed by well-to-do Tejanos whose support he sought in Hidalgo County, Ramos was arrested by US authorities, tried in Brownsville and subsequently released. Detaching himself from the political reality of Texas, he proceeded to relocate to Mexico. No major uprising happened on the 20th of February as announced by the document carried by Ramos. However, beginning in July, a series of raids and bloody battles involving Tejanos, Texas Rangers, and Anglo vigilantes shook the counties of Cameron, Hidalgo, and Starr. South Texas rancher Aniceto Pizaña, who had promoted the ideas of the Flores Magón brothers since he met them in Laredo in 1904, emerged as a recognizable leader of the armed rebellion along with prominent Tejano Luis de la Rosa, like Pizaña a fugitive from Anglo persecution.

The Tejano armed bands came to be known as “Los Sediciosos” and the success of many of their attacks fueled the imagination of corrido composers, as had been the case with the individual dissidence of Gregorio Cortez some 14 years before. The late Américo Paredes memorialized Pizaña, de la Rosa, and “Los Sediciosos” in *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel*, a text written in the 1930s but published for the first time in 1990 by Arte Público



Figure 8 Chicano youths demonstrate for civil rights.

Press. Although they did not overtly associate themselves with the text of “El Plan de San Diego,” Pizaña and de la Rosa seem to have operated under the guidance of its principles in their actions as well as in their statements. An undeniable precedent to the political stance, the cultural resistance, and the separatist intent of *I Am Joaquín* and *El Plan de Aztlán*, “El Plan de San Diego” and the actions that ensued in the summer and fall of 1915 in various Texas counties would seem naturally to fit the spirit of the cultural logic and political rhetoric with which the spokespersons of the Chicano Movement wished to associate themselves as they looked back at their people’s history. Yet, Gonzales omitted specific reference to the events of 1915, subsuming them in this general scenario: “Violent fights and murders between Mexicans and Anglos were too common. The number of killings of Mexican Americans in the southwest from 1850 to 1930 exceeded the number of lynchings of blacks for the same period.” The omission of any reference to the legacy of “El Plan de San Diego” and “Los Sediciosos” – initiatives that involved the radical decision to take up arms in order to materialize a separatist dream – would seem to suggest that the leaders of the Chicano Movement recognized the limits of their struggle. Understanding the futility of attempting to challenge the authority of the United States in an armed rebellion, they promoted their apartness primarily in the cultural realm,

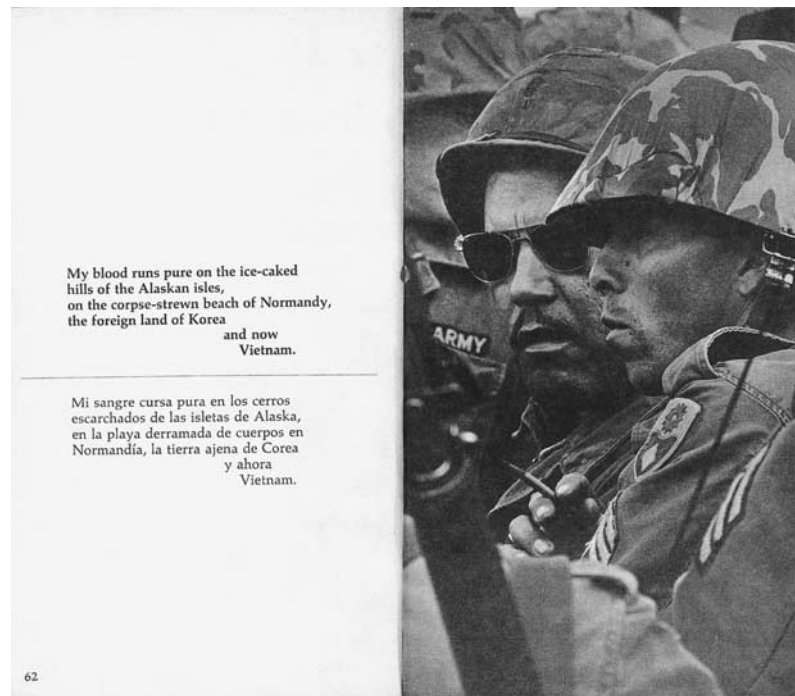


Figure 9 Chicano soldiers training in California.

while demanding that the political regime within which they existed respect the civil rights and human dignity of the Chicano population, thus enjoining American society to live up to the meaning of its creed.

About the author

Silvio Torres-Saillant, Associate Professor of English and Director of the Latino-Latin American Studies Program at Syracuse University, is one of the Senior Editors of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States* (2005). He serves on the Delegate Assembly of the Modern Language Association and on the Board Directors of the Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage Project at the University of Houston. His latest book, *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2006.

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