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A Writer's Hidden Gem in Houston: **Arte Público Press**

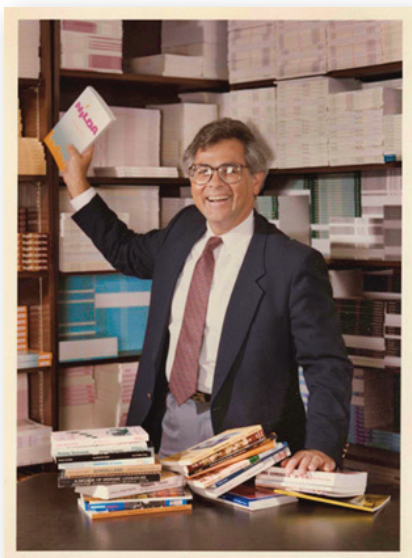
By Aileen Mendoza

“As a child, Nicolás Kanellos couldn’t find books that accurately portrayed his Hispanic heritage. As an adult, he sought out and published the ones that did.”

– Emma Schkloven¹

Houston is home to a rich, diverse Hispanic, or Latino, culture, including Arte Público Press, the largest publisher of U.S. Latino contemporary and recovered literature in the United States. The main goal of the press has always been to provide Hispanic writers access to publishing their works and, overall, to provide an accurate representation of Hispanic culture in the United States. Dr. Nicolás Kanellos founded the press in 1979 and continues to serve as its direc-

tor. With the help of his wonderful team at the University of Houston (UH), where the press is located, Arte Público Press has grown significantly, achieving a national identity as a successful publisher. More so, it has assisted numerous young writers in launching their careers and continues to advocate for Latino culture to continue its integration into the United States, from educational curriculums to social progression, and much more.



Nicolás Kanellos, director and founder of Arte Público Press, continues to dedicate his work to helping Latino writers achieve a name in the United States.

All photos courtesy of Arte Público Press unless otherwise noted.

The Impact of a Diverse Childhood

From a young age, Kanellos was conscious of Hispanic culture and its absence from schoolbooks. Born in New York City in 1945, he spent most of his childhood moving back and forth between New York and Puerto Rico. He quickly noticed that his life in New York was very different from that spent with his family in Puerto Rico. In New York, he observed how Puerto Ricans were under attack by the mass media, an act he calls “yellow journalism.”¹ The media highlighted crime, the unfamiliar food Puerto Ricans ate, and even their religious practices, all with negative views. In addition, children like him received a poor education, which hurt their intellectual growth and access to higher education.

Meanwhile, in Puerto Rico, Kanellos clearly captured the capabilities of Hispanic peoples. There, he saw Latinos were able to become anything they desired. He observed, “In Puerto Rico, society functioned; Puerto Ricans were governors, they were politicians, they were firemen, teachers, they were everything. You could see all things that Puerto Ricans could do,” he continued, “but in the United States, you could see what Puerto Ricans weren’t allowed to do.” To Kanellos that was an eye opener.²

Although Kanellos grew up in a low-income family, he found creative ways to continue reading. His summers spent in Puerto Rico allowed him to indulge in reading his family’s Spanish-language books. By contrast, in New York, he did not have the resources to buy books, so he collected discarded pages from a nearby book bindery and put them together to create his own books. His fascination with reading did not stop there. Kanellos continued his education attending The University of Texas at Austin (UT) where he earned his master’s and Ph.D. in Spanish literature.³ Overall, his childhood and his passion for reading impacted his perspective and developed his views and drive to make a change. These eye-opening experiences from childhood influenced Kanellos’s college years leading to his involvement in the liberal arts and political

movements to improve opportunities for the Hispanic community.

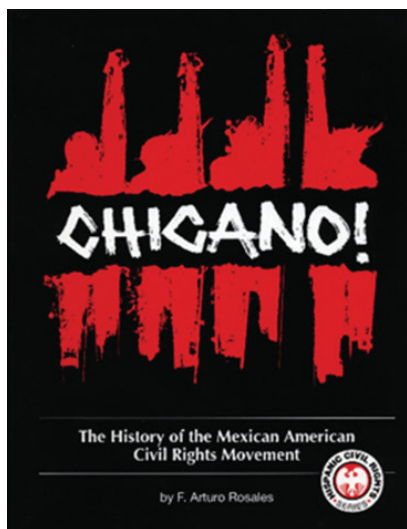
While at UT, Kanellos became involved in the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s. He began working with young writers and artists, using art and activism to support political issues. However, as the arts began to separate from politics in the late 1970s, Kanellos wanted more opportunities for writers to have their works added to the curriculum, popular culture, and ultimately the national identity of the United States. To achieve that, he explained, “I was there at every step of the way working with writers and artists, establishing magazines, then establishing the publishing house” to get their works published, distributed, and reviewed. Kanellos emphasized the importance of literature in pushing toward the future, expressing his belief that “social and political progress go hand in hand with the recognition of the culture and the expression of that culture through the arts.”⁴

Revista Chicano-Riqueña

After completing his graduate education, Kanellos received an offer to teach at Indiana University Northwest in Gary, Indiana. Upon moving there, he continued his participation in marches, boycotts for bilingual education, and assisting up-and-coming artists and writers. In 1972, José González, Luis Dávila, and Kanellos founded *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, a quarterly magazine that later became *The Americas Review*. Some of the goals included fostering a cultural dialogue by and about Latinos, creating a national forum for writers who had experiences with cultural conflict, and contrasting past and present oral folklore and contemporary literature. Additionally, it sought to strengthen the ties between Chicanos, Riqueños (or Puerto Ricans), and other Latinos; to challenge negative perceptions on bilingualism and bicultural realities; and to maintain a non-dogmatic, open editorial line.⁵



Nicolás Kanellos leading a community group protesting in favor of bilingual education before a school board, mid 1970s.



The iconic book, Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement was written by F. Arturo Rosales.

In 1986 and 1987, the journal received Citations of Achievement from the Coordinating Council of Literary

Magazines; the final issue was published in 1999. While *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* lasted for twenty-five years, the work that began there took flight in 1979 when Kanellos founded Arte Público Press. The main mission of Arte Público is to “publish, promote, and disseminate Latino literature with a commitment to reforming the national culture to more accurately include, value, and reflect Hispanic historical and contemporary contributions.”⁶ In 1980, Kanellos took a position at the University of Houston and moved the press to Texas.

The Development of Arte Público Press

With the growth of the press and lack of resources in Indiana, Kanellos found it beneficial to take a position at the University of Houston and relocate the team there. The university not only offered Arte Público Press more resources, but the city also had the added bonus of a central location between the West and East Coasts. Nevertheless, various obstacles surfaced for Arte Público. At one point, UH formed a committee to evaluate *The Adventures of the Chicano Kid* (Max Martínez), one of Arte Público’s texts, for obscenity and sexual language in an attempt to censor the work. This proved frustrating because minority authors’ works are three times more likely to be censored than those of Anglo authors, Kanellos explained. This caused delays in publication, so Arte Público “refused to subject its books to the whims of the UH printing plant and other bureaucrats who ignored academic freedom and the U.S. Constitution’s first amendment protections.” Today, Arte Público Press publishes its books without restrictions, although, Kanellos observes, censorship movements are once again attempting to keep Latino history and culture books from the hands of students in Arizona, Texas, and several other states.⁷

Another setback was that the university’s funding did not reach the level the press expected. This forced Arte Público to seek external resources. The leadership began to develop relationships with philanthropic organizations that enabled the press to survive and then thrive. Today, the press’s connection with major foundations has given it “a steady

funding base” that has made Arte Público “one of the two top fundraising organizations in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences.”⁸

Lastly, one of Arte Público Press’s biggest challenges has been getting its books and authors the recognition they deserve. Latino authors have a hard time getting agents to represent them and the media is less inclined to read Latino literature—two things that hinder public awareness of their work. As a result, Arte Público developed a strong marketing department that enabled the press to become a portal for authors to get started. As seen throughout its journey, Arte Público has helped many Latino authors achieve success, from bestselling books to integration into educational curriculums.

Designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution in 2011, the University of Houston has come a long way, becoming one of the nation’s most diverse college campuses and embracing people of multiple ethnicities and identities. The main issue Arte Público faces today is the time it takes to integrate into other university programs. To solve this issue, Arte Público Press and UH collaborated to found a Spanish-language creative writing doctoral degree and provide employment opportunities for writers locally and nationally.⁹

Recovering History and Helping Communities

In addition to supporting and publishing works by Hispanic writers, Arte Público Press launched the research program Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage, also known as “Recovery.” In 1990, the press held an initial meeting with leading Latino scholars and, with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation, established the program in 1992. Other foundations that provided support included the Mellon Foundation, the Meadows Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. The program works with an international board of scholars, librarians, and archivists to recover and access manuscripts and printed materials created by Hispanics who came from regions in existence from the colonial period to 1980 in the geographic area that has become the United States. The program has a collection of over 18,000 pamphlets and books.¹⁰

To date, Recovery has “digitized more than 500,000 items, ranging from published books and newspapers to



Nicolás Kanellos and Tato Laviera, author of La Carreta Made a U-Turn, the first book published by Arte Público Press in 1979.

manuscripts of varying lengths from the first encounters between Hispanic and indigenous peoples in North America to broadsides and photographs from the twentieth century – in short, all the materials that a literate community generates over centuries.”¹¹

Growing up, Kanellos had an awareness of the rich Hispanic culture around him. However, throughout his college education, he found no literature reflecting that culture in the university libraries—a deficiency that led Kanellos and his team to embark on the Recovery Program. They set out to find all the publications by Hispanic writers that had been neglected in the United States. Even though many items were not collected by libraries, universities, and museums, Arte Público assembled thousands of documents, from magazines, to diaries, poems, and more.¹² Through this program, Kanellos and the Recovery Board wanted to emphasize the presence of Hispanics in the United States and their contributions, both negative and positive, and, in doing so, to rewrite history by including the writers’ voices that mainstream publishers and scholars had historically ignored. Today, the press remains the largest licensor of Hispanic literature in the United States to the entire textbook industry, as well as to electronic media, film, and television.

Arte Público launched the Piñata Books imprint in 1994 that is dedicated to publishing children’s and young adult literature to showcase and represent U.S. Hispanic culture.¹³ Research indicates less than five percent of children’s books include Latino characters. Kanellos’s experience in the lack of Hispanic representation in books as a child continues to be a big problem in the United States. If children of color do not see themselves in books, they cannot identify with the characters in the stories. Keeping this in mind, Kanellos and his staff work to impact the educational system by creating books that allow children to see the portrayal of their lives in the United States, not solely the



As part of the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Biennial Conference on February 20, 2020, Jasminne Mendez reads her poetry at the University of Houston-Downtown.

Photo courtesy of DraChicana 1, Wikimedia Commons.

lives of Hispanic people living in Argentina, Spain or elsewhere with whom they could not identify. Most Piñata Books are bilingual to create “authentic language and cultural situations of the United States, rather than pedagogical books, for dual language and bilingual language education.”¹⁴ Kanellos expressed how rewarding it is to see children enjoy Piñata and Arte Público books

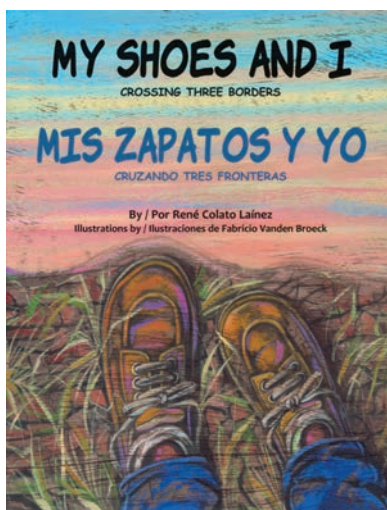
and to inspire the next generation of Latino literature.

To further aid the Hispanic community, Arte Público Press also leads programs with the Houston Independent School District to teach families to prioritize reading at home. Through its books and programs, Arte Público strives to reach out about issues important to the community. For example, one is the obesity epidemic among Hispanic

families, which results from the easy availability of fast-food restaurants and the lack of supermarkets with nutritious food in Hispanic neighborhoods. Arte Público’s program ¡Salud, familia! (or Family Health) created entertaining and inexpensive books that offer health and nutrition tips for children and their families.¹⁵ Arte Público has also taken part in other programs, including Reach Out and Read, Reading is Fundamental, and Latino Children’s Wellness Program.



The children’s and young adult imprint, Piñata Books, strives to accurately portray the Hispanic culture in the United States through bilingual books, short stories, and novels.



Accomplishments and Recognitions

Since 1979, Arte Público Press has done a great deal for the Hispanic community, especially its writers and artists by helping them publish their work and get name recognition to become bestselling authors nationwide. Even with the challenges that the press experienced early on, Arte Público remained true to its mission and ultimately achieved the success and recognition it deserved.

In 2018, the press received the Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award given annually by the National Book Critics Circle to a person or institution with a long history of major contributions to the literary world. Other awards Kanellos has

received include the 1988 Hispanic Heritage Award for Literature presented by the White House, a 1989 American Book Award, a 1993 grant from the Lila Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund through the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (now CLMP), and the 1996 Denali Press Award from the American Library Association.

Nicolás Kanellos emphasizes the importance of his team to the press’s success, acknowledging that this is not one man’s work. Assistant director Marina Tristán, for example, a graduate in Communication from UH, has led the press’s marketing efforts for over thirty-six years. She has said that the Lifetime Achievement award not only helped Arte Público gain national recognition but also acknowledged the passionate effort of the staff as part of the university.¹⁶ Gabriela Baeza Ventura, Ph.D, UH alum and an associate professor of Spanish in the Department of Hispanic Studies, is executive editor of the press and the co-director of Arte Público’s US Latino Digital Humanities Center with UH alum and Brown Foundation Director of Research, Carolina Villarroel, Ph.D. who helped the Recovery Program win the Diversity Award from the Society of American Archivists.

The Future of Arte Público Press

Looking to the future, Arte Público Press seeks to incorporate several of its works and findings into public digital projects through its US Latino Digital Humanities Center (USLDH). The center serves as a venue for scholarship focused on the U.S. Latino written legacy that has been lost, absent, repressed,



Specializing in U.S. Latino literature and women’s studies, Dr. Carolina Villarroel earned her Ph.D. in Spanish literature, from the University of Houston in 2008.

Photo courtesy of Carolina Villarroel.



Nicolás Kanellos speaks at the fortieth anniversary celebration for Arte Público Press in September 2022.

or underrepresented. USLDH provides a physical space for the development, support, and training in digital humanities projects using Recovery’s vast collection of newspapers, photographs, and digital materials; creates opportunities and facilities for digital publication of Latino-based projects and scholarship; promotes and fosters interdisciplinary scholarly work; provides a communal virtual space to share knowledge and projects related to Latino digital humanities; and works to establish a Latino digital humanities hub.¹⁷ USLDH is funded by grants from the Mellon Foundation and Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and has achieved national and international recognition for its work.

As the Hispanic community continues to grow so will the culture.

Nicolás Kanellos describes how

Houston has become a more diverse community and predicts the city will cultivate various genres in writing and use more languages. Overall, Hispanic literature will become more integrated into the United States and other places throughout the world. Although Kanellos and those at Arte Público Press have accomplished a great deal, much more remains to be done, and they look forward to the challenge.¹⁸ **HH**

Aileen Mendoza is a Hispanic student studying architecture at the University of Houston in hopes of using her creativity and design education to better communities around the world.



Dr. Gabriela Baeza Ventura earned her Ph.D. in Hispanic literature at the University of Houston in 2001.