

LIBRARY SERVICES TO LATINO COMMUNITIES IN THE U.S. : REFORMA'S LEGACY AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

By: Alicia Long

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Effective library services to Hispanic/Latino communities should be a goal of any library or cultural heritage institution in the United States—especially since the 2020 U.S. Census reported that 18.7% of the nation's population (and 26.5% of the population of Florida) identifies as Hispanic [1]. This concern with reaching out to Latino communities is not new and many leaders and scholars have paved the way for the status of services to Latinos in today's libraries.

Elizabeth Martínez, a Chicana activist and advocate for cultural diversity, recently recounted the events that took place at the 1971 Annual Conference of the American Library Association (ALA) in Dallas, Texas, where she and a group of Mexican American library leaders got together to discuss the need for more advocacy for their communities, something they were not getting from the ALA leadership at the time [2]. Martínez carried with her a film (based on a poem) titled *I am Joaquín/Yo Soy Joaquín*[3] and showed it at the meeting, which included Dr. Arnulfo Trejo and others. Inspired to serve Latinos in libraries and library schools, they made the decision right then to create an organization that will actively promote library services by Latino librarians and for Latino communities. That was the birth of REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-speaking. The name REFORMA was chosen because the intention was to reform the profession, to “change the face of librarianship.” [4] Since then, the association has seen the development of many more leaders, scholars, practitioners, and committed library workers. Fifty years later, REFORMA is a recognized organization with chapters all over the continental United States and Puerto Rico. [5]

At our state level, many Floridians have been part of the association over the years, including librarians, library managers, and LIS (Library and Information Science) faculty and students. For that reason, the administrators and faculty of the University of South Florida's School of Information (USFSI) decided that the 32nd iteration of the “Alice G. Smith Lecture,”[6] the school's prestigious lecture series, should be devoted to the theme of services to Latino communities and the work of REFORMA.



Image 1 Dr. Arnulfo Trejo
(image from Wikimedia)



**Image 2 Elizabeth Martinez speaking at REFORMA
National Conference IV, Denver, 2011**
(image courtesy of REFORMA)



**Image 3 Dr. Kathleen de la Peña McCook & Lucia
Gonzalez at REFORMA's President's Program
during ALA Annual Conference 2011 in New Orleans**
(image courtesy of K. McCook)

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Two REFORMA leaders and USFSI graduates were invited to be the lecturers. They were Lucia M. Gonzalez, a children's literature author, storyteller, librarian, public library director, former REFORMA President, and at the time President of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC)[7], and me, Alicia K. Long, a Florida librarian like Gonzalez who has been active in REFORMA since 2010 in different capacities, including as the 2021-2022 President of the REFORMA de Florida chapter. The lecture presented an overview of REFORMA's legacy and some reflections on the current and future state of services to Latino communities.[8]

THE LEGACY OF LIBRARY SERVICES TO LATINO COMMUNITIES

The 2021 Alice G. Smith Lecture, titled "Changing the Face of Librarianship: REFORMA and Library Services to Latino Communities" was "a story in two voices." [9] It was structured by decade, summarizing main events, publications, leaders, scholars, and initiatives that took place throughout the association's history.

Lucia Gonzalez initiated the Lecture with mentions of the work done by precursors of REFORMA, the origins of the movement, and the reason for the name: "Implicit in that name, I saw a call to action, a call to change from within, a call to transform and to reshape the organization," Gonzalez said as she recalled the moment she made the decision to join REFORMA.[10] From the beginning, being an agent of change in librarianship was at the heart of REFORMA.

ENCOURAGING RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

The overview of the five decades of the association's history highlighted landmark publications related to library services to Latino communities, titles that are still consulted today or that opened the door to more publications. Beginning with Dr. Trejo's initial work,[11] publications mentioned included works by Salvador Güereña, Isabel Schon (who published widely-used bibliographies and landmark works on bilingual and Spanish books for youth), Camila Alire, Orlando Archibeque, John Ayala, and USFSI faculty member and REFORMA Lifetime member Kathleen de la Peña McCook, among others. The list of works mentioned also included case studies, conference proceedings, and journal articles featuring research on services to Latinos, particularly in specific areas of librarianship such as services for Latino students in academic libraries, children and young adult services, adult reference, etc.

Throughout the years, REFORMA members and leaders participated and helped organize different events and programs that sought to provide spaces for discussion and learning and to move the profession forward toward becoming a more inclusive field. One of those important academic spaces was created with the founding of the Trejo-Foster Foundation and their "Trejo Institutes". These gatherings focused on research and discussion on topics related to library education and took place in universities with library programs throughout the U.S. and in Mexico.[12] The first Trejo Institute took place in Tucson, Arizona in 1993 and the last one was in Mexico in 2012. Lucia Gonzalez mentioned in the Lecture her experience attending the IV Trejo Institute, which took place at USF in Tampa in 1999. The proceedings from that institute dedicated to the theme of Youth Services were edited and published by McCook & Immroth and included chapters by Lucia Gonzalez, Isabel Schon, Arnulfo Trejo, and other presenters.[13]



Image 4: Lucia Gonzalez telling a story at a "Noche de Cuentos" event at ALA Annual Conference 2014

(image courtesy of REFORMA)

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REFORMA was also a co-founder, along with the other four ethnic affiliates of the ALA[14] (Black Caucus of ALA, American Indian Library Association, Chinese American Librarians Association, and Asian Pacific American Librarians Association) of the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC).[15] The first joint event took place in Dallas, Texas in 2006[16]. Since then, the ethnic associations (now called National Associations of Librarians of Color) have had three joint conferences, and the fourth one will be in St. Pete Beach, Florida in October 2022.

SUPPORTIVE INITIATIVES

Consistent with its activist mission, REFORMA has also been the force behind several programming ideas that have been adopted by libraries everywhere. One of them, "Noche de Cuentos," was born out of an initiative of ALA President Camila Alire, who was the first Latina president of the American Library Association. Libraries and organizations can use the materials and graphics from the NochedeCuentos.org website, and apply for mini-grants to implement these nights of stories in their institutions.[17] Through an initial partnership with author Pat Mora, REFORMA created the first "Día de los Niños/Día de los Libros" programs in libraries, a celebration of reading and books, which grew to be adopted by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) and is now known as DIA (Diversity in Action). [18]

Another important legacy of REFORMA is the creation of the "Pura Belpré Award" in 1996. A book award that is currently co-sponsored by REFORMA, ALSC, and YALSA as part of the ALA Youth Media Awards, it was actually the brainchild of two REFORMA "pioneras": Sandra Ríos Balderrama and Oralia Garza de Cortés, who with the help of a few other dedicated women advocated for an award that would highlight quality literature for youth created by and portraying Latinos.[19] The Pura Belpré Award celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2021.



Image 5: Oralia Garza de Cortés & Camila Alire, 2015 (image courtesy of REFORMA)

More recently, REFORMA leaders responded to an important need in the Latino community regarding refugee children being detained at the U.S./Mexico border. "Children in Crisis" was born as a program that delivers books to children in shelters and detention centers, through a network of librarians and community organizers and supported by work and donations from the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), REFORMA's members, and many others.[20]

CHANGING THE FACES OF LIBRARIANSHIP

In addition to those community-focused initiatives, the work of REFORMA involves developing leaders (especially Latino leaders) in librarianship. The Lecture included examples of several initiatives that, from the 1970s until now, supported the recruitment of library students and library workers of diverse origins, including Latino. The most impactful of these initiatives was the creation of the ALA Spectrum Scholarship for minority students of Library and Information Science. Several "reformistas" (as REFORMA members call themselves) were instrumental in its implementation, including Elizabeth Martínez, Sandra Ríos Balderrama, and Kathleen de la Peña McCook, along with other ALA leaders.[21] As Lucia Gonzalez stated in the Lecture, "it did not take a village, it took a familia for the Spectrum Scholarship Initiative." [22] National and local scholarships provided by REFORMA and its chapters are also common practices, as well as mentorships, opportunities to serve and lead in the organization, and participation in regularly held REFORMA National Conferences, known as RNC. Throughout its history, REFORMA organized seven RNC. RNC VI was going to take place in Puerto Rico and Hurricane Maria forced its cancellation. RNC VII took place in 2021, just in time to celebrate the 50th anniversary. Titled "We Are the Change/¡Somos el Cambio!," this was the first REFORMA conference completely virtual and attracted more than 700 attendees.[23]



REFORMA's "Children in Crisis" team delivering books to children detained at the US/Mexico border

(image courtesy of Jenny Lizarraga)

In the photo: Patricia Aldana, Ellis Vance, Lucia Gonzalez, Azucena Galindo (IBBY), Jenny Lizarraga, Patrick Sullivan, Oralia Garza de Cortés.

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CURRENT STATE AND FUTURE OF LIBRARY SERVICES FOR LATINO COMMUNITIES

With first-hand accounts and informational research, the Lecture was a mix of facts, history, and stories. The voices of the leaders who made REFORMA what it is today were present through the “time travel through the decades,” [24] which ended with a call to reflect on the status of Latino services today, and an invitation for the audience to consider their roles in its future.

Statistical data and Census demographics presented in slides during the Lecture compared percentages of Latino population to percentages of library professionals of Latino origins, as well as numbers of graduate students and faculty of Latino origin in LIS schools, all of which portrayed a continued challenge of lack of representation. “No matter how many members we [REFORMA] had, no matter how many librarians we graduated, we could never keep up with the growing numbers of the community” [25] reflected Gonzalez when recounting the efforts of the Association to diversify library services.

Moreover, in addition to their exponential growth, Latino communities are more diverse than ever and always evolving. “The Latino community is always transitioning, re-birthing.” [26] Lucia Gonzalez concluded. One aspect that demonstrates those changes is terminology. Latino communities were and are called by many names: sometimes people use regional or more specific names like Puerto Rican, Mexican American or Chicano; general categories like Hispanic (the term used in Census data) or Spanish; Latino-American, Latino, and more recently Latine or Latinx (in an effort to make the term gender inclusive.) These terms are, like the people they represent, diverse, complex, and unique. “It’s whatever we call ourselves because right now we are telling our stories,” boldly stated Gonzalez. [27]

Because of this diversity within the Latino communities, there is no standard library service for Latinos. Each library and each community needs to recreate what that means in their own context: their librarians, library workers, and library leaders need to stay engaged and open, they need to listen and “get immersed in the stories of the communities” [28] they serve, and they need to fight to include all voices so that everyone has “a place at the table for community building.” [29] The 2021 Alice G. Smith Lecture provided a glimpse of the work accomplished so far by Latino library leaders. The audience was invited to join in this mission to bring about change and to re-form librarianship. Everyone is invited to become the new leader who will be featured in the next lecture to take place on a future REFORMA anniversary.

In addition, “The Alice G. Smith Lecture, established in 1989, is sponsored by the University of South Florida, School of Information. The lecture is an annual recognition of a scholar or author whose achievements have been instrumental in the development of librarianship or information studies.” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_G._Smith_Lecture)



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