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Interview with Guillermo Cabrera Infante

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On February 3, 1986, the UCLA annual Regents' Lecture, "To Kill a Foreign Name," was given by Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Three days later, he was interviewed during his extended stay at the University. In this interview, Cabrera Infante's irrepressible love of words and word-play pervades, as in all his work.

JG-J: Earlier this week, you gave a "quote-unquote" lecture, "To Kill a Foreign Name" . . .

GCI: Why the quotes?

JG-J: Because of "lecture" being a *lecture*, and, as I said to you later, it was a very good stand-up comedy routine.

GCI: That was what it was intended to be.

JG-J: I wanted to know that, because I wanted to know how you responded to my remark.

GCI: My biggest regret in life is being too shy to be a stand-up comedian. For me, people like Jack Benny or Groucho Marx, or even Woody Allen, are like gods. I know what they do, I know that they have beforehand some jokes written, and then memorized, but nevertheless I know that a lot is impromptu repartee when they are on stage. That is exactly what I wanted to be all my life. I even devised some kind of dynamic duo when I was 19 with a friend of mine at the time.

JG-J: Burns and Allen?

GCI: No. We were doing something more South American. We were imitating a comedy team from Mexico that became very successful in Havana and then a comedy team from Argentina who were also very successful. And it was a stand-up comedy team—there was the jugular comedian and then the straight man. It didn't work, and I'm glad it didn't work. Because we weren't that compatible. Now he has become a commissar of the arts and letters, and he is now a vice-minister of culture. So you see that I was right—I saw there was something wrong with him.

JG-J: You say you are shy.

GCI: Oh, I'm terribly shy. I'm hiding right now, because of you two, hiding behind my cigar.

JG-J: You had a very good dead-pan delivery. I thought that maybe that was your shy-mask.

GCI: Yes. It also means that I am incapable of any inflection in my voice. I am an anti-actor. I cannot do anything. You ask me to repeat exactly what I did right now and I wouldn't be able to. So the dead-pan delivery is exactly that—it's a refuge.

JG-J: Just as an extension of that idea, you've written, in your prologue to Ardis Nelson's book, that you write for yourself so you can read yourself, and that your process could stop there. However, you publish so that the rest of us can read it.

GCI: Sometimes not even for money as in the case of the Ardis Nelson book. I publish for her benefit, as a matter of fact.

JG-J: When you give a "performance" as you did Monday night, does that change your relationship with your audience, this supposed readership?

GCI: No, because as Pontius Pilate said, "Quod scripsi, scripsi." That's exactly what it is. It has been written and I only read it. There is no ulterior motive about it. I don't want to become somebody else before an audience.

JG-J: So, does the immediacy of response received from an audience or lack thereof, does that affect what you're doing up there?

GCI: Yes, of course, a lot. Because if I am delivering a lot of jokes that are just normal jokes, jokes that any student could get, and if they don't

laugh, something is wrong. Most of the time it is me who is wrong. Not them.

JG-J: That intonation problem again?

GCI: Yes, and the problem of pronunciation, the problem of delivery, the problem of timing. Even though you are reading up there, it is in a way delivery hesitancy before any word. I know that very well, but at the same time I don't care. Because if they don't get the jokes, it's me that it is all about. I say to myself, "Well, it's their fault. They are guilty of not grasping what I said."

JG-J: And how did you feel about your performance last Monday night?

GCI: I thought it was about average. You see, there were too many Spanish-speaking people in the audience so that makes me somewhat edgy because the lecture wasn't meant to be for a Spanish-speaking audience so they are interfering in a way. And, besides, if they know enough English, it's not inborn, so they cannot see the words from inside the language the way I did it. And that's a problem. If I had had a totally Anglo-Saxon or say a totally English-speaking audience, it would have been much better.

DD: Regarding "To Kill a Foreign Name," how did you pick such a topic?

GCI: You know, it began with a remark by Vladimir Nabokov, who, for me, is almost always right in terms of literature. And he said that anybody who couldn't pronounce his name couldn't read his works. And that was the beginning of the lecture.

DD: Everybody had an idea of what it was going to be, and we came to hear something that was serious. You think, "OK, I'm going to sit through this somehow." It was such a relief; it was so pleasant going to something new, a totally new topic.

GCI: Well, I can tell you there was some alarm before I delivered the lecture. Some alarm in the department because this wasn't, I mean the title itself, wasn't serious enough for a Regents' lecture. Plus, I had, and still have, arguments to counter that. There is an incredibly enormous poet called Homer. Then you have three tragic playwrights and in the middle of them there is Aristophanes who is probably the first stand-up comedian that ever existed and the first playwright with a modern conception of the play, I mean modern in the sense of 20th-century modern. So I really have

no excuses to offer about my material. If it is comedy or if it is a serious lecture, for me it is the same. And I also learned that from an American writer called Mark Twain. He lectured; he was a superb lecturer. He wrote lectures, learned them by heart and delivered them with an incredibly Southern drawl. And he never differentiated between humor and seriousness because there was no need for that, if you see what I mean. That's really my literary position; my position up there at the lectern is the proof of a literary commitment. I think that humor is the most serious business in literature. Anybody can be Dostoyevsky, but not many can be Gogol or Chekhov.

JG-J: When you were talking the other night about the assassination or butchery of names, you talked a lot about meaning. I was wondering what your response would be to Shakespeare's old quote, "What's in a name?"

GCI: I'll tell you exactly. I was up there, you could see me up there, and what I resembled the most—you tell me of any literary character—and I'll tell you that who I resembled all the time up there was Humpty Dumpty. Humpty Dumpty had a problem with Alice because of names, because of the meaning of names and also because of control, which is the final commitment for a character like Humpty Dumpty, the control of words. That is, the control of names. I think that answers your question because that is what happens all the time when I am up there: a fat little man trying to be the master of all the words he says in that evening.

DD: Everyone talks about your great interest in and knowledge of films, and no one ever talks about this other art form, which is the theatre. I would like to know how you feel—

GCI: I hate it.

JG-J: You hate it.

GCI: I hate it. I never go to the theatre, with two exceptions: Regency or Restoration comedies as one exception, and the other is Shakespeare. No matter what Shakespeare, I'll always be willing to go and listen, not to the actors but to his music of words. But the rest of the theatre is for me the most—my wife is crazy about the theatre—but we never go because I get fidgety and move about in my seat because I cannot tolerate really what is going on on stage.

DD: Why?

GCI: Because most of the time it is bad acting. I mean if you go the first night, they are not ready for you yet, and if you go three months later, they are too ripe for you. So when should I go to the theatre? I never know.

DD: Then, excluding the obvious, what for you is the difference between film and theatre?

GCI: All the difference in the world. I mean photography is closer to the movies than to theatre. I mean, I think the theatre has always been a bad influence for movies, pretending that there is what they call a legitimate theatre or what they call the "West End" plays in London. That has been the burden of actors, of movie actors, because theatre is the older art—I mean the older performing art because movies are very new and very different. And we haven't seen anything like this in the history of art. You see paintings, OK, they are there, but paintings are dumb. Paintings are absolutely dead. They don't talk; they don't tell you anything. You have sculpture, and the same can be said for sculpture. It is very static, it never moves, and it's always the same. You see a statue once and you've seen it forever. Of course, there is some kind of an interrelation between the theatre and the movies, and that is through the actors. You think in terms of great movie actors like Gary Cooper or Edward G. Robinson, you think of great movie actresses like Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich, you don't think of the theatre. But, there is something strange about actors in that they want to be on stage, no matter what or who they are. Even Rock Hudson wanted to be a stage actor. All of them wanted to be on stage and you know why? Because they want instant recognition; they want instant applause. Because in the movies they don't hear it; it is never possible to listen to the audience approving as they approve in the theater. They must count on reviews. But what if the reviewer is telling a lie? They must count on press releases. But what if their press releases were written by their agents? So that is why they want to be in the theatre. And some other actors, great movie actors at the beginning of their careers, before then they were on stage, like Marlon Brando, he never went back. And the list is endless, but nevertheless, I think there is this relationship, but there is this relationship because the theatre wants words. That's the only thing a playwright has to express himself and just the opposite is true of the movies. Good movies don't need words. There was a whole segment of movie history in which there were no words at all, which are the silent pictures. Does that answer your question?

DD: I think so. Let's go back to something you said yesterday; it's related to *Tres tristes tigres*. You said that when you were doing your military service, you heard the news about the death of the "cantante insoportable,"

Fredy, and that prompted you to write the short story, “Ella cantaba boleros.” Do you think that if Fredy had not died or if the news hadn’t reached you, there would be a gap in the novel or there would be a vacuum?

GCI: Oh, yes. The answer is that I am truly a sentimentalist so I was moved by her death, not by herself as a person, but the death of her voice, and that was important for me. I mean talking about the past is like talking about the future: You are dealing in prophecy so it is really very difficult for me to tell you what I would have done had this woman been alive until now.

DD: Yes, because I thought of it when you said it spurred you at the moment. It must have caused some kind of strong emotional feeling in you to have actually come out with something. If that hadn’t happened, how would you have gone about it?

GCI: I never expected her to die. I truly thought she was forever. At the same time, I found her insupportable. What she did to me is there in the novel, tells all about our relationship, but, nevertheless, I thought there was some kind of genius in that woman. To begin with, she had a tremendous voice. I haven’t heard a voice like that, not even in great opera singing, even if you think of Ma Rainey, not Ma Rainey, but Bessie Smith who had a great voice, whose body was a solid instrument. This woman in person had such a voice, you wouldn’t believe it. And so I was angry because that disappeared. In a Hollywood movie, she would have been glamorous and beautiful, like Jennifer Holiday, but she wasn’t. So all we had then was her voice and this mean record that she made.

DD: To go back a little to films: You claim that *TTT* is not a novel; it’s a book. Have you ever thought of making a movie of it since you have written screenplays and you have worked with movies?

GCI: The first person who told me about the possibility of making this into a movie was Nestor Almendros, the great cinematographer. Almendros pointed at that precise story, “Ella cantaba boleros” (or “I Heard Her Sing”) to make a script out of that and out of that only. And I think he was right, because he is a very literate man. He knows how to read and he is a professional of the eye so he is aware of whether the camera could produce an equivalent of the story I wrote. He eliminated the rest of the book, because he knew the rest of the book is all about words and you cannot film words. But I don’t know, I was too busy at the time to do it, and I didn’t want anybody else to do it.

DD: But at this stage now, do you think you would like to go ahead with the plan and work on it?

GCI: Let me think about it. You know what? A powerful South American television company in Mexico, its president offered to buy the book and make it—the whole from beginning to end—make it all into a soap opera of 52 chapters.

JG-J: Another mini-series, a “telenovela.”

GCI: Isn't it wonderful? I was speechless. It never occurred to me that the housewives of South America would sit home and watch this preposterous concoction of sentimentality and jokes.

DD: We were just saying this afternoon: “Let's ask him if he wants to make a mini-series because we are having a lot of them right now on TV.”

JG-J: In previous interviews, you have said that in your writing process the first thing that comes to you is the title. Yesterday you talked about the title for *La Habana*. Do you have any titles in your head now?

GCI: I have the old title which is an old warhorse called *Cuerpos divinos*, but, let me tell you, I have a book which I think will be my last dabbling in politics. It is a book about Cuba, about the political figures there, and I knew I had it when I thought of the title. And the title is going to be *Mea Cuba*. But you really have to grasp the double edge, having the old *mea culpa* transforming into *mea Cuba* and also the obscenity of “mear” into this. And it's true, I need a title. Even when the title was a crummy title like *Confesiones de agosto*, I was working because I had the guiding—not force—but the guiding light of a title. Otherwise, I'm lost. It's like sailing at night. You have the stars, the Northern Star, and you know where you're going. That's what happens to me with the title.

JG-J: You've also written that you're constantly asking the reader not if he's reading you but if you're boring him. How do you find out your answer?

GCI: That's a very good question. I never do, but I keep asking. There are no answers. To very good questions you don't have to answer. But I think that for me it's a very bad habit, because a writer truly concerns himself with boredom.

JG-J: Why boredom and not understanding?

GCI: Because for me the thing that is created in writing is the tension between myself, the writer, and words. I never care about characters or about telling a story well or anything like that. It's a constant battle with words. The constant give-and-take between the words and myself. And I think that that tension is what—it doesn't matter if it is bad writing, it doesn't have to be "belles lettres"—but it's that tension that gives you the edge, that keeps you uncomfortable and relieves you from boredom.

JG-J: So you're checking to make sure that the reader has the same—

GCI: No, no, not checking, assuming. If the reader is about to be bored with what I'm writing, then I call him or her back to me, and with any given script, I show them the way to release themselves from boredom. It's difficult because I know that what I do sometimes is remind the reader that he is not living that film, that it's just words and writing, and I think that's a way of relieving that boredom also.

JG-J: Do you find that you can still keep the tension? I know that in reading some of your other works, that you use some of the same jokes over and over again. Do you relieve the boredom and tension then?

GCI: No, and I can tell you why. Listen to Tchaikovsky, listen to "Francesca da Rimini," "Romeo and Juliet," and "The Sleeping Beauty" and you'll find more than one theme that you have heard before in the previous piece. He used them over and over. You know why? Because he is achieving some point of—I don't know if you know about music, what a sequence is. A sequence is a group of notes that are repeated over and over until they reach a climax and that's why I thought of Tchaikovsky. He was trying to achieve a climax without using his first tool which is the sequence. He is the master of the sequence, he is probably the best of the Romantic composers in the use of the sequence. And that is why I am not ashamed of repeating, and sometimes I think, "Well, this is a good joke. Why throw it away? Let's keep it one more time."

JG-J: If it worked once, I'll use it again.

DD: Talking about your latest book, *Holy Smoke*—it's in English.

GCI: Let me warn you. Some people, because of the book and the writer being from London, tend to pronounce *Holy Smoke* as *Holy Smog*. And that's something that shouldn't happen.

DD: Considering London and Los Angeles. In writing in English, are you trying to make a point? I mean, you normally write in Spanish.

GCI: No, I'll tell you exactly what happened. It was the easiest way of writing the book because, if I wrote the book in Spanish, I was going to collide with the Cubans who know about cigars, and there are a lot of them who know about cigars and the weed. Then, the two greatest books on smoking, written not by specialists but by writers, are James Barrie's *My Lady Nicotine*, which is a devastating title, and Compton Mackenzie's *Sublime Tobacco*. You remember Compton Mackenzie? He is the man who wrote *Whiskey Galore*. And funny enough, both are of Scottish origin, Barrie and Mackenzie. Mackenzie wrote a very, very honest book. Barrie wrote a very elegant and funny book. And there are no other writers in France, or in Spain, or in Italy, or in this country who have written as well and as entertainingly and as knowledgeably as have Barrie and Mackenzie. So I had the presumption of wanting to write the book in the language of both Barrie and Mackenzie that could befit them both. It was as simple as that. I couldn't do that in Spanish.

DD: But at this stage do you think you are more comfortable writing in English or would you still prefer Spanish?

GCI: I am more comfortable when I translate from Spanish to English than writing a translation from English to Spanish. Right now I have serious problems with *Holy Smoke*, beginning with the title in Spanish.

DD: We are familiar with France having a French literature, England having an English literature, and America having an American literature, but we get to Latin America and each country is termed as one. Do you think there should be a break-up in the terminology? When asked about it, do you consider yourself to be Cuban or Latin American, or do you think you're an outsider?

GCI: Oh, no, not an outsider. What I think is that every writer tends to think of himself not as a writer, but he always wants to be considered as literature. Let's say what Borges is. You don't see Borges as an Argentine writer but much less as a Latin American writer. He would be insulted if you called him a Latin American writer. Therefore, I don't feel—I was, in a way, evicted from my home, and I went just by chance to England and I stayed there long enough to become a British subject. And that makes me really some kind of rare bird. Just imagine me: I was born in a very small town on the Northern coast of Cuba, and I came to Havana, that is to say a big city, when I was only 12 years old. I never thought of leaving; I never gave a thought to leaving Havana. All of the sudden, in the same way I was born, I was expelled from some maternal ambience, a spiritual kind of cradle. I know I'm mixing the metaphors, but, anyway, I know what I'm trying to say. What I'm trying to say, that in the same

way I was expelled from Cuba, I was received by England. Of course, England didn't know she was receiving me at the time, but it doesn't matter. And Cuba knew very well that she was expelling me. So I don't consider myself any more a Cuban writer or, for that matter, an English writer. I consider myself, sometimes, an English subject who writes in Spanish, probably the only one to do that in England. But for me, it is very difficult at this time to think of myself as anything.

JG-J: Does that make you sad? Do you have any emotion attached to that?

GCI: No, on the contrary, that makes me very happy. It makes me very free. You know, I keep shouting all over my house—sometimes, when I feel like shouting—I keep shouting, “Free, free at last!” And those are the very words of the genie in the bottle when Sabu released it.

JG-J: Martin Luther King, Jr., too.

GCI: (Laughs)

DD: Yesterday you said you weren't interested in a book that has “historia,” “climax,” and “desarrollo.” What exactly then is a book for you? How do you look at a book?

GCI: You mean examples or telling you what this book would be?

DD: In other words, a definition of what a book is.

GCI: I like books that are all mainly about words—books, let's say, like *Alice in Wonderland* or books like *Ulysses* or *The Exercise of Sound*. Those are the books I really enjoyed. Those are the books I say, “Well, this is a book I would have liked to have written.” I don't see myself saying that about books that are just stories told, because for that then you must admit that Harold Robbins is a great writer, and I couldn't say that. And there is in many writers a tendency to be versions of Harold Robbins. I know that it's nice to have a best-seller, but going after it is kind of obscene because how can you go after a best-seller in the same way as Harold Robbins or this lady of the dinosaurs (or whatever animal she is writing about) and at the same time think what you are writing about is literature? You cannot. Or otherwise, you have a best-seller and not care about literature and, as a great example, you have again Harold Robbins.

JG-J: I have one last question which is slightly—

GCI: Frank.

JG-J: Flip. I'm not going to ask you what your favorite tree is, or if you could be an animal, what animal you would be, but: What's your favorite word?

GCI: The word "word" . . . Is that clear?

JG-J: That's clear. Why it?

GCI: Because I don't think there is a more expressive word in the whole language, in the whole dictionary. And in Spanish, it's a good word, and in English, it's a better word, because you have "word" and almost immediately you have "world" in your thoughts. And you have so many derivations of that incredibly expressive Anglo-Saxon word.

JG-J: So your favorite word is the English "word"?

GCI: Yes. I can say that I don't like the French word for "word." I think "mot" is a slightly ludicrous word. But I think that "palabra" is a good word. It's supporting itself rather rudely on Latin, but it's a good word. There's no other way to say it.

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