**A Latino storyteller shunned**

By Esther J. Cepeda

Oct. 2, 2013

Even before social media empowered the masses to easily shout down those they disagreed with, the now-common behavior of reacting with outrage before fully understanding an issue has been ruining people's careers.

Take Gary Soto, the talented and underappreciated Mexican-American author and poet who should be one of those beloved-by-their community artists who serve as unofficial ambassadors of Hispanic Heritage Month.

But eight years ago, Soto's career was stopped dead in its tracks by peddlers of identity politics who decided to take him down to uphold their own beliefs that no one, not even Hispanics themselves, should be allowed to cast light on the harsh realities that the Latino community faces. Well, not unless they want to be portrayed as traitors.

Soto's "crime" in 2005 was to publish "Marisol," a story about an 18-inch doll. At the same time, the American Girl doll company released Marisol Luna, a Latina-themed doll and their 2005 "Girl of the Year," which was sold with Soto's book about Marisol's back story.

Marisol Luna was a fictional pre-teen Hispanic girl living in Chicago's Pilsen community who was dealing with her family's impending move out to the suburbs, to a safer neighborhood and for the same reason all immigrant families move to America: a better life.

People freaked out, accusing Soto of besmirching the honor of Pilsen, a lower west side neighborhood with a lot of pride — and many issues. It's a community that frequently defends its Latino roots, which span back to the 1960s, while fending off both criticism of its crime rates and encroaching gentrification.

Despite its bluster, Pilsen, like many other Chicago neighborhoods, has its share of poverty, gangs and violence. It is located in the city that has recently been dubbed "America's Murder Capital," and the lower west side had 37 shooting victims in 2012 and another 15 so far this year. The neighborhood has had 35 homicides since Jan. 1, 2007.

In 2005 when the uproar over Soto's book erupted, Latinos were, in fact, fleeing the city for the suburbs' quieter neighborhoods, better schools and ample manufacturing jobs. The 2010 census found that while the Latino population grew by 3.3% within the city since 2000, it grew by 46.5% in suburban Cook County and by larger proportions outside of Cook County.

While Soto was being shunned for writing a story fully representative of Hispanics' historic across-the-country mass migration from cities to suburbs, I was teaching a classroom of native-Spanish speakers in a formerly majority-white, suburban school district that was struggling to serve an unprecedented influx of Latino elementary schoolers.

That was the year I first discovered Soto's Christmas fable "Too Many Tamales" and shared it with my first-graders. I was so thankful there was a book, in English, that reflected my students' home language and traditions alongside school-wide readings of "The Polar Express" and "Frosty the Snowman."

Last year, The New York Times reported that a 2011 survey on the race of authors and characters in children's books published each year found that "just over 3 percent of the 3,400 books reviewed were written by or about Latinos, a proportion that has not changed much in a decade."

Hmm, I wonder why?

In a heartbreaking essay on the Huffington Post's Latino Voices site, ["Why I've Stopped Writing Children's Literature,"](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-soto/childrens-literature-writing_b_3989751.html) Soto described how "Marisol" became his undoing.

"I kept quiet. I kept to myself. At night, we unplugged our telephone." And, finally, Soto noted, "I have stopped writing children's literature. At my age, the genre is too dangerous."

Come back, Gary; America's schoolchildren need you.

In fact, we all need authors of differing races and ethnicities to be able to speak their truths, even if not everyone in their particular community approves.

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/opinion/a-latino-storyteller-shunned-b99111090z1-226196101.html>