

Interview with Luis Valdez

JOSÉ ANTONIO GURPEGUI

José Antonio Gurpegui: For some people, you represent in the Chicano cultural world what Cesar Chávez was in the political field. It seems a great responsibility.

Luis Valdez: There is no question that Cesar Chavez was and is a major inspiration in my work, particularly with El Teatro Campesino. Born on the picket lines of the Delano Grape Strike in 1965, my farm workers theatre took root in the movement Cesar created, together with his family, Dolores Huerta and a rare handful of unpaid organizers. Yet my association with Cesar began long before that. I joined his union in the first weeks of the grape strike, but for me it was also a vital homecoming. Looking back, after all these years, it does not surprise me that some people associate my role in the arts with Cesar's role in labor politics. It was no accident that I was inspired to follow his lead. In a very real sense, we both sprang from the same generation and the same earth. My use of the arts to defend campesinos remains consistent with his belief that to help the poorest of the poor is to build from the ground up. This is a big responsibility, yes, but if one can only stay true to the simple humble task of helping the voiceless to speak their own truths, it's really not so bad.

J.A.G.: Could you tell me some more about your “association” with Cesar Chávez?

L.V.: Cesar was the first Mexican American to achieve national and international status as a political and labor leader, but he was shaped by his childhood experiences as a

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Gurpegui, J.A. “Entrevista a Luis Valdez.” *Camino Real. Estudios de las Hispanidades Norteamericanas*. Alcalá de Henares: Instituto Franklin- UAH, 1:2, (2010): 125-133.

Chicano migrant farm worker. So was I. In school, he never got past the eighth grade, but underneath the humble façade of a campesino was a mind of extraordinary brilliance. His basic understanding of people, politics and economics turned him into a maestro in my eyes, and for this reason, even though I was a “college graduate,” he very naturally became my mentor and role model. In other words, I internalized his example. And I was not the only one to do that. I was born in a farm labor camp in Delano, California in 1940. When the Chavez family arrived from Arizona in 1941, they moved into a tiny house across the street from my birthplace, owned and rented to them by my aunt. My first conscious contact with Cesar thus occurred when I was six years old. He was nineteen at the time and I knew him as C.C. As a benign pachuco, a zoot suiter, on Delano’s Westside barrio, he was the running partner of one of my cousins, Billy Miranda. Billy died a violent death in Phoenix in 1955, seventeen stab wounds to the chest, but C.C. survived to become the American Gandhi. I didn’t make the connection until I told my mother in San Jose that I was going back to Delano to join the grape strike.

“Oh,” she said. “You’re going to work with C. C.” “C.C.?” I said, “Is that vato still around?” “Mijo,” she answered, “Don’t you know who C.C. is? He’s Cesar Chavez.”

J.A.G.: Do you recall the 60’s with anguish or with a romantic yearning?

L.V.: I remember the 1960’s, indeed the whole decade from start to finish, as a time of rising hope, disillusion and tumultuous change. For me it began with the Viva Kennedy campaign that put JFK in the White House. I was only a sophomore in state college then and not even old enough to vote, but I was swept up in the excitement of electing a young, witty, Irish Catholic president who promised a brighter future for the whole country. His assassination in 1963 was thus a devastating shock to say the least. Subsequent suspicions about a plot by the mob or the CIA only served to embitter me and most of my friends about the role of the Warren Commission in the cover-up, resulting in a intense wave of hatred and resentment toward LBJ and his administration. The military draft and the War in Vietnam only deepened my resistance. With my student deferment, I was supposed to report for active duty after my graduation in the summer of ’64. Instead, I chose to go to Revolutionary Cuba with other students to protest the Embargo and travel ban. After smoking cigars in conversation with Che Guevara and playing baseball with Fidel, I returned with a continental vision of the Americas. Moving to the Haight Ashbury district in San Francisco before it went psychedelic, I was a quasi hippie for a time, as I joined the SF Mime Troupe as an actor.

The anti-war movement and the Civil Rights movement were at their height as parallel manifestations of the same desire for social change, yet other forces were also simultaneously impacting on our youthful way of life from the sexual revolution to the rise of the drug culture. Not insignificant among these changes was the appearance of inter-racial romances, and this touched my personal life directly. After the middle of the decade, however, all this romantic experimentation suddenly turned inward, as my counter cultural longings took root in a desire to assert my own racial identity through direct action. Looking back I feel neither anguish nor romantic yearning, but rather a kind of quiet gratitude that in spite of all our clumsy idealistic groping, our hearts were ultimately in the right place.

J.A.G.: But what about the Movimiento Chicano and the Teatro Campesino?

SC: I don't know because I'm not a historian or a critic, so it's hard for me to answer. I eat what I like and I only eat what I like, I never have to eat anything I don't like. So, it's hard for me answer that question in the context of an expert in literature because I never felt I was an expert in Chicano literature... I never feel like I'm an expert in anything.

JAG: But you will agree that you belong to the movement which is known as Chicano literature.

SC: Do I belong to the Chicano literature movement?

JAG: I do consider you are a Chicano author. Do you consider yourself the same way?

SC: I do agree with that, culturally. That, I do claim.

JAG: To some critics Chicano literature was the culture product of the Movimiento Chicano of the 60's. Is it so nowadays or is it something else?

SC: I think it has become something else, at this time, in my opinion. I'm not an expert on anything except myself, but I think a lot of writers are writing now that don't have any Chicano consciousness, that don't call themselves Chicano writers.

JAG: And what about Chicanism...

SC: I was put in a school, where I taught, with Marxists, Leninists and Anarchists, and this was my introduction to the “isms”, with people that were living their politics. They were a bunch of *locos*, and they saw me as a kind of “artsy-fartsy” who was just floating up there, but after a while when they saw that my students, these kids, were winning poetry awards, competing with the best schools and winning, they started giving me a little bit more of respect. I learned how to become a political person by working there and the book that changed my life, the only political book I read, *de pura casualidad*, when I was in Iowa was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which is one of my favorite books. And *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* made me realize this whole idea that you couldn’t put books in a category for when you go to prison, that can change you and can change your life. I use *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with my students and *A Hundred Years of Solitude* with me in this alternative school. I did the best things I could with the books that had changed my life, but I didn’t know what I was doing. I did not realize that I was actually forming my political consciousness, and I still don’t know what to call it, but I learned something working there and one of the things that Esperanza is looking for, if you read between the lines, you’ll see that Sandra Cisneros is looking through the eyes of Esperanza for *otro modo de ser*. I didn’t know how to be and exist with this reality of these young girls coming into my class, I was looking for my feminism and my politics, and teaching there and writing *House on Mango Street* helped me to find my “isms.”

JAG: You have just mentioned Malcolm X. Could it be his influence why you are so radical in your feminism and your political view?

SC: I think so, that’s why Esperanza renames herself with an X, in honor of Malcolm X.

JAG: Is Esperanza a special girl or is she an everyday woman?

CS: I don’t know, I didn’t think about that. She was me in my twenties, because in my twenties I was looking for my *camino* and I really was thinking at that time to stop writing and teaching because to me at that time it seemed *absurdo* to be teaching these kids to write poetry *cuando llegaban golpeadas, cuando tenía yo que enfrentarme* with their parents when they wanted them to quit school, my smartest student, they wanted her to quit school and start working because they were tired of taking care of her baby and go back to her boyfriend... *me daban ganas de llorar*. I was looking for my way, like Esperanza, I was looking at the bad examples and saying “how can I give a light and a direction to my students, why am I teaching them how to write? Why don’t I just say

“fuck this” and say to all the girls “I’m taking you all to planned parenting and working on those student statistics?” I look a lot of classes on sexual education so that I could guide my women, I paid for an abortion, I did things I wasn’t supposed to do but - good or bad - I did what I felt I had to do at that time. I felt that I wanted these women to live up to their potential, and I didn’t see poetry and writing as to saving their lives, so I felt that maybe I should stop and let go. I felt really frustrated and angry, and I thought that maybe I should make them learn and distribute birth control flyers around the neighborhood, so something poetry was not doing, so out of frustration I felt the most impotent I’ve ever felt: in my twenties when I was forming my politics and writing *The House on Mango Street*, and I never dreamed that those stories that came from a moment of most despair would come back, become *House on Mango Street*, and be used in the very same school I collected the stories, and are saving women’s lives now, *porque yo no tenía idea de que la literatura* and the political necessity that I saw in the community could come together. I saw my poetry as being separate, I’ve been trained to think of poetry as having nothing to go with changing the planet. This taught me more than all my years in college, those years that I was in the community really shuck my up and shaped me as a writer, so if I hadn’t taught in the community I’d be a very different writer now.

JAG: Well, now it is not clear to me if Esperanza is a real or fictitious character or maybe both.

SC: Yes, she was me searching for my *otro modo de vida*. Me and my students were *en la oscuridad*, clumsily trying to find our way.

JAG: After reading *Caramelo* I have a sense of the change Chicanas have gone through during these eighteen years.

SC: I think that one of the great things is that now we know we exist. We didn’t even know before.... (laughs)

JAG: But the *Revolución Femenina* is still there...

SC: Well, I think that one of the great things that have happened in the eighteen years is that we know that we’re not alone. [We know] that there is another woman like you trying to write, that also has the same issues and same problems, so that we know where

to find each other. We're not all alike and the things that we write about, but there is a great comfort in having a spiritual family because our blood families do not understand what we were doing and thought we were crazy. We need a spiritual family, a community that understands you, and the Chicano movement was not my spiritual family, I did not feel like I was part of a family, until I found the women.

JAG: And Ana Castillo, Montserrat Fontes or Estela Portillo are members of that family. What do you have in common with them?

SC: Sometimes just a uterus. Maybe a uterus and sometimes even our Spanish is very different. It's like splitting hairs and saying what makes me different from even a Chicana writer who lives in Chicago, like Ana, I always look for place as a difference, not to compete but to find my voice, to find my center.

JAG: Are you saying that there is a Chicana voice?

SC: I don't know, that's your job. (laughs) I'm on the other end of the telescope, so I don't see what you see.

JAG: *House on Mango Street* is always your book name, but I really love your short stories. Sometimes I think that I like your short stories even more than your novels, some of them are so fabulous.

SC: Thank you, I like them better because I think they are better crafted.

JAG: What would you say if I compare you with Hemingway in the sense that Hemingway is always recognized by his novels and not so much by his brilliant short stories.

SC: Thank you, I appreciate it very much because I try, with every genre, every poem, every chapter that I write, to do it better than the last. I always try to *mejorar, y mi papa me enseñó eso*, "when you do a job, get paid higher the next time, never go backwards, always go up". And I understood that about my craft with my *oficio* too. I try to do that with everything in my life because the public will be very happy if I wrote "Mango Street II", I could write fifteen chapters more to Mango Street and that's it, *pero para qué*, I already did that. I want to do something I've never done, so if I'm interested in something

in the moment, something exciting that Rulfo is teaching me, I'm going to try that in the story, so some of the stories I learned from Rulfo, from Jane Reeves, from Nuria del Mar.

JAG: How do you understand *La Llorona* at the end of the 20th Century, as a relic or as an actual reality?

SC: You only have to look at the papers, the Llorona stories happen every day. You know that woman in Houston who drowned her children, did you read about that? There's always a Malinche story, a Llorona story in the papers, you just have to read the papers or read the *alarmas, sí ocurren* and you see these women, we look at it very deeply, and say "I would never put that woman in jail, I'd put her husband in jail". But anyway, that's why I try to come to my work, because I feel like I see these vestiges of these nets in me. But I don't know about Chicano literature or writers, or women writers, I'm very limited in that I only have consciousness of this body that I'm dragging myself around in for all these years of my life. I have a curiosity about other people, but I don't know about them except by way of myself.

JAG: What remains of *Esperanza in Lala*?

SC: I think Esperanza was a really younger self, before the Fall. There was like a Paradise and a Fall for me in my life, and Esperanza is part of Lala in part one, before the crash. That was part of my innocence, because my father created a kind of shielded world for me where I really thought *que los hombres iban a ser como mi padre, muy caballeros conmigo*. I had no idea that people would treat me the way that I was treated, and it was like night and day. When I had my relationship with my professor it was such a damaging relationship, that's why I always tell women when I speak, "don't have relationships with your professors." It is such an abuse to be treated like that from people that are your teachers, it is so disrespectful how they treat their women students that way, they don't see them as they would their daughters. I just went to some place that I never came back from, it was like vanquishing, and I think that Esperanza is me before that quake, before that shock, and Lala in part three is me now, that's who I am...*grosera* (laughs)

JAG: When reading *Caramelo* it remind me *The Brick People* by Alejandro Morales. The novel about his father coming to California, working...

SC: *Sí, me lo regaló, pero* I haven't had a *momento* to read it yet. Part of the problem is that I move a lot and I live in *cajas*, before I got this house, so I don't know where my books are, *no tengo libreros ni tengo donde ponerlos* so everything is all thrown around, It is easier for me to buy a book than to find it, but Alejandro [Morales] gave it to me, *me lo firmó y todo*, but I don't know where it is, I'm finally building a library in my office, and then I will be able to find where everything is.

JAG: After reading *Caramelo* I have had a clear sense of paralelism. What I mean is that even quite different experiences have many things in common.

SC: *Para mí todos los libros llegan en su momento*, so there were some books I read that it wasn't time for me to read them, and for example it's time for me to read Emerson now, it wasn't time before. Siddhartha, I didn't understand it when I read it before, but now that I'm searching for spirituality, it's time. All these things arrive in the moment when your body needs to be nourished by certain books, so I will read something that's in my library, but it's just that I don't know where they are.

JAG: About spirituality. Why do you have “Buddhalupe” tattooed?

SC: This book was very hard for me to write, and I really thought that when I did this tattoo it was to mark a death and a rebirth. I think we have lots of deaths in our lives, and if we're lucky we are reborn and if we're not lucky we wander around with the walking wounded. *Yo me morí con este libro* and a new me is being reborn and part of the process of searching for a spiritual cell in my forties is with pain. There are a lot of *dolores* in this book, because there have been a lot of *dolores* in my life, so this [tattoo] is sort of like to celebrate this book with something significant. I originally was asked to pose for a Hispanic magazine but I have this policy where I don't appear in books with “Hispanic” on the title because I'm not Hispanic; I don't accept *premios* that have the word “Hispanic” because I don't feel Hispanic. So there was the paradox of appearing on the cover of Hispanic and I'm not Hispanic. So I put a temporary tattoo that said “*pura latina*” on it, but *me gustó tanto* the juxtaposition of a tough tattoo with something ultra-feminine. In my head I feel tough, I think I have a deep voice, I'm big like Lala, in my head, so people are always surprised when they meet me that I'm so feminine and small, but that's not how I see myself. So I liked the idea of having a tattoo thrown upside down and on its head, so when people see me they don't expect me to have a tattoo. I didn't want to have “*pura latina*” on me, I preferred to have something more significant

for this stage in my life, and that was the Buddhism and the Virgen de Guadalupe that came into my life. Since I wasn't raised up in a religious home like Lala, my mother was a godless woman, so I wanted to mock that. My mother saw it and told me that it was the stupidest thing I've done and I told my mother "well I think the stupidest thing you've done was to have eight children". I didn't mean it to be mean, but I wanted to tell her that from my point of view I would have the tubes tied after the first one.

JAG: Culturally, religion is at the heart of Latino machism; so I don't understand why you are using a religious image like the Virgin.

SC: *Sí, pero es la Virgen* but no from Catholicism, she's changed.....My work has always been spiritual, *House on Mango Street* is full of spirituality but it's not Catholic, it's looking for spirituality.

JAG:It seems Chicano literature is in fashion nowadays. What will remain, lets say, in twenty, thirty years from now? How do you see Chicano literature in general?

SC: I don't think Chicano literature is in fashion, it's only a fashion in Europe. I think in Europe anything exotic is always in fashion, so maybe it's due to exoticism, I don't think it's in fashion in the United States. Chicano literature is looking for a new direction and a new name, calling itself "latino literature," it's looking for itself. Things have changed, I grew up calling myself "latina" because on the city I grew up in, but we're seeing those changes in cities like Los Angeles and other places where we're seeing how people redefining what it means to be Latino. I think we are going to see something that is kind of multi-ethnic, not just Mexican-Americans but more of a multi-Latino. I hope we see things that a more including, much more work that will explore other *fronteras*, not just *fronteras* of culture but *fronteras* of sexuality and class, because now we're seeing people publish from many different classes and niveles.

JAG: Any work in progress?

CS: I have a button box full of *cuentitos* called Infinito, erotic short stories. I have a book called "Uncensored Cisneros", which are ideas for poems, and a book called "Ten Times Ten", on how to teach writing to people who are afraid to write.

Madrid, May 14th 2003.