

# At Home in the Borderlands: An Interview with Rolando Hinojosa

by Josef Raab

**The following interview with Rolando Hinojosa was conducted by Josef Raab at Schloss Seggau, Austria, on July 29, 2010. Hinojosa was teaching in the Inter-American Summer School of the University of Graz at the time. Having been categorized as a postmodern writer, an ethnic writer, a local-color or regionalist writer, etc., Rolando Hinojosa illustrates the influence of his ‘native country’ the Lower Rio Grande Valley, on his work in the interview.**

While in Seggau, he was working on his latest novel, a likely conclusion to his *Klail City Death Trip Series*. The series, which consists of fifteen books so far—some in Spanish, some in English, some English variations of novels published first in Spanish—started with *Estampas del Valle y otras obras* in 1973; the most recent volume is the campus novel *We Happy Few* (2006).

Hinojosa was born in Mercedes, TX, in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in 1929. His family roots in the Valley go back to 1748. He turned his birthplace, to which he still travels several times a year, into the Klail City of his series, located in fictional Belken County. This region on the north side of the Rio Grande and of the international border between Mexico and the U.S.A. is the setting for all of Hinojosa’s fiction, which chronicles the lives of ordinary people—many of them of Mexican descent—in the borderlands since the Mexican Revolution, their conflicts, troubles, and hopes, their community values and traditions. Often several generations appear in one novel, and usually the conflicts of the present (mainly between Texas Mexicans and Texas Anglos) are linked to the past. There are frequent shifts of perspective, as Hinojosa allows his characters to tell their own versions of events. His novels tend to be comparatively short; their style is concise and often ironic.

During the Chicano<sup>1</sup> Renaissance of the 1970s Rolando Hinojosa—along with Rudolfo A. Anaya and Tomás Rivera—stood at the forefront of a Mexican American literature that was putting the Hispanic Southwest on the literary and cultural map of the United States. Hinojosa’s focus has remained on the Mexican American community of the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas. His fiction has recreated some of this border region’s developments: we meet migrant farmworkers in the 1950s, a Mexican American police lieutenant in the 1980s, and Latina/o professors and students at a college campus in the current decade. These portrayals emerge from a variety of voices, and they are presented in a variety of genres ranging from dynamic, collage-like novels that insert fictional newspaper clippings, police reports, letters, and sketches into the narrative to epistolary novels, narrative (war) poems, detective fiction, and campus novels. Large numbers of characters populate these narratives, many reappear in several novels. At the heart of Hinojosa’s fiction remains his love for the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and especially for the people living there. He (and we) may laugh at some of their foibles, but his heart always goes out to the fictional community of Belken County—a community with strong ties to communities across the Rio Grande.

As Hinojosa writes in his essay “Living on the River,” the Lower Rio Grande Valley area is not a border to him, but rather a region that extends to both sides of a river:

The border is a term usually employed by non-borderers. And when we speak in Spanish, we always mention “el río” but not “la frontera.” *La frontera*, or the frontier, is used by those who live in inland territory. We—borderers—usually say “across” or “this side” or “the other side” (with *the River* or *of the River* being the implied phrase).

A border is a defining place, a separateness of citizenship, even, but it may, to outsiders, also imply a separate culture. It shouldn’t, and it doesn’t do so in the Río Grande Valley. (29)

Hinojosa’s most recent collection, *A Voice of My Own: Essays and Stories* (2011), explores his thoughts on the

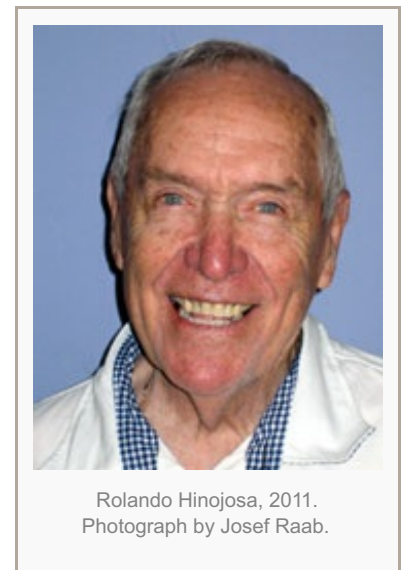
border and on Mexican Americans further.

**Josef Raab:** *Looking at the Lower Rio Grande Valley international border between Mexico and the United States over the past few decades, would you say that the border has become more closed off in recent years? Or has exchange across the border increased? Has this exchange increasingly become an illegal exchange?*

**Rolando Hinojosa:** The border has not closed completely, obviously. What has affected the Lower Rio Grande Valley, however, are economic changes due to the violence on the Mexican side. Understandably, American citizens do not want to chance being killed or wounded when they cross the river. For years and years, crossing the river to shop, for entertainment, dining, and so on, was a given, something that we, as high school students, were used to as were our parents and older brothers and sisters. People still cross daily north to south and south to north, but with a bit of trepidation. The numbers have decreased and this, then, has caused the economy to deteriorate.

**Raab:** *How present were Mexican nationals, Mexican goods, and Mexican interests in Mercedes, TX, in the 1930s and 1940s, and how present are they nowadays?*

**Hinojosa:** The presence was palpable, most stores in Mercedes accepted Mexican money; at that time, the peso stood at \$4.82 to the dollar, and one would pay in dollars across the river and be asked if the change was to be in Mexican or in American money. This easy exchange took place during the Great Depression and it must have stopped sometime after 1942 when Americans had returned to work after the Great Depression.



Rolando Hinojosa, 2011.  
Photograph by Josef Raab.

Weill reminds us that “Geschäft ist Geschäft.” Merchants may be politically conservative, but when it comes to business, that is something else. What increased the border interchange in the war years was that thousands of young Mexican men and women, under an agreement between the two governments, came to work in many parts of the United States and this included the border. Why? Because this country was preparing for war and laborers were necessary to fill vacancies on the farms and in the factories.

Currently, one can find Wal-Mart stores in many parts of Mexico. In regard to grocery stores, the H.E.B. grocery chain has established stores in the ritzier parts of major cities such as Monterrey, Nuevo León, and Guadalajara, Jalisco. My nephew, Joe Negrete, an architect, designed the first three in Monterrey. They carry Mexican products, of course, but American products as well. The same holds for H.E.B. stores in Texas: the stores have always carried some Mexican canned goods, for example, but now, Mexican products of all manner and sort are carried by every store in Texas. As you may know, Mexican food has replaced Chinese food as the favorite dining out plate, and although American companies sell Mexican products, Mexican companies outsell the American brands.

**Raab:** *Do you share Gloria Anzaldúa’s designation of the U.S.-Mexico border as “an open wound” or is the border to you rather a lively and diverse area of mutual exchange?*

**Hinojosa:** No, I don’t. She was born in Hargill, an out-of-the-way village in the Valley, and that experience marked her severely. However, the part of the Valley she knew disappeared by 1950; the history remained, of course, and it appears in the writing by Tomás Rivera, Ricardo Sánchez, José Montoya, and, in part of Rudy Anaya’s work, as well as in the poetry of Alurista, to mention one, and in the theater of Luis Valdez’s *Teatro Campesino*. But that Valley of Anzaldúa began to disintegrate after World War II; the Veterans’ Entitlement Act, popularly known as the G.I. Bill, became the source of higher education for many Mexican Americans or Chicanos. In 1915, for example, there was one Valleyite in the Texas Legislature. Now? They are in sufficient numbers that some are heads of the Texas House and Senate committees. More and more [Mexican American] students graduate, and more and more earn master’s degrees and doctorates. Where? Harvard. Yale. Stanford. Berkeley. UCLA, and so on. It’s another world and has been since after 1950. Why 1950? Because that was when the first mass of Chicanos graduated from colleges and universities, that is, five years after the end of World War II.

In the Valley, a sizeable number of principals and superintendents are Mexican Americans; the same is seen in the city councils, the city commissions, the mayors, law enforcement, medical doctors and nurses, dentists, in brief, all manner of professionals as well as state and national politicians. It isn't heaven, but it's not the Valley of Anzaldúa's in the '30s and '40s. I'm sure racism exists, but the number of Hispanics in the Valley is over 85%; to cut this short, there are less than 10% Anglos in Mercedes, and this holds true for all the towns and cities in the Valley.

**Raab:** *In view of the Internet, global media, migration, and manifold exchange, does the Lower Rio Grande Valley, in your mind, still preserve a distinct local or regional cultural identity? Or is it increasingly becoming a place like every place else?*

**Hinojosa:** Californian and New Mexican Chicano professors and movie makers are and continue to be amazed when, say, driving by a bank in the Valley, they'll see the Texas flag, the U.S. flag in the middle, and the Mexican tricolor at the left. In my advanced class [at UT Austin], "Life and Literature of the Southwest," I always take a census of the students' hometown: one hears Dallas, Houston, Ft. Worth, and other Texas towns and cities by name. When the Valley students are asked for their hometown, unfailingly, now, they all respond "the Valley." The Anglo students look around and then I explain that the Valley is a support system, that the descendants of the families whose names appear in the census of 1750, are very much alive, and that the newer Valleyites, from Mexico, also claim the Valley first and then the town or city they come from.

As you may know, the Valley is not a valley; it's a delta, but, to populate it with Anglo families, such as my mother's (born in 1887), the land developers labeled the place "The Valley." And in the Mexican border towns and cities, Matamoros, Reynosa, Valle Hermoso, etc., the Mexicans also call it "el valle." It's a strange place. Changes are inevitable, but the Valley's two universities, UT Pan American in Edinburg and UT Brownsville, both branches of the UT system, are also responsible for the cultural cohesiveness of the place. It is also the birthplace of *conjunto* music and many high schools as well as some universities have  *mariachi* bands and traditional Mexican dances; all, though, and to a man and woman, know they're Americans, but they also know where they came from.

**Raab:** *William Faulkner has Yoknapatawpha County, Gabriel García Márquez has Macondo, and Rolando Hinojosa has the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Is your fictional microcosm one in which borders and borderlines of all kinds play a central role? I'm thinking of the international border, language borders, ethnic borders, social borders, educational borders, gender borders etc. Do conflicts and exchanges across borderlines propel your fictional plots?*

**Hinojosa:** I write, in the main, about the U.S. side of the Rio Grande. That I include the Mexican side is natural and inevitable; that I don't overload it, however, is because I want to present an American literature that was (historically) founded by the neighboring country as seen by its linguistic contribution. To have ignored Mexico would have been a blunder and to have larded it heavier, my work would not have been an American literature, it would have been something else; as to what, I don't know, but Mexico, in some parts and in some ways, had to be included. Why? Because of its importance to the Valley's history: the Mexican Revolution of 1910, for one, but also the daily crossing of the river at a border that remains almost as porous today as it has always been.

I mention intermarriages, business, pieces of history here and there, but I maintain the Mexican American characters as the main focus without neglecting the blood lines that may bind them with the characters "from across" as we (and they) refer to each other.

In terms of gender, I think that my characterization of the women in the Valley is a fair one; Becky is the opposite of her mother and her mother's upbringing. Balde Cordero's sister is impregnated and will marry her lover, both families will see to that; there are losses in their ranks as well: Jehú's sweetheart was studying medicine at Galveston and was killed by a drunk driver; this happens, but life goes on. In *Becky and Her Friends*, the reader will see women of all stations, but this is the way, not as I see them, but as I have observed men and women in all manner of relationships in the Valley. Years ago, a literary critic rebelled and said that Viola Barragán was an atypical Chicana. How would she know? How many women dentists, doctors, lawyers, judges, teachers,

university professors, and so on, did the critic know? I knew and know them, am related to some of them, I also know women such as the Campoy character, who married and buried four husbands; that's life and that's what writers are charged with: to present and to give life to the characters.

Speaking of borderlines, the literature also comes down to the inevitable: class. [Tomás] Rivera presented field hands, well and good, but he also presented thievery among Chicanos by truck drivers who would abandon the migrants up north, a priest who used the people's money to have himself a trip to Europe, a cynic who claims that an education is worthless, and yet the child who hears this, disagrees, and so on. Borders, as everyone should know, are not geographical locations alone, they are made by humans, and some suffer while others live off their fellow men and women. The way some characters speak and explain themselves also reveals what social borders the characters have forged for themselves or how they have suffered because of borders, be they linguistic, cultural, social, racial, etc.

Faulkner saw the nature of borders very well in "Barn Burning:" poor white against rich white, and the poor youngster who chooses his own geographical border by running away.

**Raab:** *You have been publishing fiction, poetry, and essays for over forty years now, and you paved the way for many younger writers. In your view, has it become easier for you personally and for Hispanic writers in general to get your work into print? How has the market for Latina/o literature changed in recent decades, and have those changes affected your career as a writer?*

**Hinojosa:** The developments of the market haven't changed my career, but there aren't many evident openings now for publication. The literary journals have closed. *El Grito* died years ago; Nicolás Kanellos<sup>2</sup> decided that Arte Público Press couldn't carry the *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* any longer. And that just about dried it up because I don't think the *Bilingual Review* publishes literary reviews and essays regularly enough. I present my essays at universities, when I'm invited. My career hasn't changed; I travel just as much, perhaps more. But as far as publishing essays and other non-fiction, that's very difficult—maybe more difficult than forty years ago.

The advent of Quinto Sol Publishers at Berkeley in the mid-sixties had opened opportunities for writers, young and old. Three years into the publishing of the literary cum art journal, *El Grito*, the press offered the Premio Quinto Sol for prose and poetry. As you know, the first winner was Tomás Rivera for his framing tale ... *y no se lo tragó la tierra* [... and the Earth Did Not Devour Him].<sup>3</sup> Tomás's work, in Spanish, was translated into English and published bilingually in 1970. Rudy Anaya was awarded the Quinto Sol Prize for his *Bless Me, Ultima* in 1971, and, in 1972, I was awarded the prize for *Estampas del Valle*. The English edition of *Estampas* came out as *The Valley* in 1983 under the direction of Gary Keller's Bilingual Review/Press [which at that time was located] at Eastern Michigan University. In those three years, the first Chicano anthology *El Espejo/The Mirror* appeared and in a second printing. It included Tomás, Rudy, and me, Estella Portillo Trambley, and others. Added to which, the journal *El Grito* was also publishing art by the Montoya brothers, Malaquías and José, as well as poetry by Alurista and others who went on to continue writing and publishing.

But by the mid-seventies, an internal struggle among the founding members of Quinto Sol saw its dissolution. Its example, however, gave rise to Nicolás Kanellos's Arte Público Press and its literary journal *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*. Pardon the bit of archeology, but, by that time, young Chicano writers appeared and this helped to galvanize and to maintain Chicano writing. I believe that the first publication by a majority press was Rodolfo 'Corky' Gonzales's *I Am Joaquín*; the Spanish translation, *Yo soy Joaquín*, was appended to it, and the publisher was Bantam Books, a part of Random House Publishing, a major American enterprise. Various attempts at publishing occurred, but the ones that held on and publish still are Kanellos's Arte Público Press (University of Houston) and Keller's Bilingual Review/Press (Arizona State University). Other Chicano writers appeared and submitted their work to majority publishing houses with some success and this continues to this day. Kanellos also publishes children's literature as well as graphic novels, as does Keller. As always, it's up to the writers to continue writing if they wish to be read. As for me, I've not submitted my novels to any New York [publishing] house. However, I do appear in the anthologies they publish because of name recognition.

And now? Now, Norton Publishers have come out with a 2,489-page anthology: *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*.<sup>4</sup> This might give a boost to publishing opportunities for young Latino writers. "Latino" is the umbrella

term used in this anthology to designate all Hispanics in the United States and thus includes Mexican American, Cuban, and Puerto Rican writers and poets, as well as writers from Mexico who lived and published here, as did Cuba's José Martí. Caribbean writers are included as well as Central and South Americans. So I think we've covered the basics. If a writer could only write in Spanish, and the work was in Spanish, then we would provide an English translation. If the writer wrote in English, we published the original.

The anthology contains prose and poetry, songs, short stories, excerpts from graphic novels, etc. In brief, every genre. Aside from the texts and a brief biography of every writer, Norton has added 122 pages of appendices on chronology, history, treaties, acts and propositions, and influential essays by Latin American writers, among them José Enrique Rodó, José Vasconcelos, Octavio Paz, and Roberto Fernández Retamar. These writers appear separately because, unlike exiles such as Martí, they did not establish residence in the United States. Included separately as well is a 177-page section of selected bibliography. It took us, the six compilers, thirteen years to produce this mastodon-like anthology: Edna Belén Acosta, Harold Augenbraum, Ilán Stavans, María Herrera-Sobek, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and me.

Young Chicano writers continue to write, but their areas have widened, although the focus remains on Chicano life in the United States. I imagine that I'm one of the established writers in the anthology—given the number of awards, prizes, recognitions, symposia, etc. I've been showered with. I'm lucky, too, I enjoy rude health.

**Raab:** *You say that it took thirteen years to compile the Norton Anthology of Latino Literature. What was that process like, on what did you base your decisions, what do you hope the anthology will achieve for Latina/o literatures?*

**Hinojosa:** We met to discuss what it was that we wanted to do. And that's why it took so long—well, we are deliberate, we wanted the very best. One criterion was that any Hispanic—not just Mexican American, Cuban American, or Puerto-Rican, but also writers from Columbia, Venezuela, etc.—could be included in the anthology. The other criterion, apart from quality, was that the writers have lived and published in the U.S. Many of those exiles lived there for only a couple of years and published; this is enough: they earned their living as writers in the U.S., and so the criteria of residence and publication are fulfilled. And it worked out well, but it took a long time. It was a worthy experience for me, and it's a worthy publication. What will it do? I can't foretell.

**Raab:** *Let's look at your own work now. Forty years ago, at least half of your writings were published in Spanish; in the last twenty years, however, English became your predominant writing language. Did that happen out of market considerations or because the main language of the Rio Grande Valley is increasingly English?*

**Hinojosa:** It was both. I proposed to do something in Spanish [in the 1980s]; I asked Nicolás Kanellos; he said, "you know, we're not going to publish in Spanish anymore." He has, of course, changed his mind since then; as Arte Público grew, his audience grew. Relatively recently, I did publish one book in Spanish, *Claros varones de Belken* [1986], with somebody else's English translation, on which I had to work just as much as if I had originally written it in English. Gary Keller published it at Bilingual Review/Press. The market has changed; my readership is university-driven. Most of those young people don't read Spanish; some of them still speak it, but they don't write it. They assimilate more, they acculturate more quickly. Added to which, my material is not taught in Spanish departments, even that which has been published in Spanish.

At the time, there was no market for it. So since Nicolás Kanellos didn't want to publish in Spanish, I said to myself I better write in English. But then the market did change. Still, my market is the university. I'm not a popular writer.

**Raab:** *Speaking of popularity: decades ago, those Chicana/o writers who were being read were almost exclusively male. Nowadays, however, it seems that the majority of best-selling U.S. Hispanic writers are women. Why do you think that is?*

**Hinojosa:** It begins with having an agent in New York. Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chávez, Anna Castillo—they have an aggressive New York agent. I have never sought that market; I have always tried to stay within the university market. I never had an agent, and I consider myself lucky. If somebody offers me 200 dollars for a reading, because that's all they can afford, I don't have to answer to an agent who wants 1,500 or whatever and

who says, why don't you hit them for more money. That's not my viewpoint on what I'm doing. I will work for 200, 500, sometimes more—but I don't have to then share it with an agent who would always try to jack up the price. That's not what I'm writing for. This is not to condemn or in any way denigrate what the women writers do. Cisneros, Chávez, Castillo were later joined by younger women writers, many of them poets, which is very nice.

In 1975, I published an article [about these developments] in *Books Abroad*, which is now called *World Literature Today*; and in the seventies, I took part in a discussion of this topic organized by Tomás Rivera, which was later published. One of the things I said was that there were too few literary critics [working on U.S. Hispanic literature], which was absolutely true, but that women [writers and critics] would be coming in. And they have come in, and they haven't stopped! I could rattle off three poets from San Antonio alone: Carmen Tafoya, Evangelina Vigil-Piñón, and the late Angela de Hoyos. Pat Mora went from poetry to prose on Mexican living, and now she makes a good living as a writer of children's books. The women are highly successful and they are represented, and this is good.

I was very happy to be translated into German in the old GDR by Verlag Volk und Welt. *Klail City und Umgebung* was later published by Suhrkamp. And *Korea Liebeslieder/Korean Love Songs* was published as a bilingual edition: English on the left, German on the right. The translation is by Wolfgang Karrer, [then] at the University of Osnabrück. Things have changed a lot [for Mexican American literature]. We're no longer what we were in the late sixties and early seventies, but I also think that much of the change is for the better. Writers are more careful; there are many Chicano literary critics now—university-trained, obviously—subscribing to various schools, from deconstruction and New Historicism to Close Reading.

**Raab:** *You have repeatedly said that writers first of all need to be readers. As a reader, who are your favorite writers and what do you think you may have learned from them?*

**Hinojosa:** My mind hasn't changed. If you don't read, you cannot be a writer. Fortunately, I come from a family of readers. My mother would read to my father and he to her; I'm the youngest of five, and my older brothers and sisters also read. I thought everybody read. So I just picked it up. Even as a child, I wanted to write. I think that what happens is that most of us writers reread the same books and then we're introduced to new ones. I've profited from every writer I've read, I could swear to this. I may not follow what they do, but I know that something in me, when I'm writing, must have come from the outside. Some things come from one's own life and personal experiences, but reading and rereading is crucial. There's Anthony Powell; I started reading him in the early seventies, and then I read the twelve novels of *A Dance to the Music of Time* maybe two or three times. There are books I read every other year; I used to read Proust every four years, I'd begin at the first volume and read the whole lot. So, there's French, and English—but also the great nineteenth-century Russians. In regard to short stories, I'd place Pushkin first, and then Chekhov, and then the others. The golden age of nineteenth-century Russian literature that I read as a boy and that, later, as I grew older and matured, I could understand even better. And then I started reading history. History is a big help. I also would read what other writers had to say about writing and so I read interviews, such as the one we're doing now. I think all of that helped. I remember an essay entitled something like "Rolando Hinojosa, Belken County, and William Faulkner, Yokanpatawpha."<sup>5</sup> Whether the author was right or not, he realized that I was writing not à la Faulkner—who could do that?—but that I was influenced by Faulkner's choice of novels and setting and characterization. Another one is Heinrich Böll. I read Uwe Johnson and other contemporary German authors, too, but it was Böll who meant the most to me: *The End of a Mission*, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, and, of course, *Group Portrait with Lady*. One of my favorites has always been *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* [by Böll]. So, these are the Europeans. Now, if you cross the river and go over to Mexico—here, too, my interest begins with the nineteenth century. The Central American writer I read was [Miguel Ángel] Asturias, the Nobel Prize winner. Primarily, I read Colombian and Venezuelan writers, with a heavy dose of Argentina, then Chile, and Uruguay. Most writers read. If we stopped reading, our writing would certainly suffer.

**Raab:** *You once mentioned to me that you've never read Gabriel García Márquez for fear of being too close to him; people had told you that your writing reminds them of his. Are you still shying away from García Márquez?*

**Hinojosa:** Yes, but with one exception. You know, Mexico has two annual book fairs: Guadalajara and Monterrey. Well, for Monterrey I was asked to present a novel and I chose Gabriel García Márquez' *El coronel*

*no tiene quien le escriba* [No One Writes to the Colonel]. It's a short novel; it has a good deal of comedy in it, and a very serious pathetic protagonist. The following year, I chose *Aura* by [Carlos] Fuentes. Then, last year, I chose a book by José Emilio Pacheco. He's a great poet and a fine novelist. He was awarded the Cervantes Prize this year [2010]. I chose *Morirás lejos* ["You Will Die Afar;" no published English translation available]. It's a complex brief novel, so compact and so tight—it really should be a model for young writers to see what can be done in less than two hundred pages. I was lucky enough to meet him and his lovely wife last year.

**Raab:** *World literature is one source of your writing, and another is the Lower Rio Grande Valley. But now you have been living away from it for decades; yet your fiction continues to be centered there. Aren't you afraid that you may be losing touch with your own "little postage stamp of native soil?"*

**Hinojosa:** I do go to the Valley a lot.<sup>6</sup> And I don't fly. I love to drive, though it takes me six and a half hours, sometimes seven—or eight, if I stop along the way to chat with people. Added to which, each semester I usually have three or four students from the Rio Grande Valley in my undergraduate classes. So I keep up with them. Most of them are so acculturated and assimilated that their Spanish is weaker now, unless they have a grandmother who talks to them. This year, I only had one student who spoke Spanish well, not only in class but also outside of class. These boys' and girls' parents are middle-class; they speak English to each other and to the kids, which makes sense: after all, it is the U.S.

But the Valley has changed. I would say that about 84 to 87, sometimes 90% of the people in the, say, sixty, seventy communities down there are Mexican American; the superintendents and the principals as well as the teachers in the high schools and junior highs: Mexican American; the vast majority of politicians, too; mayors, chiefs of police, police forces: heavily Mexican American. The Anglo population is decreasing and aging. It is not what it was when I was growing up. We were always in the majority, but we had never voted until after World War II. The Valley has changed, as far as population is concerned. Now you have a Mexican American running against another Mexican American, which was something unheard of when I was growing up. This benefits the community, I think. However, there is also much violence, and some of our politicians are just as crooked as some Anglo politicians.

**Raab:** *Is the sense of community that one experiences in your book *The Valley and other novels of your Klail City Death Trip Series diminishing in the Lower Rio Grande delta, as far as you can tell?**

**Hinojosa:** Yes, that, too, has changed. There's more money now, people are more sophisticated. Instead of one hundred men and women and children picking cotton for a week, a machine does it in five hours. So, mechanization has helped to bring people away from those hot fields, they've been retrained to do something else. The schools are better and teachers are better paid, though most money still comes from agriculture. The change has been mostly demographic; there is so much movement across this porous border that I'm not surprised at the things happening down there. The Valley isn't paradise. It's home—with all the weaknesses that all human beings always exhibit.

**Raab:** *Speaking of paradise, does the *Aquí me quedo*<sup>7</sup> bar actually exist?*

**Hinojosa:** I'll tell you what: I received a postcard from Mexico, and one from Guatamela, both from places called *Aquí me quedo*. And once, I was in Spain, doing the Quixote trail, visiting all the spots where Quixote went in that part of Spain. And we walked into a place that was named *Aquí me quedo*. I had brought an original copy, a first edition, of *Estampas del Valle*, and I gave it to a young woman. Unfortunately, the owner had died, and when I asked his daughter "why did your father name this place *Aquí me quedo*?", she said "I have no idea." Still, the book [*Estampas del Valle y otras obras* (1973)] had been published in the early seventies, and the bar didn't open till around 1976, so it's probably not by chance ...

Now, there were two *Aquí me quedo*'s in the Valley, one in a village called Sebastian: it had two tables, and three chairs, and a bar. The other one I used to pass on my way to school. I was born on the corner of Texas Avenue and Hidalgo, and there are many *panaderías* [bakeries] still in Mercedes. On a visit to the Valley I said to my late brother René, "Let's go to the *panadería El Fénix*." Behind the *panadería* used to be the old *Aquí me quedo*. It's wasn't there anymore, and I asked the master baker: "Maestro, what happened to Cantú's *Aquí me*

quedo?” And he said: “It fell down.” My brother piped in: “Why, was there a hurricane?” And the old man said, “No, it fell.” My brother: “Was it brought down by hard rain?” “No, it simply fell.” He kept saying, “Se cayó.” So there were two in the Valley, one I used to see every day when I went to school. It was such a little old place, but it fell down [laughs].

**Raab:** *Your work, to me, has an oral quality to it. When I read it, I feel like I am being talked to. And when I read the dialogues in it, I get a sense of a distinct type of language use and style. Do you write down conversations you have or overhear or how do you manage to capture the talk of the borderlands?*

**Hinojosa:** This goes back to my childhood. I was one of the few youngsters who would sit and listen to the elders tell stories or tell jokes, or make up stories. I'd just sit there; I wouldn't butt in. Mercedes is the only town in the Valley that I know which still has benches in front of the businesses; it's also one of the few towns where men wear hats. Kennedy, in the '60s, when he was sworn in, didn't wear a hat, so people stopped buying hats. I don't know what happened to the hat industry.

Now I'm older than the people I used to listen to as a child. When I write about them, they speak according to their social position; I mimic the way they would express themselves. It's easy for me to do that. Their stories had to do with Mexico, with the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the Depression of the 1930s and that type of thing. But the way they expressed themselves, that's what got to me. I was fortunate, really. I was born in 1929, I knew these people; I felt I wanted to do something, and this something turned out to be writing. And when I write dialogues, I say the words aloud, look whether they sound authentic. Would this woman that age, would this man in that profession talk that way?

**Raab:** *Those people you listened to stayed with you for so long ... That's amazing. Do you see yourself as the chronicler of these people and their descendants: hard-working, often suffering people who never lose confidence; people who all have their individual life stories and little faults, and whose faults usually make them even more appealing? Are you a community chronicler?*

**Hinojosa:** I like the word “chronicler.” I used to describe what I do as a “cronicón.” Manuel Martín-Rodríguez, who wrote his doctoral thesis on my work, used it in an article of his, as did Professor Héctor Calderón.<sup>8</sup> I wanted to capture the time of the Mexican Revolution. But I also felt I should bring in the Korean War, and then, in *Partners in Crime* [1985], the increase in drug smuggling and the subsequent violence it has brought to the Valley. I waited thirteen years after *Partners*—until 1998—to write *Ask a Policeman* [another crime novel]. I saw the false economy in the Valley, a place which is one of the poorest in the United States. Because of the false economy, they can't invest this money. You have to rinse it or launder it or whatever they call it. You see sixteen year-old kids in high school with their pick-ups. When I ask the price, they say, “Ah, my dad paid \$35,000 for it.” A city such as McAllen with a population of 90,000 has something like 14 banks. It doesn't make sense. That money must be coming from somewhere; it comes from across the river and it's deposited there. I notice these things because I look in the Yellow Pages and I start counting to see how many banks there are ... I try to keep it as realistic as possible in my work, without an exaggeration, but the Valley itself is an exaggeration.

**Raab:** *You mentioned Partners in Crime and Ask a Policeman, two detective novels. To my knowledge, you are the first Latino writer to publish detective novels and the first Latino writer to publish an epistolary novel and a campus novel. What made you decide to go into these genres that are not traditionally associated with U.S. Hispanic literature?*

**Hinojosa:** Because it's American literature. I was going to write in as many different genres within the genre of the novel as possible. I take it etymologically; “novel” means something new, so I wrote the first two in a dynamic style: not one plot, not one main character of the nineteenth century, but pieces of this and that, introducing the reader in the first novel to the place, to the varied societies within the Mexican-American society; this was going to establish the place. Then I wrote the second novel, *Klail City y sus alrededores*,<sup>9</sup> and I added a few more characters, but I also kept some characters from the previous novel. Then I said, “okay, I have the beginning of a series.” I had written two dynamic novels, working like that instead of a linear “A to Z,” and for the third, I thought, “we're not all farmhands, we're not all from small towns. Many of us were in the military.” So I wrote *Korean Love Songs* to show the Mexican American experience in war, serving their country. In the fourth book, *Claros varones*



*de Belken* [*Fair Gentlemen of Belken County*], I had Rafe Buenrostro and others returning to the Valley. The characters are a few years older, they are mature, they are ready to receive their college degrees ...

I want young Mexican American writers to see that you don't have to write a nineteenth-century novel, that's why I wrote the two dynamics and the narrative verse, *Korean Love Songs*. Then I went back to the dynamic form, and then—then I wrote an epistolary novel, *Mi querido Rafe* [*Dear Rafe*]. It consists of letters by Jehú Malacara to his cousin, Rafe Buenrostro, who is in a veterans' hospital; the people who appear in Jehú's letters reappear in a second part as a sort of a reportage; those who have been talked about now speak, talk about themselves. Then I wrote it again in English, and it was published as well. And then I wrote *Rites and Witnesses* about the changes in the Valley: the second part again is reportage, but the first one is not epistolary; it's just a straight telling of some stories in the Valley. Here [in *Rites and Witnesses*] you see the first entrance of an educated Mexican American, Jehú Malacara, working in a bank. I kept track of what's happening in the Valley and I said, "Wait a minute, we're no longer in the fields, we're no longer in the military, we are teaching but we're also now going to college." As you know, Rafe graduates from the university, goes to law school, passes the bar exam, but decides not to study the law. He becomes a policeman, and his brothers remain farmers, and then it just goes on and on ...

And then I said: well, I've already mentioned Becky in *Mi querido Rafe*, and I asked myself what is she doing now? What would happen if a Mexican American woman living in a small town, being of one of the most influential families in the Valley, college-educated, Roman Catholic, married, with two children—what would happen if she decides that's not the life she wants to live anymore? This supposedly arch-Catholic family and society doesn't believe in divorce. What will she do? I began to write Becky's story in Spanish—and then I hit a stone wall. I couldn't do it in Spanish. It was in '88 or '89, I'd been traveling, and when I came back, I called Nicolás [Kanellos] and said "I have a novel, I won't tell you what it's about, but I'm very interested in it." "Call me back when it's finished," he said. Finally, I decided to write it in English. When I sent *Becky and Her Friends* to Nicolás, I still had these drafts in Spanish and I decided to tackle those, too; what happened was that I wrote *Los amigos de Becky*.

Now, before I started writing these two novels, I asked myself, "Who is going to tell the story, who is going to be the narrator?" If I wrote it from my viewpoint, which is male, that wouldn't be what Becky sees; if I wrote it from a woman's perspective, people might find it hard to believe. So I said: there'd be no narrator. Instead, there'd be voices—thirty-something, maybe forty. Voices: all ages, both sexes, some are close friends of Becky's, some don't know her, but have heard about her because of her high standing in the community. I said: *they're* going to write the novel; that was it, and it worked. I added a brief bio for each narrator; I borrowed this from Heinrich Böll's *Group Portrait with Lady*. He calls his compiler "The Au.," short for "The Author." I call mine the "wri," and in Spanish the "esc," short for *writer* and *escritor*. With this strategy, I could follow the changes in Valley mores, as the characters discuss the divorce in an important family. I could see all those changes in the Valley and I told them in my own way—without coloring or exaggeration or playing it down. If they're crooks, they're crooks; if they're good people, they're good people.

**Raab:** *You mentioned the different genres in which you worked—this is probably why you have been categorized in so many different ways: as a postmodern writer, an ethnic writer, a local-color or regionalist writer, a satirist, etc. Would you say that any of these labels fit?*

**Hinojosa** (laughs): I imagine they do. Actually, I don't know. I don't read much criticism. I won't read any more book reviews, that's for sure; those newspaper people don't even read the book they're reviewing. But I do respect literary criticism. I know how much work goes into an article, and then one waits for a year before it sees print in a journal ... I'm not surprised at those labels; I'm sure I've been called many other names (laughs). I am a chronicler, but also many other things; if Faulkner could get away with Yoknapatawpha or Anthony Powell with his upper-class English crowd, not that I'm equating myself with either of them ... I wanted to show these people [i.e. Mexican Americans of the Lower Rio Grande Valley] and the changes they had gone through, some of the good things they had done for this country and some of the things this country had not, or had, done for them. It's a long story, and I needed all of that.

I'm going to show you something. [Hinojosa takes out a handwritten list with two columns of names and notes for

the novel he is working on.] This is the first time I've ever done this, and it was not done because of the interview. See, I put down names, starting here on the left-hand side with Sammy Jo dying, then there is a funeral, and some traveling, then I wanted to show this male character's status ... And then I decided against the whole thing, I scratched it out and started over here. I wrote, "Running the table, as you do in a gambling game [...]." I thought, these are the dead [in the left-hand column], and they're going to have their say about the changes they've seen in the Valley; and here are the living [in the right-hand column], some are young, some are middle-aged, there's Jehú and Becky, and Esther Bewley, who appears in *Dear Rafe*, and some new characters. I gave them jobs: attorneys, a judge, a mayor of the city, a state representative, a school principal, a banker, a city official, an architect. I think, this is going to be the very last of the *Klail City Death Trip Series*.

**Raab:** *There is only one more installment to look forward to in the series?*

**Hinojosa:** I think so. I might change my mind, of course; I'm a writer. But you see, last year, I spent a good deal rewriting *We Happy Few* in Spanish, but I also wrote seven chapters about a New York Irishman, Timothy Matthew O'Hara. He lives in Long Island, but the precinct that he works in Chinatown; he retires after twenty years as a lieutenant in homicide, he could never rise above lieutenant; his wife's grandmother (who is Italian, this being Long Island) tells him that this is because he never took a bribe. And then he becomes a hitman. So I wrote seven chapters and I said: "this is going to be it." Now I'm writing another seven, but this time in Spanish. This is what I'm doing now.

**Raab:** *When you write, do you have a Mexican American reader in mind, maybe even one who knows the Lower Rio Grande Valley? Or do you see yourself as writing for a general American audience? Or maybe an international audience?*

**Hinojosa:** I keep all of them in mind. I write for people who read, and not just decorate their houses with big fat books and don't remember what they read a year ago. I don't write popular stuff and I don't want to. It doesn't matter who my readers are as long as they know what reading is and won't be shocked when we go from an academic novel to military novel to epistolary to whatever may be. Readers is what I want. But I have no mercy. I won't go around trying to please a select group. So I write for everyone. I'm pleased, though, when I receive letters. Now I receive e-mails. Most say "thank you very much, I enjoyed your book," but there's one I still treasure particularly. It came in 1974 or '75, saying, "I think you made an error as far as blood kinship between so and so and so and so." So I looked it up and the letter writer was right; it was a young woman from California. I wrote her back saying, "Thank you very much, you're absolutely correct, a pity I can't change it now." I was so pleased she was a reader, a college reader, not just someone who buys a bestseller every now and then. So, yes, I write for readers. All of those you've mentioned.

**Raab:** *In terms of nationality, do you consider yourself an American writer, a Mexican writer, or a cosmopolitan writer?*

**Hinojosa:** Well, I'm an American, so I'm quite happy to be an American writer.

**Raab:** *How do readers in Mexico and Latin America react to your work?*

**Hinojosa:** As far as I know, there's been only one review, in 1976. It appeared in *El Universal*, a leading Mexico City newspaper, and the author was a writer himself. And that was it. I'm well-known in Mexico, I've been invited to the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, but I don't know who my readers are. I'm also known in Cuba; once, as I was checking in for a flight, the young man at the counter—twenty-something by his looks—asked me, in Spanish: "Are you Rolando Hinojosa, the writer? I read *Klail City*." Imagine, a clerk working in an airport! That certainly never happened to me in the United States. He wanted to know what I was working on; I was very pleased.

Cosmopolitan? I don't know; I guess I'm suave in some things. But I have very few of my characters who are: to me Jehú is suave because he is a college man, and of course Rafe. But I also like to write about the bulk, the people I knew as a kid.

**Raab:** *In your fiction we usually meet quite a number of characters; you just mentioned the forty or so characters*

*talking in Becky; and there are as many about whom they talk. At odd moments their lives and activities intersect—often by chance. Why are chance meetings and chance developments so appealing to you in your fiction?*

**Hinojosa:** I guess it has to do with the brevity of life. It's my experience that people change locations in the Valley. Although many of them know each other or are related, I see an opening wedge to start my stories—or the novels, obviously, of course, made up of stories. I'm fortunate to be able to write that way, that I found a vehicle which is proper for me to write.

**Raab:** *When and where do you write?*

**Hinojosa:** That's a good question, I wish more people would ask it. I can write on a plane if it's not too rocky, or in an airport, if I have a four- or five-hour layover, or a hotel. I always take something to write anywhere I go, and, of course, at home. I wrote my first three novels in longhand, and then computers started to come up, and one of my daughters helped me to buy one and to learn how to use it. This helped a lot: often I need to delete a word, a line, a paragraph, a page; so a computer is handy. Now I own a small one so that I can write anywhere. I've read interviews with people who like to sharpen their pencils all the time and to put them in a neat row. Me, if I have something to say, I can say it anywhere. I don't write at the office often. But I'm more comfortable on the road and I'm very comfortable at home, and I write when I have the time. I also know that every draft of a novel will take a year or more of rewriting, I'm in no hurry. But I don't need any special spur, I just write.

**Raab:** *I think you once said that you wrote most of We Happy Few while traveling on a freighter. Is that true? And does it help you to have some distance to the borderlands, in which your fiction is set?*

**Hinojosa:** I'm a great movie fan. As a child, I used to watch black-and-white movies like everybody else, and it was from a movie that I learned that you could go on a freighter as a passenger, and I realized that I wanted to do this. So I just looked up a freighter company that went to Japan and China, because that's where I wanted to go, and I did it. I wrote a draft of the novel during the trip, all that remained was editing. It was a thirty-five day trip—thirty-five days to myself—so of course I had to write something. That's what I did a lot of the time, but I'd also eat with the crew three times a day, and sometimes watch the loading and the unloading; in the evening sometimes I wouldn't write but I would go outside and watch the stars—stars I hadn't seen since childhood when there were no bright lights in my hometown. And I watched the sea; saw those huge Chinese fishing nets; never did see a whale, only a tail or two, but I did see this spray from their backs. I also took some paperbacks along—some Conrad, some Graham Greene, and it was very pleasant. I'd get up in the morning, go for breakfast, shower, maybe watch a DVD, I'd exercise on a bicycle, write, have lunch, and back to writing. Then maybe an engineer would come up and ask whether I'd like to see the engine room and I'd say yes. They also had a pool measuring something like nine by nine, in which I swam with the crew; the Pacific is too cold for swimming, but it was fun, I had a good time, and I also wrote, and *We Happy Few* came out of that.

The title, as you know, comes from Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Last week, a Slovenian translator said she loved the book, but that the title had been translated as *Some Were Not Very Happy*. Of course she was deploring this mistranslation. I actually wrote something about her father and uncle—not in the English version of *Becky*, but in the Spanish one. I wrote the Spanish version later, and in it there are two Yugoslavs in the German army; one deserts, the other one is captured by the French and winds up in Vietnam—this story has some real-life sources.

**Raab:** *In We Happy Few you mention the changes that have occurred from one generation of Mexican Americans to the next in terms of higher education. There are stories of being the first from one's family to go to college and there are significant numbers of Latinos among the university faculty and in its upper administration. Does this scenario reflect the reality you see at UT Austin and in the Valley or would you say it is only a "happy few" Mexican Americans who make it to that level?*

**Hinojosa:** "We happy few" refers to the faculty as a whole, who don't realize how happy they are to be on the faculty. I took as my models the two four-year University of Texas branches, the one in Edinburg and the one in Brownsville. They had a woman president at each university at one time. Most of the faculty and a good portion of the administration is Mexican American. It's a good reflection of the headway we've made, though there are some deadwood Mexican Americans and Anglos in the faculty, and that comes out in the conversation. I thought the novel was a rather accurate description of academia, because I've been a chair a couple of times, a dean, a

vice-president for academic affairs at Texas A&M University-Kingsville; and when the president resigned, I gave the presidential report to the regents. I think I have a pretty good view of what the university is like. I have been to a small one (Trinity), to a medium-sized one (Texas A&M), and to two large ones (Minnesota and UT). The faculty is the same. They're out at sea and the only thing they worry about is their own work, and, of course, they engage in gossip, you can imagine.

**Raab:** *So is the novel a payback for the last five decades of suffering in academia?*

**Hinojosa:** In some sense, yes. It's a great life, though. I love academia otherwise. I like the work, I like to teach, and if I didn't, it would be a waste of time. I think I'm quoting Dashiell Hammett, who said something like that about being a private detective. I figure that I've been in the system long enough, so I think I've seen just about everything. I've no bones to pick with anyone, I sat down and wrote it.

**Raab:** *A last question: what do you want readers to take away from your books?*

**Hinojosa:** It's an excellent question! The majority of my readers are either Mexican American or Anglo-American. I appreciate the foreign readers, they make you feel so worldly, but mainly I want my readers to see and recognize themselves in those novels. Some Anglos are mean-hearted and prejudiced, and some are not; same thing with the Mexicans. My characters are as diverse as people are diverse. They are good people and bad people, some are in high offices, some are out in the streets, endangering their fellow citizens. And also, whatever the Texas Anglos thought of the Texas Mexicans in the last century, they can get some answers here from someone who has no bones to pick. Not all Mexicans are thieves, not all Mexicans are lazy, but some are. As a chronicler, I can't afford to take sides. I think it's a reflection, and I want the readers to see themselves.

**Raab:** *Rolando, thank you very much.*

**Hinojosa:** My pleasure.

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## Notes

1 The epithet "Chicano" was espoused by young, politically active Mexican Americans in the 1960s and 1970s, who claimed Aztlán as their mythical homeland and called for resistance to "gringo oppression."

2 Nicolás Kanellos founded Arte Público Press at the University of Houston in 1979 and still directs this press,

which publishes contemporary works by U.S. Hispanic writers as well as recovered works. Most of Hinojosa's books since the late 1980s have been published by Arte Público Press.

3 In 1986 Hinojosa published an English version of this book under the title *This Migrant Earth*.

4 See Stavans. *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* collects writing by Hispanics in the Americas from colonial times to the present with a focus on Latina/o literature in the United States and including popular genres like sung *corridos* (ballads) as well as historical documents like the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The anthology includes the complete text of Hinojosa's *Becky and Her Friends*.

5 See Busby.

6 Hinojosa revised the transcript of this interview while spending some time in the Valley in May 2011.

7 This is a bar in Hinojosa's fictional Klail City, where numerous conversations and events of his novels take place.

8 See Martín-Rodríguez; Calderón.

9 An English version of this novel—not a faithful translation but an adaptation with some scenes omitted, others added or changed—was later published as *Klail City*.

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