

## The Helena María Viramontes Annual Lecture Series: *Manuel Muñoz*

On March 10th, 2016, author Manuel Muñoz visited the CSULB campus as this year's featured speaker in the Helena María Viramontes Annual Lecture Series. The series was created through the joint efforts of the Departments of English and of Chicano and Latino Studies to provide a forum for the discussion and appreciation of Latino/a art and literature.

A former student of Helena María Viramontes, renowned author of *The Moths and Other Stories* and of the novels *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *Their Dogs Came With Them*, Muñoz led a writing workshop for CSULB students, followed by a reading from his work and Q&A. The event was exceptionally well attended; the lecture hall was filled to capacity by students and faculty.

Born and raised in California's Central Valley, Muñoz engages in his writing with issues of poverty and identity faced by Chicano families. As a self-identified gay author, he provides strong voices for the queer and Chicano communities alike.

Muñoz is the author of three books, including *Zigzagger: Stories and The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue*--short story collections--as well as his most recent work, *What You See in the Dark*, a novel. For the campus event, Muñoz read a short story entitled "The Happiest Girl in the Whole USA," a piece he explained was inspired by his mother. During the event, Muñoz shared his conviction that the stories and voices of individual Chicano families are often overlooked. He stressed that every family has a significant and unique story to share and that it's important to listen to these voices if we are to understand the United States as a whole.

California's Central Valley, in particular, is home to several scattered agricultural communities; these small towns are often made up of Mexican-Americans and immigrants separated from the public eye by the barriers of geography, poverty, and language. The stories of these families are central to Muñoz's writing, and they represent voices from the other side of America's cultural divide.

The Helena María Viramontes Annual Lecture is significant to Muñoz's message because it is a collaboration of the Chicano and English communities. It represents the need and desire for communication across language barriers and highlights the importance of ethnic writers in the nation's contemporary literature. In order to effectively engage with an increasingly diverse population, students must be exposed to the stories and perspectives of Americans of different ethnicities.

The Helena María Viramontes Annual Lecture demonstrates how English is becoming a multicultural language--a common window for Americans of very different backgrounds to frame and communicate their experiences. A committee that includes Professors Araceli Esparza and Dennis López, of the English department, and Professors Anna Sandoval and Griselda Suarez of the Chicano and Latino Studies department organized this year's event.

Regarding Manuel Muñoz, Professor Suarez says, "Manuel exposes the relationships between the queer self, religion, community and family while at the same giving a queer person of color agency for their own identity. This is liberating when so often queer characters are absent or fall flat in literature."

Moving forward, the committee will be seeking to expand the Helena María Viramontes Annual Lecture into a two-day event featuring panel discussions with a variety of guest speakers. Given the popularity of the event this year, it is clear that students will be enthusiastically awaiting the lecture next time around.



Manuel Muñoz speaks to a crowd of students.