

THE SOUTHWESTERN BORDER IN THE EYES OF ONE  
OF ITS PIONEERING CHRONICLERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH  
ROLANDO HINOJOSA-SMITH

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*Professor Rolando Hinojosa-Smith was born in Mercedes, Texas, in 1929. Today, he is one of the best-known contemporary Chicano authors. Among his numerous publications are Estampas del Valle y otras obras (1973), which was awarded the Premio Quinto Sol in 1972; Klail City y sus alrededores, winner of the prestigious Casa de las Américas Prize for the best novel in 1976; Mi querido Rafa (1981); Fair Gentlemen of Belken County/ Claros varones de Belken (1986); and The Useless Servants (1993). His latest novel, Ask a Policeman (1998), will be in the market in a few months, and he is already working on his next one under the tentative title of Favors and Misendeavors. Apart from his fiction, Hinojosa has written critical articles for many journals and anthologies. At present, he is a senior professor in the English Department at the University of Texas, Austin.*

*His fictional works center on the autonomous Chicano culture of the Río Grande Valley and its struggles for survival in an increasingly Anglo-dominated world. Hinojosa's major achievement is his ability to depict concisely but keenly the people and mores of this region. In order to do so, he uses almost all the conceivable literary forms and succeeds in giving a sense of veracity to his fiction. Perhaps the aspect of his novels that readers are most likely to enjoy is his ironic, yet also very penetrating humor.*

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**Aitor Ibarrola:** Professor Hinojosa, you have explained in previous essays and interviews that most of the materials you have used in your fiction come from your formative years as a child in the Río Grande Valley. What was life like on the Mexican-U.S. border in the 1930s and 40s?

**Rolando Hinojosa:** Economically, it was most difficult because of the Great Depression which went from 1929 until the Fall of '39 when this country, while supposedly neutral, began shipping *matériel* to Great Britain. This fact, then, softened the economic crisis for some. Not so along the Texas Mexican border which was not in any way industrialized. In short, times were really rough.

Socially, and for the most part, the Río Grande Valley people were divided along racial lines. Educationally, some Valley towns were also divided ethnically, say, one school for Texas Anglos and another for Texas Mexicans. Not in every case, of course, but Valley schools were divided in that manner. In my hometown, Mercedes, Texas, South Ward Elementary was a predominantly Texas Anglo school, while my school, North Ward School, was one-hundred percent Texas Mexican.

There were no Texas Mexican teachers or administrators in any of the elementary schools, or in junior high or, even, in the one high school in town. Come to that, the head janitor was Anglo, too. Most of us at North Ward did not meet Texas Anglos until the seventh

grade in junior high. But then, things in high school were something else since sports were so important and this was based on pure competition. The coaches, whether racist or not, always wanted to have winning records since their jobs would be on the line.

Up until I was four years old, my father worked in Mexico in whatever he could to keep us fed and clothed on the Texas side. In 1933, he became the town police officer and later worked in Democratic Party politics. Texas was a one-party state at the time. Some of us made friends with Texas Anglos and, as is always the case in human relations, some did not. Still, because people are human, there were some intermarriages. That was then, of course.

**A. Ibarrola:** How did the fact of being the son of a Texas Mexican father and an Angloamerican mother affect your development and education, and eventually, your worldview?

**R. Hinojosa:** On the Mexican side, my father, due to his Spanish blood, I suppose, had blue eyes, as did his mother. My Texas Anglo mother's eyes were also blue, as are mine and my sisters'. So, we looked Anglo, but we knew what we were, and it did not much matter to us.

The vast majority of our friends were Texas Mexicans, but you also have to take into account that there were social differences within that society depending on education, economics, and so on. There were social clubs to which segments of the Texas Mexican society were not invited and did not belong. A segment, in fact, looked down upon by other Texas Mexicans, too. Even though Texas Mexicans were discriminated against by some Texas Anglos, Texas Mexicans could be as racist as anyone else.

One's color mattered, but standing in the Texas Mexican community was also measured by being an old family. Ours, for instance, had been living on the northern bank of the Río Grande since 1749. Evidence of this appears in the first census taken by the Spanish crown in what was then called Nueva Santander, in 1750. We, however, were not the only issue of intermarriage. I can give you the names of some other Mercedes families: Heath, Carroll, Parker, Baum, McVey, Bowman, and others. But most of these were marriages between World War I soldiers and Texas Mexican women from Mercedes. Our family was different, though.

My mother was the youngest sister of nine Texas Anglo Catholics; she was completely bicultural and, thus, bilingual. She had been brought to The Valley in 1887, at the age of six weeks. Three of her sisters, aunts Ida, Numa, and Ellen, the eldest, married Texas Mexicans. I did not think any of this was special, and I still don't. This attitude comes mainly from having two strong parents as well as two older brothers and sisters who served as models for me. Pride in my family also helped, I am sure. We harbored some resentments, of course; they are a fact of life, but not controlling factors.

**A. Ibarrola:** If you were to specify three or four defining aspects of the region where you grew up or its inhabitants, which ones would you choose?

**R. Hinojosa:** Of the many defining aspects, I guess it was the idea of being from The Valley; a region apart and a border one. We had our own structures which paralleled the Texas Anglo ones: our own culture, social clubs, printing shops, artists, writers, created interests, and the like. It was, then, The Valley. I did not realize it until later that Texas Anglos also had a claim on the region since The Valley was also home to them.

I hope you do not think that there was no racism then, or that there is not some residual racism even now, but it does not really matter. Texas Mexicans, by dint of fighting for their rights, of striving for an education, are in political power in the four counties of the Valley area: Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy. Look at the city commissioners, the

county commissioners, the lawyers, doctors, engineers, teachers, superintendents, principals, in brief, the professional class. A healthy economic middle class with all the worries and hang ups of the middle class, but as my friends down there tell me: «At least, they are our hang ups.»

There is also the continuing poverty, which is mostly due to the border that is highly porous; likewise, the recent turn to nativism is also a defining moment for me. You should understand this: Texas Mexicans will not allow a return to the blatant racism and discrimination of old.

**A. Ibarrola:** Did you feel underprivileged or marginalized in any particular ways during your childhood and young manhood? If so, do you remember any anecdotes from those times that would show the hostility toward individuals with a Hispanic background?

**R. Hinojosa:** I considered myself underprivileged, but as I look back on that period now, and as I have for some forty years, I realize that we were not dirt poor. I thought we were then, but I was just a youngster, and what did I know?

It struck me much later that my father had a job; a steady job. Low pay, for sure, but we owned our house because my father had saved prior to the Depression. Too, the five of us finished high school and my older brother and sister worked at whatever came along so that they could enroll in a junior college during the middle Thirties. As for feeling marginalized, as I said earlier, we had our own structures of which our Boy Scout troop was yet another example. As mentioned, the Texas Anglos had their structures, but so what?

In what concerns my young manhood, I left for the U.S. Army at age seventeen. At the time, dating Texas Mexican girls was difficult; what parties were held were mostly held in homes. Very strict parenting, you know, and dating was not what one was supposed to do. I did date two Anglo girls, which was cause of gossip in my high school. They both owned cars.

I remember several anecdotes from that period. One happened to my brother René. He and a group from North Ward had been transferred not during the seventh grade, the usual practice then, but during the fifth. René and a boy named Darrell Riley fought over some athletic equipment during recess, and the principal punished them both. That one act, equal punishment, curiously brought some sort of equality. An earlier incident concerned my two sisters. Both were enrolled in the Catholic primary school. One day, out of the blue, the nuns separated the Hispanic children from the Anglo children. The explanation was that the Anglo parents wanted it that way. In this instance, my mother went to the school and disenrolled my two sisters there and then. My mother did not return to the Church until the beginning of World War II.

The third anecdote is more dramatic, and it involved Roy Lee, my oldest brother. He did not want to enroll in North Ward: most of our Texas Mexican friends, because they lived in another part of town, were enrolled in South Ward. When Roy tried to enroll, he was turned down. What follows is gospel. He went home, told my father, and together they went to South Ward. My father strapped on his pistol and said he had come to enroll his son in school. A minor victory, as I see it now, but then it was a major victory and, perhaps, the beginning of desegregation in Mercede's elementary schools. As for the Catholic church, the only time I saw my father in church was during his funeral service.

The hostility was due to stupidity, and we noticed that some Anglos discriminated against other Anglos as well. Held against us was the matter of history and myths, racism based on skin color for some, almost anything for others. The myth of cultural superiority played a part, but the outcomes in grades and sports disclaimed that so-called superiority, particularly when half of the players were Hispanic and the top grades came out almost

equally divided. The shameful part is that many young Hispanics had to work to help support their families, particularly the migrant farm laborers, and I am sure much talent was wasted and lost because of that disturbing economic fact.

**A. Ibarrola:** In your essay «The Sense of Place,» you noted that your identity as a borderer «with a living and unifying culture» was to a great extent strengthened by the fact that it had been «born of conflict with another culture.» Could you elaborate some on this idea?

**R. Hinojosa:** Well, as I have said, the Texas Mexican culture was a unifying force. It was a living culture, we were not Mexicans, and although some of us came to that part of the state when it was under the Spanish crown, we were not Spanish, either. We were Texans, Valleyites.

It is true that the Texas Anglos called us «Mexicans,» pejoratively pronounced *Messicans*, and we were also referred to as «greasers.» To be called that to one's face meant a fight; among adults, too. Those insults were usually thrown at those unable to defend themselves. You can imagine what they called us when we were not present.

But we were also borderers, and borderers, unlike people who live in the interior of a country, say, Kansas, Missouri, or the Mid-West, are different, if not special. There is a mutual economic dependency, not infrequent intermarriages, and business arrangements; a shared history and a shared psychology. As I have said, not special, but merely different. The first conflicts came in 1848, when the original 1749 settlers on the northern bank became American citizens at the end of the Mexican War. This also became the starting point of the forging of border culture.

**A. Ibarrola:** Although deeply rooted in your childhood memories—a time often recalled by authors with nostalgia—your vision of life in The Valley is as far removed as it can be from any sentimental or idyllic presentation of reality. Has there been a conscious intention on your part to eschew any romanticizing elements from your fiction?

**R. Hinojosa:** I have tried, and it has been my intention, to curb sentimentality. A deliberate choice, yes. As I pointed out in that essay you quoted above, The Valley was not paradise, but then it did not have to be; it was home with all of the unfairness and pettiness that comes with the truck of daily life. The last thing I wanted was to romanticize the place, and that was not my role when the evidence of separated cemeteries, churches, communities, schools, and so on was there for me to see and experience on a daily basis.

Moreover, one heard stories of discrimination told by old timers. And I believed them because I and some of my friends experienced taunts and insults—some real, some imagined—from people we considered absolute fools, and yet, they were in power. My father himself put it best: «They're not tougher nor smarter, not in the least. They came here with a new language and new laws; we just have had to catch up.»

And we have. Look at The Valley structures now. But I can see and hear, as the Bible says, and I also see that some of us are not any brighter than the Texas Anglos. We can be just as petty, crooked, and stupid. On the other hand, we are also kind, self-sacrificing, and, in the end, human.

No, romanticism is not in my nature; besides, what kind of a writer would I be if I were to present our society as a band of angels?

**A. Ibarrola:** Evidently, your fiction borrows heavily not only from your personal memories but also from the collective memories of your people. Have you ever felt any kind of responsibility—or even some regret—for the revelation of some intimate aspects of your culture? Do you think such revelations could make you more vulnerable in some cases?

**R. Hinojosa:** No, no regrets. Writers cannot afford the luxury of regrets. Or, as Faulkner reminds us, writers cannot afford the luxury of being afraid. I do not worry much about vulnerability either; I think joining the military service at age seventeen steeled me in some ways. Plain talk at home was another help.

It is not my job to protect the Texas Mexican, or the way we think, speak, or act. If one of us cannot tell the truth about ourselves, what can we expect from misinformed Texas Anglos other than misrepresentations, myths, romanticism, a deformation of our history, etcetera. Texas Anglos are not monsters, and we should not present them that way either. But then, I must not gloss over what both sides are responsible for.

**A. Ibarrola:** Let us focus a bit more closely now on your writing career. I understand that you did not begin to write fiction with any serious ambitions until the early 1970s. What was it that encouraged you to start your career as a writer just then?

**R. Hinojosa:** For the record, I first wrote during high school, when I was fifteen. I had written a short story involving two *campesinos* during the Mexican Revolution; I wrote it in Spanish, and this was because I spent three summers in Saltillo, Coahuila, during my teens. I also wrote five pieces in English during my junior and senior years in high school. Two were fictionalized memories plus three essays. The pieces form part of a collection called «Created Bits» and are stored in the Mercedes High School library.

I continued to write but nothing came of it. I did, coming from a family of readers, continue to read; nothing really systematic, whatever I felt like reading in English and Spanish. I decided to be a writer during high school, and I knew that reading was the key to writing, and so I continued to read when and whatever. Incidentally, the Army furnished me with books and with the opportunity to read.

As for the 1970s, this was the defining moment for many U.S. Hispanics of Mexican decent: renewed Civil Rights movements, the war and turmoil produced by our adventures in Asia, and incensed protests. What happened in the Seventies is that the Veterans' Entitlement Acts of World War II and Korea had produced a sizeable and critical mass of educated U.S. Hispanics by the Fifties and Sixties.

If one had been honorably discharged, one was guaranteed an education in a trade or, in the case of many of us, in a university. The Act is popularly referred to as the G.I. Bill (G.I. means government issue, and the initials are the slang term for soldier). From the G.I. Bill came the educated Hispanics. By the Seventies, then, the World War II and Korean veterans were in place as educated members of the community; out of this group came the teachers, the politicians, the professionals, sizeable, and educated middle class I spoke of earlier.

Mexican American literature, to call it that, was born on July 4, 1848, when the United States and Mexico proclaimed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signalling the end of the Mexican War. The literature could not be anything else: it was not Mexican or Spanish. The Valley was now part of the American Union because two governments decided on the new boundary lines of the two countries. The early literature of the nineteenth century was mostly written in Spanish although recent research reveals that New Mexicans were also writing in English as well as in Spanish.

Let me return to the Seventies now, though. In 1970, a student of mine showed me a short story by Tomás Rivera, whom I did not know or had heard of. I then read Rivera's novel *...y no se lo trago la tierra*. What struck me, aside from the fine writing, was that it was published in this country, and in Spanish. That set me off and, as you know, I have not looked back since. I continue to write and to publish in both languages.

**A. Ibarrola:** You have recognized on several occasions your indebtedness to Tomás Rivera. What were/are the aspects of his works that you admire most? Could you name any other authors—Chicanos or otherwise—whose fiction also attracted your attention in the early stages of your writing career?

**R. Hinojosa:** What I owe to Tomás Rivera is our friendship which ended with his death in 1984. We met at a professional meeting after a mutual friend introduced us. We walked and talked the entire afternoon; we missed lunch, the conferences, everything. We talked about literature, the Chicano movement, the need for getting more people not only interested but also involved, and above all, as always, literature.

I sent him a chapter of something which he then sent to the publishers of Quinto Sol. When the number of the journal *El Grito* came out, the first three writers were Tomás, Rudolfo A. Anaya, a good friend and writer, and I; but, of course, a set of other writers were also published along.

My first two novels were written in Spanish and I have written three others in that language, along with renditions in English of those novels as well as five or six other novels in English. My recognition to Rivera's worth concerned his economy of language with its deceptive and seeming simplicity which, in truth, is complex and tough. I called it fine writing earlier, and it is; but it is the finery of tungsten steel: it will definitely live for a long time.

There are too many influences to number; too many writers and too many countries to do any one of them full justice. Not to admit to being influenced is fraudulent; for instance, it is not uncommon to recall a writer while one is writing. It is inescapably human. This does not mean one will plagiarize, but it does mean that one cannot deny the influence of, say, Heinrich Böll, Anthony Powell, the great Peninsular writers of the nineteenth century, of which Galdós is the prime example of that literary period. Then, there are the Russians, the French, and the Latin Americans for three other examples.

Living writers are a continuation and heirs of all writing that has gone before us. Without them, we are nothing. I have always agreed with Medieval thought: there is not much originality, and the little there is may not be worth the candle.

**A. Ibarrola:** As you have said, your first two novels—both of which were awarded important literary prizes—were published in Spanish. In what ways did the use of this language condition the initial reception of your work? Do the later re-creations of these novels in English suggest something about your perception of different audiences?

**R. Hinojosa:** I wrote the first novel, *Estampas del valle y otras obras*, in Spanish for various reasons. For one, Rivera had done it with significant success, and for another, I found it natural to do so. Added to which, the characters lived in a Spanish-speaking milieu, and so it seemed to me the natural thing to do. The same is true about *Klail City y sus alrededores*; the number of Anglo characters in these two novels is minimal. Moreover, the scant mention of them is deliberate since I was focusing on our culture.

But now, look at what happened in *Korean Love Songs*. With the success of the first two novels in Spanish, I thought I could write about my Army service in that language. It took me some seven frustrating months to catch on to the fact, for the most part, I had lived that time of my life in English. At first, I even tried to translate what I had into English, which proved an unqualified disaster.

When I wrote *Claros varones de Belken* soon after *Korean Love Songs*, the characters were back in the Valley and still in the Spanish speaking milieu. *Varones* was followed by *Mi querido Rafa*, an epistolary novel and set in the Valley, but a much changed Valley; the rising, educated Texas Mexicans were coming on strong and I found it natu-

ral to mix both languages as English invaded Spanish in the work place, in social gatherings, and in daily living.

Regarding the audiences, I let them sort out the literature by themselves. Since my main reading public consists of university professors and their students, I gave both of them credit to see and discuss what it is that I am doing. I am not a popular writer; it is a choice, and one that may be further reduced by the public which reads my work. I think that my audience would give short shrift to romanticism and sentimentality. Also, I am fortunate enough to have written my work in that fashion years before anyone started to use the novels in the classrooms. I believe «fortunate» is the right term to describe what has happened to me and my work.

**A. Ibarrola:** In the late 1980s and early 90s, there was quite an intense controversy over the «ideological» dimension of your fiction. While some scholars —e.g., Yolanda Sánchez— contended that your early novels showed only a very slighted critique of social and economic inequalities in the Valley, others —e.g., José David Saldívar— have argued that they offer an alternative and highly subversive history of the region. Which of the two critical positions do you think of as doing more justice to your fiction?

**R. Hinojosa:** I am not up on, or much aware of, the controversy regarding the «ideological» dimension in my fiction. The critics have a difficult time and role since I am writing a novel with many parts; it is a longitudinal work, and to say this or that after reading one or two parts of it is always premature. This narrow and shortened stance has been taken by some who do not and have not taken into consideration that *The Valley* is not a static entity.

Saldívar, on the other hand, takes the same longitudinal look as I do, and it is because of this that he manages to see both the extensive as well as the intensive bent in the work. Therefore, I think Saldívar is much closer to the mark as well as on the right track.

I do not, by the way, read newspaper reviews. I do, however, honor critics by reading the articles, books, and theses they write. They have spent much time in the preparation of their work, their reputation is also at stake, and as a Ph.D. and writer, I know how hard they work.

Still, some professionals do not read the works in their entirety, and here is an example of what writers put up with that may even provide an occasional laugh: A critic stated that *Partners in Crime* followed the regular pattern of the crime novel. That is, the world is at peace, a crime takes place, and after the capture of the guilty party, the world returns to its settled ways. Well, first of all, the world is never at peace. A cursory glance at any newspaper shows the violence, the multiple deaths by accident or by design, and the calamities that befall people, wherever they live. But with that out of the way, this critic, who should know better, characterized *Partners* in that manner. What is one to think of sloppy reading by a professional? To begin with, the false economy in *The Valley*, due to the dangerous drug trade, clearly contradicts what the critic wrote. Second, the villain of the piece gets away with murder and other high crimes, and, finally, *The Valley* does not return to that peace the critic wrote about.

This commentator did not read *Partners*. He couldn't have, not if he wrote what he did in that article. In fact, the piece read more like a review. The inaccuracy and speed with which reviews are written and published contribute to obfuscation rather than to accurate explanation. As I have remarked, a critic's reputation is as much on the line as any writer's.

**A. Ibarrola:** Would you agree that there is a close connection between the intricate narrative strategies you use in your fiction and the complexity of the society that you try to depict in it? How are the two related to each other?

**Rolando Hinojosa:** Yes, there is a connection all right, and I should hope that more critics would see and comment on it. The Hispanic society, as any other, is complex, and I thought that by using various and multiple complex narrative patterns, that they would see how these would somehow reflect the lives of people in the Valley and in «Klail City Death Trip Series.»

The relationship is quite close: Since memory—mine and the characters’—plays a large part in the Series, the open-endedness of the various parts of the Series, I believe, resembles life more than that found in straight, linear, one-protagonist versus one antagonist narratives. The Series is not linear since the recurring characters are seen at different stages of their lives (e.g., they may die in one part and be alive in a subsequent one). Furthermore, since friends, enemies, relatives, etc. talk about a character or he is remembered by them, then the character is not dead. This is very much like the dead that are remembered and talked about by friends and relatives, they are not truly dead until the last member of that generation or of that circle of acquaintances is dead.

**A. Ibarrola:** As a reader of your novels, I think one of the most difficult tasks your public is faced with is the construction of the kind of «implied author»—as Wayne Booth conceived the concept—emerging in your fiction. Have you deliberately erased all signs of your own interests, values, etc. from your novels?

**R. Hinojosa:** True, I have intentionally tried, to the best of my ability, to erase all signs; this is one way to submerge what sentimentality or romanticism would otherwise appear if the writer were trying to prove something or, worse, to write for one specific audience.

Regarding another type of identification, I am always happily surprised when readers and professors alike talk about the characters as if they were alive or old friends. I have also received any number of genealogies from all manner of readers. The latest one is from Professor Doktor Wolfgang Karrer from Osnabrück who has compiled and cross-listed the characters with whatever part of the Series they appear in. He uses a computer for that purpose, of course; still, this is a labor of love, and I am grateful to him.

**A. Ibarrola:** What does the shift from Spanish to English in the KCDT Series suggest about the social changes taking place on the border? Have the idiosyncracies of your characters undergone any broader changes as a result of the linguistic one?

**R. Hinojosa:** You may have noticed in *Mi querido Rafa* how Jehu Malacara intersperses English in his letters to his cousin. This is due to several factors, the chief one being that eventually, twelve years of schooling, three in the military service, four at university, and other years at the work place where business is conducted in English take their toll. Also, Jehu majored in English, but since he is a member of the original founding families, his Spanish will not disappear. The same, however, cannot be said for Spanish as a literary language among Chicanos. Things change.

That Jehu engages in the use of both languages in his letters merely reflects the years of doing the same in his speech patterns. This is a commonplace in any border territory whether it is Alsace-Lorraine and the German border, or, better still, the Swiss cantons, where there is a lovely and engaging mixture of languages. To have Jehu do otherwise would constitute a fraud. He is at home in both languages, as is his cousin, too. You cannot help but notice that Ira Escobar is not and neither is Becky in *Mi querido Rafa*. She only begins to remedy her lack of use of Spanish in the «Becky» novels.

Since English changes more than Spanish, and thus loses some of its edge at times, Jehu’s Spanish is what remains solid. His English does too, but in this case what makes it strong and fluent is the fact that he is a wide reader. The letters are deliberately chatty, for,



after all, the letters are confidential and going to a much-loved recipient, his cousin, Rafa Buenrostro.

One of the things that bother me about so-called epistolary novels is that almost within short order, the correspondence begins to sound much like narrative prose. Also, the difficulty of epistolary novels, but which I find exciting and challenging, is that the letters have to be written in such a way that the reader buys into them. I'll explain this: Buenrostro knows the characters being talked about in the letters, but the reader does not. How to write the letters so that the reader learns about the characters and about past and present events without telling the reader everything? This, to me, was one of the more enjoyable aspects of writing this type of novel.

To sum up, the language should resemble the characters by being as they are: dynamic and everchanging.

**A. Ibarrola:** Your experiences in the Army must have been extremely productive in writing *Korean Love Songs* and *Mi querido Rafa*. Could you explain in what ways those experiences altered your perception and understanding of reality?

**R. Hinojosa:** The Army service did help the writing, no question, because every experience is a help to the writer. I guess that so-called research would have helped the non-veteran, but recalling those days, the military vocabulary and the language register used then was not a difficulty.

Regarding my perception of reality and understanding of that experience, that atmosphere is the most unreal world there is. There is nothing like it. Nothing. That, also, may be why it is difficult to talk to people who have not undergone the experience. The closest to this, in civilian life, is, let's say, the study for the doctorate. You enter with a class, you see them fail, drop away, pass on, or complete the work, and then you may never see them again.

I remember reading during my Renaissance classes about courtly love and all that, about the brevity of life. Well, not to put too fine a point on it, the uncertainty of life in the military will make a realist out of anybody and change whatever perception one may have had of life and one's future in it.

It took me some time to write *The Useless Servants, a Korean War Journal*. I worked for two years on it, laid it aside, and then picked it up again, but did not once refer to the many spiral notebooks I had filled. I started from scratch and decided on the diary, log, or journal form because, to use Emerson's words, when he refers to poetry, I needed «the force of few words.» The diary form allowed me to do just that: few words to say as much as possible with them.

**A. Ibarrola:** Readers are often shocked at first by the convergence of diverse generic forms (some traditional, others new) and the multiplicity of linguistic registers in your work. Are those significant demands on the reader's re-construction of the fictional universe intended? What is their ultimate aim?

**R. Hinojosa:** I believe that readers are collaborators or the writer should so consider them. Lazy, inattentive readers would be baffled by what I do, but readers, that is, real readers, find the material engaging. Baffling for a while, perhaps, but not too long. They stick with the texts, and I am happy that they do.

I have repeatedly stated that I will use anything to tell the story: dialogues, monologues, newspaper clippings, letters, reportage, whatever. And also, whatever it takes by way of anthropology, history, myths, linguistic tropes... That this gives off some verisimilitude is all well and good, but careful readers also like challenges, and I happen to trust readers and their intelligence.

**A. Ibarrola:** To wrap up this part of the interview, what are the main differences between the Belken County of your fiction and the «frontera» region as it is today? Do you think that things have improved for Borderers in the last three decades?

**R. Hinojosa:** Given Mexico's mixed economy, the Mexican borderers have not done as well as the Texas ones. That is a fact. Still, because many of them cross to the Texas side on a daily basis and are paid in dollars, they are better off, in many ways, than their fellow citizens in the interior, and certainly in the rural areas.

The lot of the Texas Mexican has also changed, and it has because they changed and because they are responsible for the changes. Earlier, I mentioned the continuing poverty for many because of the porosity of the border, almost everyone started off that way and if not they, then their offspring improved their lot. One must face it, there is more opportunity on this side of the river. And look at this, since Texas Mexican students make up ninety, at times, even ninety-five percent of the student body in The Valley, it is nonsense to call us a minority down there.

I'll give you just one example: A few years ago, Jesús Salvador Treviño was filming me for a Public Broadcasting Service program titled *Birth-write*. He had his cameraman and others looking for sites. After a while, he turned to me and asked, «Why is the Mexican flag alongside the Texas and the U.S. flags at the banks and the malls?»

«Because this is The Valley, that is why,» I said. «This is not California or New Mexico. It has been like that ever since I can remember.»

Of course, it is also good for business on the American side. It is no exaggeration when my fellow Texans from up here, from up north, as we say in The Valley, look at the place as something alien, strange; even foreign. They are just not used to being a minority.

Valleyites are assertive, and I think that is why we retained the Northern Mexican version of the Spanish language. My first schooling, on this side of the river, was in a private school taught by a Mexican national, an exile during one phase or another of the Mexican Revolution. We opened and closed our days with the Mexican national anthem. Yet, we knew that we were from this side of the river, there was never any doubt on that score. The northern bank of the Rio Grande is our reality.

**A. Ibarrola:** Turning now to your teaching career, do you feel privileged for having been privy to the important changes that have taken place in the *academia* in recent times? Would you say that the conditions in Higher Education could still be subject to further improvements?

**R. Hinojosa:** I feel most privileged to have witnessed and to have participated in the changes in the U.S. academy. When my older sister, Clarissa, enrolled at Texas A & I University in the mid-Thirties, she and her roommate, Eloísa Ramírez, and the other Texas Mexican young women (Valleyites, all of them) were not admitted to the University's dormitories. Understand that this was a public institution whose dormitories were built by taxpayers' money.

In 1970, I was hired by that University as the Chairman of the Department of Modern Languages. Four years later, I became the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and two years later, I was named Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the University. That is quite a change. But here is a better one.

There remained some residual racism when I arrived there in 1970. A young undergraduate woman, Paula Hernández, was a student reporter on the University's newspaper and a former grade school student of my sister, Clarissa. I had only been on the A & I University campus a week or two when Paula came to see me. She introduced herself and wit-

hin a few minutes told me that Martin Dormitory, a women's dorm and also the newest, was reserved for sorority women. Since Texas Mexicans did not belong to any sorority, they were not admitted to Martin. I asked her then to check her facts and to come and see me when she had done it. She was back in less than a week. It was so. In her presence, I called the President and laid out the information. The result? The dorm was opened to all women students the next week. No hullabaloo, no noise, no crowing. I did what needed to be done, that was it.

In 1970, there were three Texas Mexicans on the faculty: Alberto Olivarez in Chemistry, Alfredo Espinoza in Engineering, and I in Modern Languages. It is now 1997 and the President is a Hispanic as are some of the important administrators. The faculty has changed somewhat, but not enough; one of the reasons for that being that Hispanics, much like African-American Ph.D.s, command higher salaries and prefer to work in larger institutions. That too is a change.

The most crucial change is the critical mass of *raza* Ph.D.s that has been building since the mid-Seventies. A group of us, led by Arturo Madrid, garnered money from the Ford Foundation and this led to a huge increase in scholarships for future Ph.D.s during the 1980s. The National Research Foundation manages those funds now, but the monies are still for minority students. Another important change.

I feel most privileged, no question about it.

**A. Ibarrola:** In what ways has your job as a university professor affected your writing? What role do you feel more comfortable in, that of a reader/critic or that of a writer?

**R. Hinojosa:** Being a professor allows one to have the time necessary to write. We are a privileged class, really, and one of the last ones. Still, colleagues complain of their lack of time; I find this difficult to accept. I usually tell them that it is easier than picking citrus for a living. They laugh, but what do they know?

I am a writer. The Ph.D., among other things, allowed me to study the various schools of criticism, and I shall always be grateful for that opportunity. But, as I told a fellow student back in the 1960s, during my years in Illinois: «I will write their papers and engage in class discussion, but I am primarily a writer.» The friend replied that I would never get tenure that way. Never say never, right?

The funny thing is that at that time I had no idea what tenure was or meant. Even later, it has not been a concern with me. I think my studying literary criticism has been of inestimable worth and value, and that is why I appreciate literary critics: as I explained at the beginning, their reputations also go on the line when they publish material.

Literary criticism toughens the mind, disciplines it. Without critics, I cannot really see this or any literature surviving for any length of time. Most Americans, whether they realize it or not, whether they are even marginally aware of it or not, are reading books written as disposable products. That is not what literature is about or has ever been.

**A. Ibarrola:** You have explained that the great interest that Chicano/a writers have generated both in Europe and Northamerica in the last two decades could have the effect of some mediocre fiction being published just because it was written by Hispanic authors. Would you say that this is still happening? How do you feel about it?

**R. Hinojosa:** Yes, I am well aware that much poor writing has made its way to Europe. Again, that writing may mislead the general reader; if it then also misleads the literary critic, then Chicano literature will suffer from various ends: the publishers who do not care about sound writing, the writers who may not be up to the task or who do not care except for money and the temporary awe they may inspire, and the folkloric elements that attract interest but which fail to get to the meat of the matter.

Yes, the standards are lowered, and this is when decadence sets in. Writers have to be avid readers and listeners and keen observers of the world about them. They must also be truthful. To dress up in Mexican sarapes and huipiles, china poblana, and cowgirl outfits is deplorable and a travesty; it is not what writing is about. Oh, I know the get-ups are convincing in New York and in some European countries, but one does need to have some semblance of shame. My feelings are very clear on this.

**A. Ibarrola:** To conclude, do you see the future of the Southwest and its literature with optimism or pessimism? Why?

**R. Hinojosa:** The future of Southwest writing will depend, as always, on the writers, their knowledge and veracity, and on the critics who understand what is being said. To repeat an idea already mentioned earlier, writers have to be avid readers, and they must read widely. Writers must not restrict themselves to one literature on the restraining and ridiculous stance that Shakespeare, Cervantes, or Goethe have nothing to say to them; that these writers are not Chicano and, therefore, do not know of our human condition. That is a dangerously narrow view, not to say a silly one.

Writers live in the world, and the world is wider than the Southwest, and, at the same time, it is much like the Southwest: places populated by people who enjoy momentary successes, who suffer, who betray friends, but who are self-sacrificing, too. People fall in and out of love, exhibit ordinary bravery and loyalty, and all manner of doings that mankind falls heir to.

Writing about our history and demonstrating the many injustices at the hands of the majority population is not to say that we, as a minority, have not committed crimes or have not discriminated against our own, and have not behaved in a most sorry manner at times. After all, we are human and thus prone to commit mistakes, and so, as writers, we have an obligation to speak the truth.

I am both optimistic and pessimistic; but do not take this as a copping out. If Chicano writers do not read, then their work will not be worth reading. It would not be much of a loss either, but it *is* their responsibility to read, observe, write, and to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite until the work is finished. It is not news to say that sloppy writing kills literature.

