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## “Maybe I Could Save Myself By Writing”

As a Latinx teen in Chicago, he belonged nowhere—until he found his voice



**José Olivarez** Sep 12, 2018 · 5 min read ★



Illustration: [Austin MacDonald](#)

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hen I was a teenager, I felt like I belonged nowhere. I know it’s a cliché: *Ni de aqui, ni de alla*, but damn if I didn’t feel that. I walked around with my head to the ground. I was just trying to get through each day.

That was a long time ago now, but recently, I decided to write a book of poems, *Citizen Illegal*, about what it was like for me as a teenager. I didn’t always love poetry (though I

always loved reading). When I was growing up, poetry was taught like it was a historic practice akin to scratching a cave wall with a stick. It was past tense. Poetry happened, but we never met any living poets or even talked about them.

## We were empty bank accounts and it was our teachers' responsibility to deposit facts.

This wasn't unique to poetry. I attended public schools in a working class south suburb of Chicago called Calumet City, where teachers taught via the banking model of education: We were empty bank accounts, and it was our teachers' responsibility to deposit facts.

Before we go any further, I have to tell you that my memory cannot be trusted. It's been 12 years since I graduated high school and 25 years since I started kindergarten. Am I reconstructing my past to fit what I now know about how the decks were stacked against me and my classmates?

Why am I telling you all of this, anyway?

I'm telling you this because I wrote a book of poems with one foot in the past, one hand in the present, and a nose on the future. Because I want to be honest about how much I don't know. Because, maybe, you too want to write your own book, but are worried that you don't remember well enough.



Here are the facts: My parents were born in Cañadas de Obregón, Jalisco, México. I was born in Chicago, Illinois. The distance between Cañadas de Obregón and Chicago is 1,965 miles.

This is one story: When my family moved to Calumet City, I knew I did not belong. How did I know? My parents brought me to the local preschool facility where the preschool promptly rejected my application into the school. The preschool did not have anyone on staff who spoke Spanish well enough to help me attend classes.

This is another story: Around the time I entered high school, I knew with complete certainty that I needed to move to México. I was living in the wrong country. I didn't make sense in the United States, but if I moved to México, I would make sense. All my questions about where I belonged would be answered. I could go and live a good, anxiety-free life.

## If it weren't for gravity, I might have floated away.

When I was 16, my parents let me spend a month with my grandparents in Cañadas. My plan was to never come back. However, I arrived in México and felt just as out of place as I felt anywhere else. The kids on my grandparents' block pronounced my name like my parents did, but when they asked me where I was from and I tried to tell them I was Mexican, they were quick to correct me. No, no, no. You're from the United States.



What I wanted and desperately needed in those moments was a book to help me make sense of all my questions. I didn't need answers, but I really wanted to know that my family was not alone. In those moments, I needed to read books by Sandra Cisneros, Laurie Ann Guerrero, Benjamin Alire Saénz, Luis Alberto Urrea, Ana Castillo, Javier O. Huerta, Denise Chávez and other Chicanx writers.

I needed to read books by Latinx authors. I needed to read about the Chicano Movement and the Young Lords and anti-gentrification organizers. Those authors and those stories weren't a part of the curriculum.

Luckily, my high school did have a poetry slam club. I didn't know what a poetry slam was, but the first time I saw my classmates perform their poems, I felt something bloom within me. I leaned forward in my chair. I picked up my head and looked at my classmates. If it wasn't for gravity, I might have started floating.

Maybe I could write the stories I was craving to read. Maybe I could save myself by writing.



Writing shifted my relationship to education and power. After I started writing, I stopped being interested in models of education that didn't consider me an active participant. In class, I got in trouble for the first time. Some teachers complained that I talked too much. Other teachers reveled in my growth. It made school harder. When I passively accepted everything I was taught as fact, school was easy for me. I just had to memorize a bunch of information. Now, I asked myself to understand what stories were being left out? From whose perspective were we being taught? How else could we write the story?



here are facts and there are stories. Every fact can be turned into any number of stories.

Here is a fact: The United States went to war with Mexico in 1846.

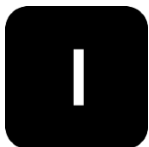
One story says the U.S. soldiers were heroes. One story says the United States was a winner and México was a loser. One story says Manifest Destiny.

One story says México suffered terrorist aggression from an imperial state. One story says México didn't lose—it was robbed.

One story says both México and the United States have illegitimate claims to govern in North America.

One story says we were poor before the war and we were poor after. Spanish or English. The mouth is still hungry.

Given this history with education, I am always concerned with power.



didn't want to write poems that moralized the issues of young people. I wanted to write poems that confronted the questions I felt as a teen. I wanted to write poems in a way that might give a young person in similar circumstances some comfort. I hoped my poems would be used to write new poems and to launch a million more stories.

Still, I had my doubts. How could I be sure that my writing could capture the emotional truth of adolescence?

## I am always concerned with power.

I decided to find out. I would take my poems and ask young people for their feedback and advice.

I was already mentoring a trio of a trio of young Latinx writers: Victoria Chávez Peralta, Luis Carranza, and Ken Muñoz. Together, we organized a series of open mics in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. We designed them to hold space for Latinx people, and we heard over and over that the space felt like home.

That's what I wanted my poems to feel like, so I asked Victoria, Luis, and Ken to read them. That experience taught me about what's possible in poems—and in mentorship relationships.

In my mentorship relationships, I hope to dismantle the hierarchies that place me as the expert because I'm the oldest among us. When we sit in workshop together, we are all students. We are all trying to learn and grow. I consider their comments on my work, and I invite them to reject my critiques. They have to write the poems that will save them, just like I had to write the poems that saved me.

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