

In this political landscape Palacio is unlikely to find the allies he needs to put the decentralization process back on track. The Palacio government is widely perceived as a transition government. It was brought to power as a result of the ouster of Gutiérrez and does not have strong political support, neither among parties in parliament nor among citizens. Elections are scheduled for the last trimester of 2006. Until then decentralization is unlikely to make headway.

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Maja Neff

Approaches to a Hemispheric America in *The Rag Doll Plagues*.

An Interview with Chicano Author Alejandro Morales.

Maja Neff (MN): Alejandro, you have come to be known as a Chicano writer, a writer publishing bilingual books in Spanish and English, as someone dis-

cussing concepts of transnationalism and heterotopia. In an interview, you once mentioned that the initial thought to develop the plot of your novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* was a story on Chicanos being ‘deported’ to a hospital against their will. Remembering this event as a motivator, I wonder what made you create the borderless zone of LAMEX in the third part of the book – was there also an event or a situation inspiring you?

Alejandro Morales (AM): In the first part of the book taking place in Mexico City around 1788, you have Europe migrating to the New World. Once they established their economy, the Spanish were beginning to push North and South, migrating to different parts of the continent. In the second part of the book, set in Orange County, California, in 1979, you have the issues of Mexicanos coming across the border. So there is migration, racism, different cultural, ethnic, economic groups are all working and living together in that area. Looking at these developments, I then decided to go forward in time. What’s going to happen in the future? Will we have to deal with the same issues? Will there still be a border? That is how I started writing the third part. I tried to develop a vision of what the area between Los Angeles all the way to Mexico City is going to look like a hundred years from 1979. In that third part, the LAMEX part of 2079, you don’t have a border. There exists a triple alliance brought about not by economic nor political nor military reasons – the triple alliance between Canada, the United States, and Mexico is brought about because of ecological reasons. So those three countries all organize themselves to try to deal with this, to avoid great ecological disasters. But you cannot control what they have already done, the damage to the ocean, the dumping of thousands and

thousands of tons of garbage out in the Pacific Ocean. This is the idea the novel presents: Three different times, same scenario with some kind of a great plague threatening the people and all taking place in basically one area. The last part of the book is a vision of the future, one of those themes that I really like to work with. Even books that I am writing now definitely deal with the relationship of Mexico and the United States and how that relationship is getting stronger and stronger. The history of the United States in the future is tied to the future of Mexico. I don't believe that these countries can survive without each other. The future of Mexico is going to be the future of the United States and the other way around. The Southwestern United States and Northern Mexico will drastically change and there will be a broad general change in both countries. To me, the border will slowly disappear.

MN: *The Rag Doll Plagues* has a particularly transnational approach with its characters experiencing constant transformation and adaptation due to the borders they keep crossing. Looking at the movement within the American continent and the apparent delusion of borders, do you consider the LAMEX corridor to be more than just fiction?

AM: Yes, I think so. Look at demographics and the last forecasts based on the census in the United States that predicts that California will be a majority minority state with Latinos. It's going to happen in the cities, it's going to happen throughout the United States. You now find Latinos, Mexicanos everywhere in the United States. People from the South are coming almost as a natural thing, they are going North. So I think that my vision of the future is not so far fetched, sort of based on these projections of demographics and what is happening in Mexico. The United

States policy is trying to develop business in the border region with the *maquiladoras* and NAFTA allowing more and more trucks to cross from Mexico to the United States, allowing Mexicans here in the United States to use their Mexican identity cards for identification purposes, to open bank accounts in California. They are exploring the possibility of developing power plants in Baja California, which is close to the idea that I present in *The Rag Doll Plagues*, where they are eventually to develop atomic power plants and then send that energy North. Also, middle class Mexicans living in any Mexican city: they see the same shows, they like the same music. This global culture is impacting all of us, and in a sense Mexicans are thinking in a way *Norte Americanos* are thinking and the other way around, they all seem to want the same. There is a value system, they want good education, nice homes, nice cars: that's one world in a sense. So, I believe that this sort of fictional view of that area in the future is not so far fetched. Although we have these real hardcore – how would I say ... “nativists”, who want to shut the border, control American culture, control American language...

MN: ...‘American’ meaning U.S. American?

AM: U.S. American, yes. Control U.S. culture, U.S. language, control our borders. To me those are impossible things to do! You cannot control language, language is a dynamic living thing. To me, in the United States we should know at least two or possibly more languages. If we are one of the greatest countries in the world, we should know different languages. As far as control culture, you cannot. Culture again is another dynamic living process that is constantly changing. Control the borders? I don't think you can control borders either. Especially not between Mexico and the United States!

MN: Since you say United States and Mexico will grow together because the one cannot really do without the other, people have the same value system and so forth, don't you think people in Mexico are afraid of being overwhelmed by U.S. culture?

AM: Yes, I guess that is kind of a natural knee-jerk reaction to change. But in the United States the same thing is happening. You have people here who are very much afraid of the waves of Latino invasion, the Latinization, the Mexicanization of the United States, the impact of these new immigrants in a sense. People are afraid. In Mexico, the same thing is happening. Mexico, I think, has always been resistant to this – in a sense – global culture. But there are the kids wanting Levis, the kids wanting Coke. I am talking about middle class Mexicanos who can afford these things. Obviously, there's another Mexico, too. There's an indigenous Mexico, there's a *México* that is very poor. But even that indigenous Mexico still has a TV, still has a radio. You cannot escape it. So I think you are right, Mexicans resist, they resist the influence of the United States in a global culture to a certain extent, but they love to go see movies of the United States, listen to the music of the United States. Both countries have this kind of love-hate-relationship that is definitely there.

MN: *The Rag Doll Plagues* can even be considered a 'hemispheric novel' describing the creation, growth and possible future development of the Western hemisphere. Part one takes place in late 18th century, reflecting the relation between Europe and America with the final emancipation of the later. Part two deals with the conflictive situation between Mexico and the U.S. in 1979, to a certain extent transferable to the entire North-South conflict of the American con-

tinental. Part three, then, represents a hemispheric approach with the creation of a borderless zone, the LAMEX area in 2079. Considering the possible concept of such transnational zone between the United States and Mexico, do you think novels anticipate future processes?

AM: I think that certain novels do. To me, people who, for example, write about Latinos today, are creating a new knowledge, their novels in a sense could be prophetic. Events are occurring very fast and novelists, poets, artists seem to be those who write about or paint, who compose music about these things. Also, they talk about topics such as negotiation of space. We are constantly negotiating space. As well as negotiating identity. So novelists are writing about this negotiation of identity, negotiation of culture, space and so forth, are writing about the future. And I guess they are writing about certain kinds of political truths they sometimes stumble on. I think that is why literature is becoming more and more important. It seems to me these are not just Latino writers, but these are ethnic American writers. I see that in African American writers, take the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. But also native American writers such as Leslie Silko. One of her books, *Almanac of the Dead*, has kind of a prediction of the future, she is kind of pointing to a possibility of the future. I like the idea, I like to work with it. I think there is always some view of the future in my books, too, whether it is very obvious such as in *The Rag Doll Plagues* or hidden in the context, in the plot line or in the characters or the development of my books. But it is always pointing to a future. Even if I write about the past, it is moving, it is viewing towards the future. Like the scholar Iain Chambers said "roots in the past are routes to the future". You are digging roots, but those roots will lead you from the past to

the present. So, I think you are right. To answer the question I say yes, there are some elements, something about these texts – or my texts at least – that do sort of forecast the future.

MN: Besides these future perspectives you like to play with the concept of heterotopia in your novels. In *The Rag Doll Plagues* there is, for example, the library described in the third part or for instance the way of life people lead in the LAMEX corridor, everything being supervised and subordinated to a rigorous plan, descriptions that very much remind of Foucault and his heterotopia concept.

AM: I haven't read all of Foucault, but I like Foucault, I like what I find in Foucault, and I use many of these 'cultural philosophers'. And you are right, there is a whole issue of, a search for knowledge in the novel *lagues*, this whole idea of the library, the accumulation of knowledge. It's definitely an idea of Foucault, but Foucault isn't the only one. I work with actual empirical facts, if you want to call them that.

MN: Foucault and heterotopia also remind me of Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of 'nepantla', which she describes as a "space in-between", a transitional phase within the formation of one's identity, a "birthing stage" where your identity is reconfigured. Taking on that "birthing stage" idea, can you apply this concept to *The Rag Doll Plagues*?

AM: The concept of 'nepantla' – a "birthing stage"? Yes, I think you probably could. For example the character of Revueltas in the first part. He is a Spaniard and when he first arrives he is repulsed by what he sees, the indigenous people, indigenous women. But at the end he decides to stay. So, when his fiancée travels from Europe to look for him, he already is in this stage that Anzaldúa calls 'nepantla'. Also, if you look at the nation

of *México* at that time, there are these ideas of revolution, of independence. This has already happened in the Caribbean, in Haiti, there was a revolution already. And so now in *México* there is this giving birth of a nation. The same thing with Marisela, the child Revueltas stays with. This child represents the new *México* because the child is mestizo, it is of Indian and Spanish blood, the mother being Indian, the father, the Vice Roy, being Spanish. So the child is also in the interstice, it is birth from the interstice, birth from 'nepantla', birth from being in the center, being between two things. There are a lot of possibilities of this idea to apply to the novel, also in the second part. When Sandra Spear falls ill and all that limited medicine cannot help she goes to Mexico where she becomes a new woman. One of the easiest treatments they teach her after science cannot deal with her, is simply to learn to laugh. So she comes back a stronger, transformed woman, she has gone through this "birthing stage". In the last part, the future part, the characters are the same way. Especially Gaby, the Asian woman who has allowed this computer technology to replace her arm, she is constantly wanting more knowledge, so she is right in this interstice of finally becoming accepted, be a fine doctor. But she fails. She does not go beyond that stage, she gives birth to tragedy, she commits suicide. So I think this idea of 'nepantla' is constantly present and I think it is sort of the way people live today. Especially people who are moving, who are crossing borders, crossing into new cultures. They are living that stage, it is a constant part of living in heterotopia. That is what I am concerned with, living in Los Angeles, in New York City, living in the South. Whenever you have these two cultures together, meeting each other – languages meeting each other, people meeting each other

from different parts of the world – you are going to have this ‘nepantla’ state. All people who come from different cultures will go through this, passing through this interstice. And it might never end. I don’t think it does. I think it is constant, I think people live this ‘nepantla’ state every day of their lives almost, it is part of living in a heterotopian zone.

MN: Which leads me to the question of identity. Looking at *The Rag Doll Plagues*, I think that in part one the diverse national identities and the cultural differences are obvious, whereas these become kind of diluted in the second part and somewhat disappear in the third part. People live in an almost ‘nationless zone’ which is not only enforced by the geographic but especially by the biological fusion, the blood transfusion, leading to a total symbiosis of the two nations and their people at the end of the novel. How important then do you think is identity to the characters in *The Rag Doll Plagues*? Does identity slowly grow futile to them throughout the various stages of the novel?

AM: That’s a question I have not really thought about. But I think you are right. In the first part of the book, identity based on race is really important, the Spanish meeting the *indigenous*, the Indian. Also, they developed a detailed caste system to keep track of racial mixtures, miscegenation. I think that identity based on race or ethnicity does become less and less important. How does that change and why? What is the purpose of this becoming less and less important? People become educated in certain ways. Revueltas becomes educated to what he sees, he gets to know the people and then of course his mentor, Father Jude, educates him. He learns that these people are not animals, that they have souls. He begins to soften up his attitude, and through his education and his

experience being with these people, identifying them as human beings, race becomes less and less important. In part two kind of the same thing happens, education allows for the possibility of Sandra Spear and Revueltas to come together. They are both very educated people and they don’t see themselves as of different cultural or racial background, as *Mexicano* or Anglo-American, they see each other as two people who end up loving each other. To them as individual characters, the identity based on ethnicity or race or jobs is not important because they see themselves as human beings. Sandra’s father though resists, her Dad still sees him as a *Mexicano*. And this gets even worse when she becomes sick. Revueltas still sees her as someone he loves, not as a person who is sick, he cares for her, he wants to do anything possible to help her. The outside world though identifies her as someone who carries a plague, a disease, there is discrimination against her as well, and this way the disease becomes a synonym for race. In the third part of the book I think it is kind of the same thing. Gaby is Asian, Revueltas is of Mexican descent, but this is not necessarily important. What becomes important is the knowledge they possess. They live together, work together, he does like her, loves her perhaps, but there is a separation between them, not because of race but because of what they do. However, the other couple who is Asian and Mexican, who have a child, they are kind of pointing to a future. A future based on perhaps the idea of miscegenation, that there will be more and more of this miscegenation. Again, this is what many scholars are talking about today, they are all pointing to miscegenation, transforming the United States, the area called the LAMEX corridor. Slowly, once people look at each other as human beings, race and ethnicity are not impor-

tant, it is really a social structure, a construction that people used to identify one another. Race is an ugly horrible thing, race and racism could be looked at as something very negative. Ethnicity could be positive, maybe that is a new way of looking at ethnicity. In which one emphasizes traditions or expressions that each ethnic group might have and which is worthwhile to preserve. I think in this globalized world we live in, we carry many identities, not just one. People in general and especially young people are trying to find an anchor, something that is fixed, something they see as their essence. But I think you are right, race and identity, identity based on race is lost way way way in the future. Never really lost, but there is less importance on it.

MN: Do you think some day there will be closer links within the Western Hemisphere – not only politically or economically but also culturally, on an intellectual level?

AM: I guess, we have to have more and closer relations in order to survive, whether we want them or not! In *The Rag Doll Plagues* for example, the whole idea of the United States' military – not that I want this to happen – is what? It is all Latinos who have come up to the United States, who have volunteered in the army because these are the only people who want or need to go to the army at that time,

also because the Anglo-American population is very old. I think, to look at the American continent, the Western Hemisphere as a whole is very important. We have to look at it because of the ecological situations, of water, demographics, business, new markets, all these ugly things that people call ugly from globalization and international business.

MN: Well, so let's look forward to some new – bilingual – novels on hemispheric topics of the Americas... Thank you very much for this informative interview!

AM: I want to thank you for making the trip all the way down here!

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Alejandro Morales (Ph.D.) is a professor in the Chicano/Latino Studies Program in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of various Chicano novels written in English, Spanish or both dealing with intercultural relations in the California border zone between the US and Mexico. He has recently completed the novels "The Place of the White Heron" and "The Captain of All These Men of Death".