

INTRODUCTION

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I want to create a new body of work now, a literature of uprootedness about someone who's living in an environment that's not his own. In truth, this isn't a personal calamity but a universal one, because the world is full of people who aren't living where they should be, and if they are they have to run away. All the literature of this century is somewhat burdened by the theme of uprootedness.

REINALDO ARENAS, interviewed by Anne Tashi Slater in 1983,
published in *The New Yorker*, December 5, 2013

Dear Person Now Reading This,

What an incredible word, isn't it? Uprootedness. People, driven to uproot themselves by a variety of circumstances: violence, imprisonment, hunger, and sometimes, but much less often, by an act of nature. To run away to another place. With other people. To attempt life in an environment not their own, a place not where they (or their ancestors) believed they belonged or thought they'd ever be.

In English, not many sources come up when one looks for the word “uprootedness” in the context of literature, the 1983 interview with then recent Cuban émigré Reinaldo Arenas one of precious few at the time of this writing.

As with so many things, in Spanish it is the opposite, and the term is everywhere. *La literatura del desarraigo*. There are anthologies devoted to it, thesis projects that discuss it, even newspaper columns. And yet the words are the same. Or maybe not. It occurs to me that in Spanish, the connotation of the word for uprootedness, *desarraigo*, includes what is left behind and does so with something close to a rebuke. *You left us and now you belong nowhere unless we forgive you*. Meanwhile, uprootedness in English is more pragmatic and, by necessity, more forward-looking. *You are an uprooted being. Work hard, and we’ll talk*.

It is that concept—uprootedness—that this book is mostly about. Even the word carries inside the tension of seeming to mean one thing in Spanish and something never quite the same in English, the word itself with its dual meaning the very essence of the world in which a Latinx immigrant lives.

Note I say “lives” and not “arrives,” because you are an immigrant until well after your arrival. Because the experience of uprootedness is not one of a moment, of a beginning. Rather, it is a continuum of long and short lines connected in jagged ways, like a constellation in which you can find each immigrant, like a star, closer to or farther from home, occupying its own dot on the spectrum of belonging.

Home in Florida: Latinx Writers and the Literature of Uprootedness, then, is about how that turmoil-uproot-transplant-reroot process changes and defines the human beings who go through it and then, as in this case, how some of them, literally, live to write about it. It is about how the result, the contributions of these uprooted people (and their descendants), reshaped by all that new rooting soil, that *enraizante*, in turn changes the people and places they learn to call home. Like you, maybe. But really, like all of us who live in the kind of places where, it seems, the dreams of the uprooted stop to rest more often, to catch their breath long enough to wonder, “What if I stayed? What if here could one day be my home?”

There’s another big concept in the title of this book. Latinx. It is a term some people say shouldn’t even exist. That it is a made-up thing. Something advertisers and politicians created in order to form a more powerful buying market, a more influential voting block than if considered by each individual country of origin. They are right, in a sense.

But that is the thing with creations. They live. Take hold. They come to mean

something. For me, “Latinx” is the word that defines the collective immigrant experience of people who share a past.

What past? The colonization of our countries, of course. The Spanish language? The Catholic religion? Both were imposed on us. The inherent culture of corruption that is colonization was beaten in so early and so violently that the leftovers still remain in the constant political instability, in the ever-present teetering toward autocracy of so many of our countries once ruled by Spain and Portugal, in so many laws and official customs arranged so as to still be prone to the intrinsic exploitation of occupation.

But that past is also present in our culture. The one reflected in how we use the same ingredients but cook them in different ways. In the common celebrations, the superstitions, the things *abuelas* teach their American-born grandchildren every day in this country, whether they are from Cuba or from Argentina. From Mexico or Venezuela. Those are the things that remain and make us seem more similar than we are, at least to the untrained.

Meanwhile, language changes over time. It is why you need not speak Spanish yourself to be Latinx. Because what makes a Latinx person Latinx is experiential.

That is why the word “Hispanic” is inadequate to talk about uprootedness. You see, once born, Hispanics are Hispanic no matter where they go. But we are only Latinos *here*. In our countries we are Cuban, Argentine, Mexican. By virtue of sharing the immigrant experience along with our similar pasts, we become Latinos. People trying to make the “here” our home while offering the culture of the place we (or our ancestors) came from, the best of us, in exchange: our gift to this country. *Soy de allá, pero vivo aquí*, as writer Isvett Verde says in her essay of the same title. I’ve chosen. Here’s where I want to be.

This is all, of course, not new. The experience of the writer is how we’ve always given context to literature (and to every art, really). Why else would it be important to study Russian versus French literature, to know how they differ? It is because the lived experiences of writers are what enlighten their histories, and our own. They are what makes life clear, what enriches our understanding of humanity. And isn’t that why we read, in the end?

Let’s return now to the continuum of uprootedness I mentioned earlier. What does it look like beyond abstractions, and how does it make this book you now hold in your hands, or on your device, different?

We might draw two points. One, located at the start, on the left side of what will be an uneven line, holds your recently uprooted: the soon-to-returns, the just-arriveds, the what-have-I-dones, souls with turmoil tattooed in indigo on

the whites of their eyes, their gaze always lost, their eyelids heavy from having to look inward to find what they never imagined they'd miss this much. If they are writers, they do not write. Not now. They first need a job, a physical address, a first paycheck with which to send money back home. Not now. Why write? Nobody knows them here. Who would translate and publish them? It's too soon. They've had no time to create community. They are surviving, and even those rules, they are still learning.

The other dot goes on the opposite end of the spectrum, the right side, where you have the people you think of when you hear the term "Latinx." Many are second generation. The rest have been here long enough. They may or may not speak Spanish. They have jobs and speak English better than most and, in the worst of cases, certainly enough to get by. They have made a choice, in their hearts this time, or their parents made it for them before they were born. If they are writers, you'll have heard about their writing. Not just because they are widely published and reviewed, recognized, as is the case with the majority of the less recent émigrés in this book, but because they've been here long enough to have found their people: other writers. They have a voice, and any sadness has been tempered, processed, written, and given a drawer. Sometimes close to the front door. Sometimes in the most hidden of bedrooms.

Between the two ends of this spectrum I've tried to describe for you are lines, jaggedly connected, a zigzag of them teeming with stars, each in a unique spot on the road to belonging, and shifting daily in one direction . . . or the other.

And so, what might make the experience of reading this collection different for you, dear Person, is that it includes writers from the entirety of the spectrum. The best Latinx voices from the right side you've read or been told to read. But *also* those new Latinx writers who fall under the fog of a category that is on the left side of the continuum. The ones who managed to write important stories for this collection with the fresh perspectives that not yet belonging gives them. The ones who wrote anyway when immigrant life told them "Not now." Their stories are the ones not often found in English-language anthologies like this one because our radars tend not to track the left side of the spectrum of uprootedness, when most writers are surviving and not writing, or at least not as much as they might have in their countries of origin, too broken to write after the long voyage here and the even longer goodbye to all that they left.

Here, you will also find writers who left us too soon, like Reinaldo Arenas,