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An Interview with Novelist Joe Rodríguez: The Vietnam War Beyond the Wire

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Roberto Cantú: *In a comprehensive attempt to understand both your critical work as well as your prose fiction, let's begin with the obvious: namely, the recurrence of selected categories or conditions such as paradox, epistemic literacy, and ethnicity. As an open gambit, let's place our trust on an initial assumption: in your literary criticism and narrative fiction, such categories and conditions seem to represent some sort of theoretical limits or boundaries that await transcendence or transgression, much like the barbed wire on the perimeter of Talbot's camp in your Vietnam war novel Oddsplayer (1989). Viewed as such, how does your life as a war veteran, as a writer, and your academic background find their "inner logic" beyond such enclosures that, more so than to be transcended, might have to be transgressed in the sense of being reconfigured and altered at another level of personal significance?*

Joe Rodríguez: I think Chicanos are a cultural and people-centered expression of a revolution in thinking about identity and the sense of self. Our mixed legacies, history of challenges in the United States, and our unique vision demand that frozen versions of who is "American" be unthought and rethought. Such rethinking involves ideas about language and theories of knowledge. Unfortunately, many people aren't ready to hear the message or they are threatened. I myself am an expression of the "Latino diaspora" in terms of my own history. I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on November 4, 1943. My mom's family had migrated to Hawaii from Puerto Rico to work in the sugar cane fields. My dad was a *Tejano* from Laredo, Texas, who joined the U.S. Navy. They met in Pearl Harbor, married and started a family. We moved every two or three years as part of my dad's career in the Navy. Guam, Japan, Vallejo, Long Beach, North Chicago, Illinois, and San Diego were some of the places we lived. Hawaii was our home of record and we always returned there. I was encouraged to take school seriously. My mom's family wanted to return to middle-class standards of living, and my dad always said learning was something "they" couldn't take away from you. I was the proverbial "troubled youth," and I started and dropped out of college several times. I received an NROTC scholarship to the University of Texas at Austin but I stayed only a year. Texas was my baptism into the Alamo. Hawaii and Texas were very different in terms of anti-Mexican sentiment. I went back to the

University of Hawaii for several years. The family joke was that I had a new major every week. I knew that there was a wealth of information I didn't know, and I wanted to learn it all. I was in Vietnam as a Navy medical corpsman attached to the Marines in 1966. This tour was the inspiration for my novel *Oddsplayer* (Arte Público Press, 1989). I returned and finished my B.A. at San Diego State University in 1967 in Philosophy. I took a job as a probation officer, but after six months went back for a Ph.D. in English. I have been a janitor, a construction worker, a retail clerk, a chef's apprentice, a licensed vocational nurse, a surf rat in Hawaii, homeless living on the streets. I am a professor of Mexican American Studies at San Diego State University, where I have worked for eighteen years. To this day, only three percent of the faculty at San Diego State University are Chicano or Latino, so I never confuse work with home. Now that I have summarized my life background, let's move on to the theoretical limit that you have identified in my work. To live well requires the forethought to allow others their dreams also. So ideas can provide space for our separate rooms. Paradox recognizes that the language I speak bumps against its own limits. The challenge is not to declare war because of uncertainty and ghosts. El día de los muertos is a special day with an important message about mestizaje or my mixed cultural legacy—*Tejano* from my dad, *Puerto Riqueña* from my mom, Hawaiian because of where I was born. The message is this: my Anglo-American legacy teaches me to run from ghosts. El día de los muertos inspires me to invite them into my home and ask their names. Meaning is not enough for the twenty-first century: Vietnam taught me to respect meaningless as well. Chicanismo or being Chicano, is idea-intensive and a very heady claiming of turf. To my way of thinking, the fact that Aztlán is our mythical homeland doesn't make the place any less important. In 1988 or thereabouts, the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed 1600 or so people of Mexican descent. Only about 4% chose the name Chicano. What matters to me is that many of these 4% have had the good fortune to go to college and grapple with names and ideas. Epistemic literacy is the ability to shift points of view or to "paradigm shift." A Chicano has to be always arriving, and such thinking helps me get beyond the wire.

RC: *In your novel Oddsplayer the reader finds references to gambling (cards, dice, dominoes, and such), and to the notion of "death by remote control" (therefore, the characters who "eat fear and shower in the dust," p. 44), references and notions which one could interpret as metaphors of fate. Reading the luminous summary of your life's background, I found it difficult to separate the determining forces of fate from your personal resolve to achieve unity and meaning from the several boundaries and paradoxes of your life as a war veteran, surf rat living in Hawaii, novelist, licensed vocational nurse, and university professor in Mexican American Studies. I think you are right: it takes epistemic literacy to fully comprehend how life travels from A to Z. Let's go back to your novel: the cover of Oddsplayer displays five cards, with the fifth being the photo of a soldier framed within the enclosure of an ace of spades, thus ambiguously defining the life of*

a “grunt” under the sign of “low value” or, on the contrary, as the “most valuable playing card.” What led to your deployment of such images and metaphors in the title, cover, and narrative of your novel?

JR: The title *Oddsplayer* comes from Einstein’s response to Heisenberg, quantum physics and the Uncertainty Principle. “God does not play dice with the universe.” The idea that the universe can’t be measured and predicted precisely haunted Einstein. I side with uncertainty—but, once a person is trapped behind the wire, he or she is locked into either them or me. The importance of being able to talk and connect with others is that their counsel can offer a means to resist being trapped. Other points of view offer alternative choices and decisions. Do you recall that Hendrick is warned about going to war? He goes anyway, and the logic of murder is inexorable. The advertising blurb about joining the Army to be all that you can be bothers me. They should be explicit about the chance of dying, existential truth in advertising if you prefer. By the way, it really steams me the way people like Phil Gramm and Newt Gingrich avoided service in Vietnam. This kind of people prefer to wage war by proxy or remote control. They strike me as Talbot in civilian clothes when they “push the button” on the poor, disadvantaged, and immigrants. I’m not surprised either that in Texas, politicians today have a soldier’s take on sealing the border with barbed wire. Talbot lives, and Lieck has gone to Congress.

RC: *Let’s turn our attention to other texts or films about Vietnam for the purposes of establishing a ground or context that will best exemplify the sources of your work beyond personal experiences. I reread Dispatches by Michael Herr, in tandem with a rereading of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, and watched Apocalypse Now by Francis Ford Coppola once again. How important were novels and films (if, in fact, they were of any importance at all) in framing your field of direct war experience within the project of your novel?*

JR: I have only recently been able to read novels and watch movies about Vietnam, so I can’t say that *Oddsplayer* was influenced by the works you cite. I used Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* with a twist. Even before I read about deconstruction, my vision of Vietnam was that we took our “heart of darkness” there and blighted the earth. Charlie Trujillo’s self-published collection about Vietnam would have been impossible for me to read until recently. My experience with the men I knew in Vietnam is that most were decent people who did their duty—but once in the country, we spiraled off the edge of the earth. There were authentic psychos, though—warped and malignant people. There were Talbots! However, my fear is that deranged surroundings unleash our demons. Beautiful surroundings invite good deeds. We talk more comfortably and share our best sides. We need to plant gardens. Once a person is caught behind the barbed wire which figures prominently in my novel, he

is lost. If you want to escape the wire, you have to have the presence of mind not to be caught there. I was never in full combat day after day. I served as a medical corpsman attached to a Marine detachment in a rearguard station at Danang. However, I was shot at because Vietnam was a guerrilla war where the enemy struck virtually anywhere. I remember the whine of ricochets, and I saw men die during an attack. I did obsess about being behind barbed wire and why I was trapped there. If you want to escape the wire, don't be imprisoned behind the strands in the first place. Once there, the odds of surviving to play you, not the other way around. The "presence of mind" that avoids being trapped includes being hyper-aware of circumstances and people. Paradox, epistemic literacy, and ethnicity are a way out of the wire.

RC: *Tell us about Joe Rodríguez and the act of writing. How did it first manifest itself, and how did it eventually lead to your first novel?*

JR: I knew that I wanted to write when I was a senior in high school. But writing requires a room of one's own, and peace of mind is expensive. I never wanted to be a poor artist writing beautiful dreams in a cramped garret. I did well in school very early, and education stood as a way of finding my voice. Once I returned from Vietnam, I was driven to complete my B.A. at San Diego State University, which I did because of veteran's educational benefits. I was married to a teacher, an extraordinary woman who encouraged my writing. I had the quiet to study and think. I imagined education was a way of improving my life, which has happened. Books, for me, embody the hope that we can live better, not perfectly necessarily, but more humanely. *Oddsplayer* took about fifteen years to write because it's not just a book about a lifeline. Everyone is wounded in the novel, and I was very fortunate not to be scarred by Vietnam (at least not so they show). One important reason I finished the novel is because the Department of Mexican American Studies at San Diego State University hired me to teach. This good fortune was an epiphany. I finally had a place to weave together all my various experiences, travel, jobs and invite my ghosts. Before then, I used ideas in isolation like a talisman, and working for Chicano Studies at SDSU got me out of my cave. When I was hired by Chicano Studies, I was working as a nurse. This profession is a good one, but exhausting. I gave my notice the same day the Chair of the Department let me know I was hired. Nursing, for me, was a lonely profession with lots of time devoted to sickness and misery.

RC: *Let's pursue the topics of sickness, misery, and epiphanies. Contrary to Coppola, Herr, and Tim O'Brien (to name a few), who propose some sort of double life for their characters (i.e., life before and after Vietnam), your novel questions such schizoid rift, suggesting instead (through your characters) a problematic past which unfolds and*

*paradoxically matures into people during military conflict who are “warped and malignant.” Possible illustrations are found in your representation of Talbot, Priest, Lieck, and other similar characters, as “case” studies of troubled backgrounds. Thus, Vietnam is not the cause of the madness of these “authentic psychos,” but the site where their inner sickness flourishes with full force. In his book *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973), Richard Slotkin claims that the myth of the American frontier finds its truest expression in the language of the hunt, the wilderness, and the hero’s quest. This mythology, adds Slotkin, informs a national history that has embraced violence and transgression as a means to territorial expansion and “self-renewal” (13, 562). Could this interpretation of American-led wars against other peoples run parallel to your epiphany of the historical meaning of the Vietnam experience (let’s say, as opposed to the stereotypical portrayal of the “deranged Vietnam veteran.” I am thinking of the parallel lives and background of Talbot, Priest, and Lieck, and of their inability to relate to the world of their parents; even Pérez, who loves his father and mother, nonetheless distances himself from them (“angry with his parents for their narrowed lives, 51).*

JR: *Oddsplayer* is as much about class conflicts as “race,” which makes it wider than Vietnam. Double vision or living as a chorus is a fact of life for me. For example, I am a Chicano professor in an ethnic studies department at a university where 3% or so of the faculty are “Hispanic.” Talk about the only surfer boy in New York! One hopeful feature of *Oddsplayer* is that characters who are isolated and from different cultures manage to forge a measure of camaraderie, despite their loyalty being based on killing Sergeant Talbot. I was very pleased that someone discussed *Oddsplayer* in a multicultural context at the Modern Language Association Conference held in San Diego. Makes one believe in critics sometimes. Some of the reviews of *Oddsplayer* have faulted its “fragmentary” nature. The novel is about “fragging” or killing your own allies with a fragmentation grenade, and moreover, people at war do not think in full and measured prose. The camp behind the wire is like a wounded animal, and individual sensibilities blur. Routine and uniforms efface distinction, and the loss of identity terrifies. Listening years ago to José Antonio Villarreal (a war veteran himself) talk about his novel *Pocho* with you, Roberto, makes it easier for me to discuss isolation. We idea mongers tend to live inside our heads. One aspect of Villarreal’s character, Richard Rubio from *Pocho*, is his suspicious habit of loneliness. I would bet your translation of his novel into Spanish made you think long and hard about the differences between solitude and loneliness. We read books in quiet contemplation, which does not foster the ability to share feelings. Loneliness is a detachment that pains; the rounded quiet of solitude circles back to others. And, of course, we are all wounded by our families, and by the experience of claiming independence. In a sense, I come from a family of migrant workers, but my dad always had the same job. What happened is that he moved with his job all over the world, and when we were lucky, we were able to follow him. In these unsettled circumstances, your family is your ground of being, and members’ nexus can be secure and stifling. Talking about Vietnam remains difficult because my brother, Frank Louis Rodríguez, lost his life there. Since I had been to Vietnam

before he was ordered to that theatre of combat, he probably could have requested a waiver and postponed serving “in country.” However, he was a new Army officer with Ranger training, and he wanted to make a career in the military. I remember talking with him, and saying that war meant the risk of death. He listened carefully since he was a very good listener, but still decided to serve in Vietnam. He was a year younger than I was and, in many ways, the favorite of the family. He had a quiet charisma, an aura of sympathetic openness. His death shook us deeply and was a profound loss. In many ways, he was the mediator in the family who held us together despite our differences, as much because of his sympathetic demeanor as his skill with people. Our family was never the same. I loved him, dedicated *Oddsplayer* to his memory and carry him with me still. Vietnam was also the first war waged on TV. Publicity was glaring, and so were the divisions over why we were there. The landscape held an aura of menace that I tried to capture in *Oddsplayer*. Since my dad was a career Navy chief petty officer, I was not unfamiliar with weaponry and military equipment, but the scope of the conflict defied description—bases and armed soldiers marched to the horizon. There were also pervasive stories about body traps and ground glass in ice, food, and soft drinks—nothing could be trusted. Paranoia kills—Chicanos who live in communities where the streets are dangerous understand how gnawing uncertainty and corrosive fear diminish day-to-day life. People who live in extremis are worn down, and their worst impulses surface. One of the reasons the characters in *Oddsplayer* hate the cruel racist Sergeant Talbot is because they are terrified of becoming like him. Remember, in Vietnam, enemy soldiers and Vietnamese civilians alike were labeled “gooks” and “slants” and “yellow bastards.” The racism was so pervasive and venomous that my skin crawled. After all, I am Mexican. I came to ethnic consciousness with flares lighting the skies after nightfall. Vietnam was the low point of my life. Being at war saddled me with a sense of guilt, confusion, and rage that I turned against myself. I should have known better. We should have known better. As *Oddsplayer* points out. Anyone in the country for four months knew the war was lost. A guerrilla war is winnable, but the invaders have to be willing to kill anyone and everyone. The village has to be destroyed to save it. Such irony wounds the ordinary soldier. I’m reminded of nurses in Vietnam and the price these women paid caring for the wounded. When we made runs to pick up medical supplies, it was not uncommon for nurses to have been on their feet for twenty-four hours or longer during pitched battles when casualties streamed into aid stations. How did they survive seeing the rows of the dead? Ethnicity, to me, involves a sense of group identity and transcending the isolated self. Making it on my own is both a lure and a chimera.¹

RC: *Your replies and observations have given this interview the scope and radiance of thought I anticipated. Thank you.*

¹ Prior to this interview, I enjoyed long telephone conversations with Joe Rodríguez, which led to a biographical essay and analysis of *Oddsplayer*, Rodríguez's Vietnam novel, the first on that subject in Chicano literature. My article appeared in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 209, Third Series: Chicano Writers. Ed. Francisco Lomelí and Carl R. Shirley. The Gale Group, 1999. 236-242.