

**"I HAVE NEVER PUSHED ANYONE TO BE A CHICANO"
A CONVERSATION WITH RUDOLFO ANAYA**

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Rudy Anaya passed away on June 28, 2020. Death visited with him at his home in Albuquerque, the gorgeous house on the hills surrounding the city where several times Rudy hosted me, my family, and even my students. What follows is the transcript of our conversation at his home, during a sunny afternoon in the early spring of 2012. Many a time during these nine long years, I have meant to transcribe the recording, a task that now becomes my duty to the memory of a dear friend. I have kept the Spanish words and expressions as Rudy used them, rather than translating them into English. Those readers who do not speak Spanish will easily understand their meaning; those who do, will appreciate the uniqueness of Anaya's code switching. It was not a formal interview, but rather the distended chitchat of two friends catching up after a long separation, and as such, it dealt with personal as much as literary matters. I have left out most of the former, and selected the parts relating to Anaya's writing and to Chican@ letters in general. Listening to the recording, I must confess, has not been an easy task, the thousand memories brought back by his voice on the tape being too overwhelming at times. I hope the reader finds some value in this long-overdue transcript, in which Rudolfo Anaya reveals, probably for the first time, some illuminating clues about his life and his work.

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Manuel Broncano (M.): Have you ever looked into the origins of your surname, your Spanish ancestry? As I recall it, Anaya is the name of some monuments in my hometown, Salamanca, like “palacio de Anaya” or “plaza de Anaya.”

Rudy Anaya (R.): Patricia and I were traveling in northern Spain and one day we joined an organized tour to visit some museum, and the bus driver was surprised by my fluent Spanish, and was curious. So I explained to him, and he asked my name. Through that driver, I learned that Anaya is a Basque surname, and it means “brotherhood” or “clan,” but I don’t really know to what extent that is accurate.

M.: I know you had a difficult time when Patricia passed. When did she die?

R.: The first week of January 2010, hace dos años y tres meses. In fact, I had just finished the manuscript of *Randy López* when it happened [Patricia suffered from cancer] One day she broke a hip and underwent surgery and then rehab for a while, and after that we brought her home and we took care of her all the time she was sick here in the house. Aquí la cuidamos y estuvimos con ella. We didn’t want to let her go, y estuvo muy contenta. We talked a lot about what was coming. But things went downhill quickly. Two months before she died, Patricia went to what they call here a hospice. Mientras estuvo aquí en la casa, al principio salíamos al jardín, y luego no más aquí al portal a platicar y ya después estaba en un cuarto aquí al lado, pretty close to the bed and the chair and the bathroom. I have just finished writing a manuscript about those emotions. [*The Old Man’s Love Story*, 2013]

M.: Is that what went into *Randy López*?

R.: No, this came after *Randy*. I showed the first draft to my editor at Oklahoma University Press and right away he said, “I want it, I want it.” I have worked some more on the manuscript and I think it is now ready for publication. A ver, it was my way of writing through the emotions, the experience, being alone, y cosas así, fictionalized by creating a character que solamente se llama The Old Man, and the Old Man was through these experiences, these emotions. That’s it, that’s what I am doing now. Ya lo terminé, pero siempre estoy tweaking esta palabra, la otra. I go to the park everyday, I walk, and the park has a school of goldfish, these little goldfish that probably people have thrown there from aquariums, a whole school, and I have

a relationship to them. I go every season, spring, winter, summer... A lot of what I am writing now has to do with memory and the world of spirits that figures into a lot of my work. Especially the four books of Sonny Baca, that begin to tell about the world of spirits. That is where the soul goes.

M.: So you believe in an afterlife?

R.: The novel I am working on now is a journey towards what I really believe. And that's where I start, with that world of spirits, but that is not where it ends up. So it finally ends up in memory, *la memoria*. And dealing with how much illusion there is in the world, and I am going to tell you this example I told Belinda [his niece]: *voy al parque y veo mis peces, ah! my fishes*, and I relate to them, and a big fish is floating dead on the surface of the water, *y digo*, "what is surface?" It is where the sky meets the water. We call it surface, but there is no such thing. *Es una palabra*, but we use it to describe something that is not, you know. Why don't we call it for example, "the belly of the sky?" The Old Man is going through this process, trying to understand what the final reality is, what we really do have.

M.: When you wrote *Randy López*, was Patricia already sick? I ask because *Randy* is also a journey towards death.

R.: Sí, it was a journey that both of us were going through. We talked a lot about her failing health. But instead of writing it about us, the vision of Randy López came. I had this vision of this young man riding his yegua, going back to the village where he was raised. That's what I had to write. It was similar to the vision that had inspired *Última* to me, and I don't know for sure whether it was a vision or a dream. *Última* came through the door one night and I felt her presence behind my back, and she told me to include her in my novel.

M.: While reading *Randy*, *Pedro Páramo* and the village of Comala came to my mind.

R.: In fact, I have a friend in California, Roberto Cantú, who loves *Pedro Páramo*. I had a beautiful edition and I sent it to him. But I don't think that was an influence. After I finished, Roberto Cantú in Los Ángeles right away pointed out that he felt, he knew it was an allegory somewhat like *Pedro Páramo*, but who knows... The most important thing was the vision that I had of this young man. Here is another interesting thing, Manuel: on the road to Jémez Springs, about three miles before you get in, it is about one hour

and fifteen minutes from here, entras a la sierra, a la montaña. Es un cañón bonito, muy chiquito. About three miles before you go in está un descanso, una cruz blanca, grande, y quizá la familia la cuida, porque está bien cuidada. Randy López, está el nombre en la cruz. El descanso de Randy López. Very few people know. Of course, the people in Jémez and la familia know, the question is, was that the spirit that came to me, to have his story told?

M.: I have always admired the kindness and care you show for all human beings in your writing, your understanding of the many flaws we humans have, and your understanding of creation. When I read *Randy*, I thought, ‘this is a summary of Anaya’s writing career.’

R.: I think it is, como dicen, the bookend to *Última* in a way and I am very pleased with it. I think it is a strong work, and Jesús Treviño, the photographer, told me after reading *Randy*: “This is it, man, this is it!” And I agree, I see the combination of elements from my previous works. Nowadays I write less and less in terms of time: as a young man, I could write four hours every morning, and now I am happy if I can write for an hour. This new book is different, it is something that happened to me, and I felt I should write it down. And it is not only for me, but also for people who go through grief, through grieving, through mourning, they share stories, and I felt that one way of sharing my story was writing it. Some of the things I am writing about, not even my immediate family knows. I have been composed, carried out with my writing, I keep the house and the Jémez house, invite friends, but underneath is all those memories you have to deal with, so maybe on behalf of someone else... And then, as soon as I have time, I want to collect my poetry, poems I have written along the years, because I think they will make a nice book. I also have a play I am working on, so, you know, siempre va a haber algo que hacer.

M.: What connection is there between Randy and Antonio?

R.: Well, I had not thought of it, but perhaps there is something between the two characters. Is Randy López a version of Antonio, going back to his hometown years later? Perhaps. It doesn’t seem to be the same place, one is the llano and the other a mountain, a canyon; the ages are also different: Randy López is thirty, and he is working at odd jobs in the city, went to the navy, and went to night school, decided he would be a writer... Now, would Randy be Antonio

as an older man? It is possible, no lo sé... in a universal sense, sure: you leave the little hometown where you have grown up, and then at some point later you feel you have lost something. There are symbols and themes that seem to repeat: the river, the schoolteacher, the priest... The priest in *Bless Me, Ultima* was authoritarian, one of those who preach 'my way or hell', 'eternal damnation'..

M.: When you spoke of the gold fish earlier, the golden carp in *Última* came to my mind, that powerful spirit of the river.

R.: Oh yes, it keeps appearing. I don't know, very often I drive over to the park, and walk, short walks these days, obviously, but I enjoy them immensely. It is not a big park, but it is nature for me. I would like to walk all along the river, climb the mountain in Jémez as I used to, to discover my little heaven, you know, my little nature, pero ya no puedo. In this new manuscript, the Old Man says: "my Walden," "my Walden Pond," and it is not the New England pond, que está toda bonita y verde. This is a little pond, manmade. Pero ahí están los golden fish, ducks, geese come in, all sorts of birds I can see and identify, y los árboles...

M.: Nature has always been a central element of your fictional universe.

R.: Yes, even in this new work, the Old Man finds some comfort as he goes along, and he is always talking to his wife, he tells her what he sees, and sometimes he goes for two or three chapters talking to her, telling her the things that are happening in his life. And all of a sudden she talks to him, to his great surprise: "you are here!" "Yes, I never left." Throughout the story, she keeps telling him the she has not gone away, never left his side.

M.: I have always thought that *Bless Me, Ultima* is the story of your childhood. Of all its characters, I find Narciso one of the most endearing, with his fallen nobility and his gift for gardening. How much of your life did you pour into the novel? Was Narciso somebody you knew?

R.: Many of the characters in *Última* are people I knew growing up, and sometimes I don't even change their names, even though in fiction they always tell you to change their names, pero por qué, es más bonito dejar sus verdaderos nombres. And yes, there was a Narciso, he was the town drunkard. Man, he was tall for a Hispano, muy alto, grande, with a big moustache. I'm sure he spent his life

in the ranchos, doing construction, odd jobs. He knew my father very well. They were drinking buddies, and whenever they went de parranda, he would come to the house. And there he is, in the novel. In his garden, he is like Zorba the Greek, and dances drunk while he sows his seeds in the moonlight, y sin querer he grows his plants because of his dance. Narciso warns Última that Tenorio is coming, and Tenorio kills him, shoots him near the river. I remember the real Narciso with special fondness. When he came walking down the street, we kids would hang around, si tiraba una bacha [cigarette butt], we would pick it up and smoke it. Nowadays children are told to avoid people like him, but I remember Narciso as an essential fixture of my hometown and my childhood. The other characters are like that, too: the Vitamin Kid, Gene and Bones, etc., they are based on children I grew up with.

M.: And Última?

R.: Última is a secret. Última is inspired by the same vision that inspired Randy López, as I said earlier. Randy's vision didn't tell me anything, but I knew I had to write the story. I don't remember whether it was a vision or a dream, but it was so clear; was I awake or was I asleep? Última was an apparition, una viejita like those you still see dressed all in black in Spanish villages, and more rarely, here in New Mexico. Última the character is a composite of several women I knew that did the work of a curandera. But I don't go into that, have never gone into that part of me. Enough to say that Última appeared to me, and once she found her way in, she became the soul of the novel, and everything else made sense all of a sudden. It was no longer the story of some kids growing up, but the story of some kids in a world that had this substratum of cuentos; cuentos that open the doors to mythology and the uncanny.

M.: And this world, somehow timeless, is set against the background of WWII, whose echoes reach the small town in rural New Mexico, as if the crude reality of the war assaulted this self-contained universe in an attempt to disrupt Antonio's childhood. After all, *Última* is the story of a vanishing world, a world passing away forever...

R.: I grew up with WWII, and my three brothers were deployed, like Antonio's in the novel. Yesterday, I received the visit of a large group of teachers, writers and friends. They were *librotraficantes* on

their way to Arizona. We met to discuss the situation created by the removal of Mexican-American Studies from the curriculum of a large school system in Tucson. After the meeting, a couple of teachers approached me and we talked about the importance of keeping our cultural memory in textbooks and educational programs, because the loss of that memory in our youths would represent an overwhelming change, overwhelming disruption. Pop culture, mass media, what they see on Facebook and similar places, all this is promoting this loss of cultural roots, which is alarming among our Mexican-American kids. That is the way society wants them, the way to control them, to turn them into consumers. Y nosotros, we say, hey, stand back, stand back awhile, you don't need a hundred CDs, use the radio instead, and things like that, and they don't understand. That's the power of economics...

M.: Is there a future for Mexican-Americans as a cohesive community?

R.: Yes, I am convinced there is, if we make the effort to preserve our memory, the collective consciousness of who we are, of our shared history as a people. And I believe in the Darwinian principle of adaptation; we need to adapt, of course, but we need to ask ourselves, what value is there in your history, what kind of continuity do you want to keep. Y en cuanto te cortan el hilo of that continuity, that thread weaving the past and the present, you find yourself adrift. We know, at least I know that, being adrift, you are apt to drop out of school more than the other kids; you are apt to wind up in prison more than the kids whose cultural, historical continuity is in the curriculum, is being kept up. Kids who are told, this is who you are, this is who your forefathers were, these are your values, and you can go to college. Y aquí está el chicanito. To me, that is the key to continuity. Yes, adapt to change, adapt to the circumstances; we have to learn English, of course, and we have to learn the history of the country, of course, learn its culture, its customs, todo. But it is so easy to keep more than one of those continuities, so easy to preserve one without relinquishing the other. You have it in Spain, people who speak two or three languages and identify themselves with more than one continuity

M.: Well, that is not always the case, I'm afraid...

R.: I understand, but at least quite a few of you speak two or

three languages, and travel abroad often. Y aquí no pasa. Here in the United States, we have different cultures, pero quieren cortarles el hilo, cut their continuity, erase their distinct identity, their history.

M.: I consider *Tortuga* one of your finest novels, unique among your works. However, it has not received the critical attention it certainly deserves. Why?

R.: I am glad that you mention *Tortuga*. Pat always loved that novel, and I agree with you, it is one of my best works, but it has never enjoyed the popularity of *Última*. Years ago, there was a company in Great Britain that was planning to turn *Tortuga* into a movie, but the project finally fell through, and it is a pity because it would have made an excellent film. I am an old-fashioned writer who sees the plot as the backbone of the narrative, unlike these modernists and their sudden fiction, sudden flashes, avant garde... My narrative is rooted in the cuentos and legends from the oral tradition, and it is traditional in this sense. Sometimes, the writer goes deep, it happened in *Última* obviously, I know it happened in *Tortuga*, and I think it happened also in *Randy López*. That is the only way, metaphorical way to describe it: sometimes you go deeper, you keep the narrative line, but you touch something else, you begin to touch the depths of the human soul.

M.: Is there a real Tortuga Mountain?

R.: I call the Sandías the Tortuga Mountains. The hospital where I was treated when I was sixteen [Rudy was in the hospital for several months because a spinal injury suffered while swimming in an acequia] is located in a small town called Truth or Consequences. In the 1950s, the town changed its original name, Hot Springs, because of a contest in a radio show of the same title, very popular at the time. The hospital, Carrie Tingley Hospital, is situated on a hill, overlooking the town and the river, the Río Grande; on the other side of the river, there is a mountain, and they call it Tortuga. In the novel, the other kids call the kid with the cast Tortuga because of the mountain. So now, he has an affinity with the mountain. He is completely paralyzed, and asks himself, 'will I ever move again?' 'Can that legend that the mountain will one day move be me?'

M.: And the Vegetable Ward, was it real?

R.: The Vegetable Ward is a fictionalized..., I do not know if that is the best way to put it, but in a sense, it was real, the boy in the iron

lung was real, but then I placed him in that place, in a place perhaps of my subconscious, or the subconscious of Tortuga the character. They hear screams at night, they know that there is pain, when one of the kids dies, they know, they sneak out at night, y ellos saben, they know that beyond that door it is a place of death.

M.: Last time we met, I asked you whether you considered yourself a magical-realist, and you answered, somewhat dismissively, that it was a question for us critics and scholars to answer, and not you. Would you like to add something to that response?

R.: It is simply the reality of my imagination. Now, if that reality is magical, well, you have to figure out what words you will use to phrase it. Honestly, I never felt I was in that literary stream, but you have to leave it to the person who reads your work, leave it to the critic, and if the critic places it in one of those categories, pues fine, I have nothing to object. I would say that *Tortuga* is a reality, and this leads inevitably to the next question, 'but what is *real*?' That is the question I have been struggling with all my life, and it comes out more in this new manuscript I am currently working on. The Old Man deals more and more with illusion, more and more with time, what he wants to believe, what is real, what he calls, what I call a creative imagination, is my soul, but what is the beginning of soul, and on and on and on, until he finally strings all these things together and comes to some conclusion. And the conclusion is memory, and he is afraid for a while, porque dice, 'is that all there is?' If that stream in my writing takes you to magical realism that is fine, and it is fine if it takes you into another category that has not been explored yet. By the way, this is just coming up a wonderful plática, Manuel, a dulce plática that leads us to think of new ways, new things. Maybe we need to come up with a new definition. If magical realism is a category, a label, and we are not completely in it, what are we in? Maybe that is the next critical step. I read as many works by Chicana and Chicano writers as I can, and I also read many articles that are sent to me by scholars, and I don't think I have seen a new definition. In many cases, those writers were reading the Latino writers that magical realism comes from, so many of us grew up in English departments..., even the ones who went to writers like Gabriel García Márquez, I sense they went later, so it is not bred in the bone, en la sangre.

M.: But still, the vision is there...

R.: It is there because of the stream of the migration. The Iberian Peninsula entering Mexico, meeting up with different peoples there, and then our ancestors coming up here into Nuevo México, Arizona, California, it is all one stream. Is what García Márquez tied into different from what we, after our education in English departments, tied into? Do we have added conceptions, perspectives, that he didn't? I don't mean worse, or better, simply that a people changes as he gets to a different place, a different community. I recently read several articles on the New England Transcendentalists, and this led me to think of what Transcendentalism and the Chican@ movement may have in common, and started to see some. Were we influenced by the Transcendentalists? No. I read them in college, an essay here and there, and remember a few things, but did not *study* them.

M.: I would say you are a transcendentalist, for you share the concept of the oversoul.

R.: Well, yes, the world of spirits is the oversoul. The Chican@ writers of my generation, the ones who got a degree and studied literature, we have to have brought all those influences into who we are. How can you read Emerson, or Mark Twain, or T. S. Eliot, or Tennessee Williams, and not be influenced. How can I be at the University of New Mexico during the Beatnik era, reading Allen Ginsberg and going to the coffee shops que había aquí en Albuquerque, and their poetry readings, thinking we were poets, and not be influenced. Therefore, let's create a Chican@ aesthetic that we have not seen described yet. It will no doubt be different from the aesthetic that, let's say, a García Márquez, or a Carlos Fuentes, grew up with.

M.: Do you agree with me in that the Chican@ movement has been excessively essentialist at times, excessively self-centered?

R.: Yes, I agree, but the essentialism that you mention has been a mechanism of self-defense against the aggressive threat of uniformity, the fear of disappearing as a group, as a community. I have recently read four or five novels by Chican@ writers, and there is much in them that strikes me as essentialism, in the sense that you describe it. How we came from Mexico and now live in the United States in perpetual conflict, over and over. I am more eclectic, and try to be syncretic at the same time, seek unity in divergence, and I guess I have a faith in that. After all, that's what literature is precisely about.

M.: What are the differences and continuities between Chicanismo in the 1970s and what Chicanismo may be today? A movement eminently political in its beginnings, gradually evolved into an artistic and literary phenomenon, into an aesthetics and a poetics apparently seemingly divested of all ideological activism. Is this appreciation accurate?

R.: The aesthetics and the poetics contain the humanity, and humanity operates under a political ideology. You cannot separate them. In the seventies we had poets like Ricardo Sánchez, Alurista, Nephtalí De León, we had Luis Valdés in teatro in California, and many others... Back then, the activism was in your face, up front, in the classroom, en las huelgas, in marches. I don't see that now. Is it enough for us that, in the course of things, revolutions bygone are incorporated into the aesthetics and the poetics? Well, yes, that is history, revolutions are written down. It is not enough for us Mexican-Americans, Chican@s, in this country; it is not enough to be preserved only in the scholarship, and in the aesthetics and the poetics. We need people in the streets. We need activism. We need these young people, the librotraficantes, saying, 'if you remove our books from the shelves at the schools in Arizona, if you hide them in storehouses, we will take them back and pass them out to the people, and we will overcome,' as that song from the Civil Rights movement said, 'We shall overcome...' I feel that activism is getting back to the political. We had the Occupy Wall Street movement, and they are tied together. The young people, but not only the young, seeing this inequity, the ten per cent ruling over a country, and the way they rule is to make us consumers. The corporations need consumers, and suddenly so many are saying, 'ya basta!' Once I told Tony Díaz [the leader of the librotraficante movement], 'Tony, what we need to do is to occupy Arizona,' and that caught on, you saw it in emails, people were commenting on it. Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Arizona, it is the same. Power does not want, not only your perspective, power does not want your consciousness.

M.: Before I turn off my recorder, allow me to revisit briefly my earlier question about the past and the present of the Chican@ movement, and how you envision its future.

R.: Yes. I am glad to have lived through that time in the seventies, even though sometimes I got knocked down because *Última* was not

a political tract. Quite a few of those early critics who questioned my novel missed the crucial fact that cultura is always political, always. All in all, that was a fascinating time. We don't see much of that activism of the 1970s anymore. Instead, we've been promoting the Studies, the curricula, the scholarship, the aesthetics, and the poetics. If you are assimilated completely, your culture dies, and part of you dies, because you've been given. In the worst of situations of our community, in the pobreza that we've known, we've been given something to sustain us. Our parents gave us their language, gave us Spanish, and they gave us values, the cuentos themselves had those values. We learned to listen to the oral tradition and keep it in us, we learned the value of work. Como dicen ahora, 'these Mexicans don't know the value of work...' Hey, gimme a break, we invented it! We had that set of values, you see, we had that continuity. My parents struggled for this, struggled for that, and so did mis abuelos before, and so did most parents. 'So, why don't you assimilate?' they ask. Well, yes, but at what price? The consequence of assimilation can be a dying people. I always leave it up to the individual. We can write and say as much as possible about these things that happen in our world, but I have never ever pushed anyone, 'you be a Chicano.'