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Still Running: An Interview with Luis J. Rodriguez

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Watts bleeds as I bled, getting laid-off from work,
standing by my baby's crib, touching his soft cheek
and fingering his small hand, as dreams shatter again,
dreams of fathers for little men.

Watts bleeds and the city hemorrhages,
unable to stop the flow from this swollen and festering sore.

Oh bloom, you trampled flower, come alive as once
you tried to do from the ashes.

Watts, bleeding and angry, you will be free.

—Luis J. Rodriguez (“Watts” 29-37)

Luis J. Rodriguez is an intriguing and rare individual; he is a Chicano memoirist, novelist, poet, and journalist while simultaneously a publisher and social revolutionary who campaigns on behalf of the working classes. As Andrés Rodríguez (no relation) explains, “Rodríguez is one of Chicano literature’s most gifted and committed artists today. He is also an activist, whose action, above all, is to strike at our complacency or pretense of democracy” (216). Rodríguez has fulfilled these literary and advocacy roles with raw talent and sheer hard work. On many levels, he can be read as a “classic” Chicano author whose writing confronts historical and linguistic bonds to both Mexico and North America, raising questions of cultural ambivalence and negotiating assimilation and acculturation.¹ His verse, often replete with political consciousness, prompts comparison with the militant protest poetry that has a long history in the Mexican barrio and was brought to the fore during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.² Concurrently, as this interview demonstrates, Rodríguez exceeds the strictures of his Chicano categorization, offering unconventional twists on what it means to be a contemporary author underpinned by a sense of specific ethnic identity.

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I first interviewed Rodriguez in 2006. We spoke at length about his acclaimed account of a violent gangbanging lifestyle in East Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s titled *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* (1993). When I first started reading *Always Running*, I was captivated—as were numerous book reviewers—by its graphic and brutal representation of the gang underworld. I conducted some discussion groups at inner-city schools to observe the reading practices of young, often marginalized students and was enthralled by their desire to hear more about Rodriguez as the *former* gangbanger, Rodriguez the writer and poet, and Rodriguez the creative influence. Several teachers, for whom *Always Running* has proven invaluable in getting reluctant readers to read, similarly remarked that their pupils wanted to find out more about this man's life outside of the gang.

One teacher with whom I worked made no reference to gangs when she introduced *Always Running* to her classes, presenting the author as a “novelist, a poet, and an author who has been accepted into the multicultural canon” (Metcalf 170). Often others (myself included) are guilty of underestimating young people's tastes, assuming they will be predominantly engrossed by the scenes in the memoir depicting intense and vicious acts of violence. Instead, they are equally enticed by Rodriguez's participation in the Chicano Movement of that period, interspersing his time in the gang with tales of himself as a disillusioned school pupil, bewildered and upset at the lack of respect for Mexican heritage and culture. Of course, this also speaks volumes about Rodriguez's own literary skill at deftly articulating the tensions between these two sides of his life. It could be contended that he strategically uses the “glamour” of violence to engage audiences about other things.

Always Running is in practical and literal terms a success; it has sold in excess of 500,000 copies with more than twenty reprints and translation into twenty-seven languages. In many of the high school libraries I visited in 2006 and again in 2008, the memoir was one of the most widely held books (one school even boasted twenty copies, twelve in English and eight in Spanish). Despite such accomplishments and the tendency of literary critics to deem Rodriguez a gang memoirist who then turned to fiction, his first two publications were collections of poetry: *Poems Across the Pavement* (1989) and *The Concrete River* (1993). Although I have utilized *Always Running* in the undergraduate classroom on a number of occasions, and it elicited enthusiastic responses, I recently introduced poems from these two poetry collections, and students reacted in equally passionate and academically inspired ways. Since *Always Running*, Rodriguez has continued to prove his literary credentials with a continuous stream of works. Arguably, most well-known are his collection of short stories *The Republic of East L.A.* (2002) and the novel *Music of the Mill* (2005), the former winning a host of literary awards.³

Yet to point to *Always Running* as an unambiguous success arguably misses the political resonance of the text relating to consumption and the

testimonial form. The memoir is consumed by a range of readers for differing reasons, from exoticist to intimate identifications with the protagonist and the world depicted. As detailed in *The Culture and Politics of Contemporary Street Gang Memoirs* (2012), Malcolm Klein believes such texts (including not only *Always Running* but also *Monster* [1993] by Sanyika Shakur and *Blue Rage, Black Redemption* [2004] by Stanley “Tookie” Williams) were written for black and Mexican youth. Others, such as Alejandro Alonso, maintain they were intended for European and Australian audiences (perhaps implying that such a peculiarly American phenomenon—the contemporary street gang subculture—would assuredly captivate non-US readers) (Metcalf 38). Rodriguez has commented that he wanted to make his memoir “literary enough for anyone who knows literary works can say it has some, but also accessible so some kid down the street can read it” (Metcalf 38). Each audience carries baggage that needs to be carefully considered; Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez has noted the ways in which Chicana/o literature has been defined as much by its readers as its authors. The narrative arc of *Always Running* rests on conversion: the journey from violent young gangbanger to punishment, political enlightenment, and renunciation of violence. More specifically, the testimonial genre, by its very nature, is designed to be incomplete, bordering on failure, without the reader’s corresponding action to extend the lessons learned in this fundamentally didactic form. As B. V. Olguín explains, “*testimonio* seeks to map the political awakening of the subaltern-subject-in-struggle in order to educate, politicize, and motivate the reader to change ‘the system’” (87). *Testimonios* are offered to lead the reader to action, and such traits can also be witnessed in the following interview.

Press coverage of Rodriguez—including his fictional and activist work—has been extensive since the publication of *Always Running*, with mention in a range of newspapers and magazines from *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* to *The Bloomsbury Review*, *The Nation*, and *The Progressive*. Yet in academic realms, the memoir accounts for most of the attention to Rodriguez from a wide variety of perspectives including history, sociology, criminology, pedagogical, and literary studies.⁴ Rodriguez’s fiction is gradually becoming the subject of scholarly analysis although at a slower pace. (The reasons for this are speculative and manifold, although I wonder if in part this serves as testament to Chicana/o literature as a continuously burgeoning movement.) Indeed, though Rodriguez himself has contributed to critical edited collections,⁵ academic work on his poetry, novels and short stories is, I would argue, unfinished. This interview represents a corrective to remind the academic world of his talents and interests above and beyond *Always Running*.

In Charles Tatum’s excellent 2006 scholarly overview of Chicana/o literature, he suggests that the evolution of trends in Chicana/o fiction have included engagement with magical realism and pop cultural icons, as well as reconceptualizing Aztlán (139-48). Moreover, Chicana/o literary studies has recently taken up

issues relating to those raised by Rodriguez himself in his works and this interview, including the graphic representations of inner-city life, in which crime (particularly gang involvement) and punishment (incarceration) are placed in a wider context of socioeconomic conditions. Two examples include B. V. Olguín's *La Pint: Chicana/o Prison Literature, Culture and Politics* (2010) and Raul Homero Villa's *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (2000).⁶ Situating Rodriguez within this broader scholarly discourse demonstrates the continuing relevance of his writing.

In Tatum's *Chicano and Chicana Literature* (2006), Rodriguez's memoir, poetry, novels, and short stories all make appearances under varying subgenres. These categories include "The Autobiography of the Urban Barrio," in which Rodriguez is featured alongside memoirs by Mary Helen Ponce and Gary Soto. Tatum contends that Rodriguez "presents a much more graphic and raw vision of barrio life than does either Ponce or Soto" (99). In a second category titled "The Barrio," Tatum addresses contemporary Chicana/o fiction that depicts the Mexican American inner city, discussing *Music of the Mill* and *The Republic of East L.A.* (115). Finally, Tatum situates Rodriguez under a subheading of "Other Chicana/o Poets," which includes "poets whose published works have appeared over the past 20 years but who have not been as extensively recognized as the poets discussed in the previous section" (190-91). This previous section is titled "Chicana/o Poetry from the Mid-1980s Forward" and includes Alberto Alvaros Rios, Pat Mora, Ana Castillo, and Juan Felipe Herrera. Given Rodriguez's prominence and flexibility in Tatum's vision, I predict we will gradually see more of Rodriguez in such critical texts. Moreover, such academic respect for Rodriguez will surely continue to blossom given his structural contributions to contemporary American literature aside from his own published output. Certainly, the story of Rodriguez's Tía Chucha Press, alongside its sister café and bookstore, is an important consideration in Rodriguez's story.

The narrative history of Chicana/o publishing is well documented, and it is no coincidence that a number of small presses encouraging bilingual or Spanish writings appeared in the aftermath of the civil rights decades, riding on waves of liberal fervor and cultural respect (the most frequently cited are Quinto Sol in 1967, Bilingual Press in 1973, and Arte Público in 1979). The establishment of such institutions encouraged Chicana/o literature as a body of work to expand exponentially, forcefully challenging mainstream Euro-American publishers who believed literature of the Chicana/o experience (particularly in Spanish or bilingual prose) held no market potential in the United States. Localized publishers for people of color intervened to ensure Chicana/o authors could flourish in their own artistic ways without being dictated to by conservative white taste. Although some of these original Chicana/o presses now have significant publishing sway, smaller grassroots publishers have continued to emerge in the thirty years since the Chicano Movement. In *Life in Search of Readers: Reading in*

Chicana/o Literature (2003), Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez identifies twenty-six such presses (including their city and town of origin) and stresses that even this list is not fully inclusive (194).

Tía Chucha Press was established by Rodríguez in Chicago in 1989, named in honor of his “alternative” and artistic aunt. (In a poem of the same title, he observes “They said she was crazy . . . / To me, she was the wisp of the wind’s freedom” [“Tía” 9, 15].) The Press’s first release was the founder’s *Poems Across the Pavement*, and its mission statement, as stated on its website, flags a focus “on socially engaged poetry work and literature that matters.” In 1991, Tía Chucha Press became the publishing branch of a nonprofit literary arts center in Chicago, the Guild Complex (a cooperative of artists and activists including Rodríguez), and soon Northwestern University Press became the distributor of their books. The press was the perfect opportunity for Rodríguez—who has remained founding editor—to condense his love of verse with his burning social vision. As he elucidates in *Dream of a Word: The Tía Chucha Press Poetry Anthology* (2005), “Tía Chucha Press came out of a movement and a cause—to democratize poetry and help make poetry central to US culture (instead of war, social division, material gain, polarized politics)” (Lansana and Lightfoot 11).

Three factors are noteworthy here, making Tía Chucha a particularly significant case in the history of Chicana/o presses. First, in 2005 the press was transferred to Sylmar, California, to become the publishing arm of the so-called Tía Chucha’s Centro Cultural and Bookstore. This nonprofit center, including a coffee bar and performance space, was established by Rodríguez (along with his wife and brother-in-law) in 2001 and “support[s] and promote[s] the continued growth, development, and holistic learning of our community through the many powerful means of the arts” (“Mission”). In the interview that follows, Rodríguez proudly—and rightly—asserts that the center is the only such establishment in the northeast San Fernando Valley. When interviewed for Garth Cartwright’s book *More Miles Than Money: Journeys Through American Music* (2010), Rodríguez explained the simple rationale behind his Tía Chucha project: “We live in the media capital of the world[,] but if you live in East L.A. you’re going to find it difficult to buy a book or see a movie” (qtd. in Cartwright 84). The bookstore prides itself on its carefully selected collection of Chicana/o (including bilingual), LGBTQ, and other leftist socially/politically charged literature.⁷

The therapeutic power of arts and culture was translated into the written word by Rodríguez in his much acclaimed follow-up memoir, *It Calls You Back: An Odyssey Through Love, Addiction, Revolutions, and Healing* (2011). In part exhausted by persistent questioning from readers of *Always Running* about what happened post-1993, Rodríguez responded with a book as gripping and enticing as its earlier counterpart but for vastly different reasons. The second installment of his life story stresses the importance of possessing knowledge about

indigenous cultures in Mexico; Rodriguez replaces straightforward accounts of the Chicano Movement with an alternative history, and his political consciousness and self-education matures throughout the pages of *It Calls You Back*. Memoir aside, Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural and Bookstore serve as a literal embodiment of these values, making them attainable for many. As a comprehensive educational and artistic institution, Tía Chucha has won acclaim from local parents and community activists, including celebrities such as Bruce Springsteen.

Second, Tía Chucha is also notable for the fundamental role that Rodriguez's wife, Maria Trinidad ("Trini") Rodriguez, has played in launching and sustaining the press, the bookstore, and the performance space. Gender is a well-worn topic in both Chicana/o literature and its critical studies. Presenting the feminine form first and foremost (Chicana/o) is an obvious attempt to destabilize the patriarchal premise that has traditionally underpinned much Mexican and Mexican American culture. In 1996 Rodriguez contributed to a collection of critical essays titled *Muy Macho: Latino Men Confront their Manhood*, acknowledging the chauvinist nature of Mexican culture and candidly confessing that he "was capable of great destruction, including almost killing my first wife" ("On" 201). He declared, "A Latino men's movement to regather our energies, to recall and honor our ancestors, that can make peace and sobriety acts of courage, respect, and struggle, and that can reconnect us to our mother nature, and thus to the women we have long shunned and often hurt, is extremely vital for us today" (198-99). *It Calls You Back* conspicuously leaves behind the hardened masculine ethos of the street gang and replaces it with a new kind of manhood, exploring what it means to be a father, familial provider, and respecter of women.

The crucial presence of Trini in Rodriguez's creative output—which he often highlights in interviews (including this one)—works as a figurative reminder of the appearance of compelling women's voices in Chicana literature and Chicana/o culture more generally over the past two decades. Elizabeth Jacobs notes that despite a "long-term invisibility," Chicanas actively participated in the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and Chicana political activism can in fact be traced back to the late nineteenth century (26). Although Chicanas struggled during the Chicano Movement "against both Anglo racism from without and patriarchy from within," the era prompted a vast body of Chicana literary work (including Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Denise Chávez), as well as a new field of feminist literary theory and criticism (including Cherrie Moraga, Rosaura Sánchez, and Diana Rebolledo) (Tatum 20). Both areas have since grown exponentially and incorporated various new vantage points to probe the double racist and sexist bind. Although by no means proffering to speak for the Chicana experience, Rodriguez has carefully incorporated the female perspective in his representations of barrio life. For example, *The Republic of East L.A.* includes the story "Las Chicas Chuecas" ["The Crooked Girls"] about a violent all-girl street gang, and a host of memorable Chicana characters also infiltrate the rest

of the collection. Although Trini has not sought the critical acclaim that has been awarded her husband, Rodriguez describes her as “my comrade, fellow writer and thinker” (“On” 201). He has been careful to explain that the founding of Tía Chucha’s Centro Cultural was a partnership between Trini and himself; he pays credit to the long hours his wife subsequently worked as manager of the center (*It* 314, 316). His collaboration with his spouse and his discussion of gender politics in *It Calls You Back* have led to a range of different understandings that are not always illustrated in his other written works.

Finally, the third and most important feature of Tía Chucha that warrants emphasis is the unadorned fact that diversity is at the very core of the press. Other grassroots Chicana/o publishing houses by their very nature speak to multiculturalism, often releasing not only Mexican American but also other Spanish-speaking literatures. However, Tía Chucha takes this further and in so doing reflects Rodriguez’s own social perspectives. Since the onset of his career (both literary and activist), Rodriguez has spoken not only for Chicana/o communities but also all working-class races and ethnicities. Despite the detailing in *Always Running* of the Mexican migratory experience into the United States, the Mexican barrio in East LA, and the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the preface and epilogue analyze the 1992 Rodney King riots. Rodriguez explains that, contrary to popular media reports of the uprising, the protestors were not solely African Americans but also besieged blue-collar workers of all races. He avers that his memoir is “a book of the post-industrial world” rather than exclusively the Chicano experience (Personal). *Always Running* and Rodriguez’s poetry and fictional prose methodically confront structural inequalities (including underfunded school systems, residential disparities, and racial discrimination in the criminal justice system) for not only Mexican Americans but also African Americans, poor whites, and other Latina/os. As Rodriguez explains to Cartwright, “I realized poverty was a big part of what united us. . . . In the US people talk about race all the time but won’t talk about class” (qtd. in Cartwright 82). Since its beginning, Tía Chucha Press has purposely targeted literary talent of varying racial and ethnic heritage.

This is, in part, why I find Rodriguez and his body of work so fascinating; despite an overt sense of pride for his Mexican heritage, his voice of political dissent is carefully constructed with collective racial sensibilities that are omnipresent in his work. In one of his more famous poems “Running to America” (1989) (which has regularly been used as a teaching tool in high school classrooms), Rodriguez speaks explicitly of the Mexican migrant experience: “Still they come, wandering bravely / through the thickness of this strange land’s maddening ambivalence” (36-37). Yet his poem “Exiled in the Country of Reason” is dedicated to Nelson Peery, an African American activist: “You are my most enduring and endearing teacher” (30). Meanwhile, the poem “Bethlehem No More” reflects

Rodriguez's own experiences of working in the steel mills of LA in the 1970s. He observes that

Bethlehem Steel's shift-turn whistles
do not blast out in Maywood anymore
.....
Mill families once proud and comfortable,
now congregate for unemployment checks or food. (1-2, 6-7)

Indeed, perhaps one of the most neglected aspects of Rodriguez's body of work is his historical commitment to a Marxist philosophy. *Always Running* details his participation as a teenager in a group called "The Collective," which did not strive "to enter the American capitalist system" (156-57) like others in the Chicano Movement but "prepared for a fundamental reorganization of society" (184-85) along class lines.

The epilogue to the memoir reinforces such beliefs as Rodriguez, an older, wiser adult reflecting on the LA riots of 1992, contends the riots were "the first social response to an economic revolution which began years before . . . government officials at local, state and federal levels proved they would not allow any serious challenge to the economic and political underpinnings of poverty in this country" (248). As demonstrated throughout *It Calls You Back*, his political vision has seemingly evolved from a strict Marxist (among other socialist) standpoints to a neo-indigenous Xicanindio subjectivity. Yet Marxist undertones remain prevalent throughout his works. In the following interview, Rodriguez in part confirms this Marxist base of his literary life.

Nearly twenty years ago, Tim Libretti asked, "Is there a Working Class in US Literature?" His essay in the journal *Radical Teacher* in 1995 made use of *Always Running*, among other works of Chicana/o literature, to reconstruct a proletarian literary tradition that recognizes cultural diversity rather than situating such works within a narrowly defined ethnic/racial category overshadowing their working-class constituents. Yet it could be argued that Libretti's question has not been satisfactorily answered. Raymund Paredes, writing at a similar time, stated the primary challenge facing Chicana/o writers was "how to maintain their cultural distinctiveness while reaching out to other communities both to forge coalitions capable of addressing common problems and to reinvigorate their own traditions." Rodriguez has been implicitly addressing both these issues since *Poems Across the Pavement* and continues to do so.

Having just passed his sixtieth birthday, Rodriguez's political and poetic commitments (and of course his political poetry) still show no bounds. In fact, his unwavering political drive recently manifested itself in his intention to run for California Governor endorsed by the Green Party in 2014 (under California's new "top-two system" for the gubernatorial race, Rodriguez ranked eighth and so did not progress to the actual election). As I write, Rodriguez has been

speaking as the co-founder of the Network for Revolutionary Change in the wake of the George Zimmerman⁸ verdict. He evokes his own experiences and tales of both black and brown youth enduring a racist criminal justice system and implores that no more young people, “of any color,” should face the dangerous racial profiling suffered by Trayvon Martin (“Justice”). A few years ago, Rodriguez coolly observed: “We need poetry more than ever. As long as poetry continues to be pushed to the fringes of our culture, and perhaps forgotten, we remain in deep spiritual peril” (Lansana and Lightfoot 11). I would add that we also need Rodriguez more than ever as someone who can channel urgent social commentary into a refreshing poetic voice.

The following interview was conducted in September 2012. I posed questions loosely categorized into four areas: poetry, prose, the publishing industry, and pedagogy.

Josephine Metcalf: I am interested in the practicalities of writing poetry, so I would like to begin by asking how you write. How do your first lines and ideas come? Do you carry a notebook? Do you write with a sequence in mind?

Luis J. Rodriguez: I carry a journal with me, but my handwriting is atrocious. I can only jot down ideas, a line or two, and titles. Later, I’ll get on the computer and expand on these. More than likely, I just get to the computer and decide I’d like to do a poem. Again, I start with an incident, idea, image, or even a title—anything that gets images and words moving. A kick-start, really. Sequences, direction, voice, and such come as I write. I keep writing and rewriting a poem until I feel it can’t be worked anymore. With poetry, I’m concerned with voice, description, narrative line, and, most of all, language. I write free verse, but I also seek the music within the poems, using meter, internal rhyme, alliteration, and assonance as needed to guide the process. But I don’t start with form. The form is shaped as I go along. In this way the poems shape themselves. I read all my poems out loud to see what kind of natural rhythms can be drawn out. Reading aloud helps me take a poem to a measure of completion. If it flows out well from my voice, it’s done.

JM: Do you see yourself writing poetry in a tradition, and if so, of whom and for whom?

LJR: The closest to tradition that I draw from is the 1950s Beat poets and the 1960s African American / Puerto Rican / Chicana/o poets. I’m also close to the Latin American poets such as Pablo Neruda, Roque Dalton, Federico García Lorca, Octavio Paz, and Gabriela Mistral. Although I love the work of Whitman, Dickinson, Poe, Eliot, and other “dead” US masters, I tend toward modern, contemporary poets, such as Billy Collins, Li-Young Lee, Sherman Alexie, Joy Harjo, and Jack Gilbert, and the well-known “slam” poets (who often

combine hip-hop sensitivities with poetry) like Patricia Smith, Paul Beatty, Willie Perdomo, and Mike Sonksen (Mike the Poet).

JM: Who are your primary poetic influences, Mexican American and beyond? I wonder if you look toward other Spanish poets—you mentioned Neruda, and Antonio Machado is another “big” name that springs to mind. Perhaps the political poet Miguel Hernández is also an influence.

LJR: Yes, of course, Neruda and the Spanish (from Spain) poets like Machado, [Miguel] de Unamuno, and Hernández; the Mexican poets like [José Emilio] Pacheco, Paz, and Efraín Huerta; and the work of Central American poets such as Dalton and Otto Trujillo.

JM: Speaking of Miguel Hernández, I would like to bring up the role of poetry and politics. There is, of course, a tradition of Mexican American protest poetry. Do you ever see your own poetry as explicitly political, and, if so, what do you think is the link between poetry and politics?

LJR: I came to poetry through protest. My first verses were written in jail and juvenile hall—to voice the barrio conditions, the police abuse, and the racial and class injustices. I was fifteen and sixteen years old when I began to find story, vignettes, and lines—although I had no idea what a poem was. I was in the “C” or “D” classes (although I was intelligent and loved books) where most Mexican students were relegated. (“A” and “B” classes were for better-off whites and Asians in the San Gabriel Valley schools I attended.) We simply didn’t get exposed to writing and poetry like in other classes. I found books I liked, however, in libraries even when I was homeless or among my fellow gang members. I also once walked into the only bookstore in the East LA area, called Monterey Books, run by an old Jewish Communist named Sy Feinberg. He worked with Chicana/o activists at East LA College to get Chicana/o books that were just then being published (Ricardo Sánchez, Rudolfo Anaya, or Tomás Rivera); books by African American or Puerto Rican authors like Malcolm X, George Jackson, James Baldwin, Claude Brown, and Piri Thomas; and poetry by Don L. Lee, who later became Haki Madhubuti. Sy also introduced me to books by Frantz Fanon, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Paulo Freire (Monterey Books no longer exists). I later found activist/protest writings at the old Midnight Special Bookstore in Venice [California] (again this no longer exists) and Guild Books in Chicago (another casualty of the big chain stores destroying independent bookstores in the 1990s). I didn’t get these books in school, so I learned to intertwine my badly written sketches and short verses with protest and revolutionary politics at a young age.

Most Chicano (Mexican American) writers of the time were protest poets in the vein of the 1960s and 1970s African American, Puerto Rican, Native American, and white protest poets. They included José Montoya, Raúl Salinas, and Lalo

Delgado with their code switching (English, Spanish, and “calo,” or street slang) and Chicano cultural twists. Later, in the 1980s, the Chicana writers emerged in a strong manner—Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and more. They all had the same need—to tell our story, even to shout it out, against a publishing world that seemed walled off to our lives and our voices.

JM: I would like to talk about language and translation. Do you ever write poetry solely in Spanish? Can you offer your views on translation as an art form and the use of Spanish vernacular or Mexican idioms in your poetry in English?

LJR: Although Spanish was my first language when I first entered school at age six in Watts, it was punished or devalued. I got yelled at and even swatted for speaking Spanish, but I had a hard time with English. I speak Spanish today because my mother and father always spoke it at home. My mother, even after living in the US for more than fifty years, never spoke English, but I’ve never been formally trained in Spanish (except what I do for myself). English became the language I wrote in, again with bad grammar and spelling, and later trained in. The compelling need to write overpowered the weaknesses and mistakes. I knew I had to dominate English if I was going to make a mark in US letters. I was, like most gang and troubled youth, intelligent and able to grasp things quickly.

In jail and juvenile hall, I began to write down my first words (I also drew a lot). Once an assistant for a former principal typed up my badly typed verses and vignettes. Her name was Isabel Thurber. This I showed to a counselor at my high school, who in turn submitted my work to a Chicana/o literary award contest in Berkeley, California. At age eighteen, I won honorable mention and 250 dollars—big bucks in those days (1973). I ended up on my first plane ride and going to my first poetry reading with José Montoya, David Henderson, and Pedro Pietri, three of the leading performance poets of the time—Chicano, African American, and Puerto Rican. This effectively changed my life. I was now infused with the power of words, of poetry, and I began to write regularly, largely learning as I wrote and reading as much as possible. At around age twenty-five, I attended night classes at East Los Angeles College (for creative writing, journalism, and speech classes) and soon got accepted into a summer program for minority journalists at the University of California, Berkeley. They also gave me my first daily newspaper job. I’ve never looked back since. I’ve been writing for a living in some form or another since that time (more than thirty years now).

I do write in Spanish and translate much of my own work although I have my wife Erin check these since she is a formally trained Spanish language speaker and writer (she’s also great with English grammar and spelling). The major books that got translated into Spanish—such as *Always Running*, *The Republic of East L.A.*, and *Music of the Mill*—were translated by trained Spanish-language professionals, but I read the draft translations word for word to make sure the nuances

and literary meanings were still intact. Most of my books do include Spanish or Chicana/o words and terms, street slang included, and any “Spanglish” hybrid words that are used widely in the barrio. I’ve learned to include Nahuatl (the “Aztec” language, spoken by a million people or more in Mexico) words as well, having been learning this on my own for a few years.

JM: I know you perform your poetry (for example, the wonderful “My Name’s Not Rodriguez”). What are your views on performative style? For example, do you think spoken word performance is a “crucial” tradition in Mexican American culture?

LJR: I began the performance aspect of my writing in East Los Angeles in the late 1970s and early 1980s through the LA Latino Writers Association (LALWA), which sponsored readings, barrio/prison workshops, and a literary and art magazine. In time I became director of LALWA and editor of the magazine (called *ChismeArte*, or gossip art). We read aloud in bars, cafés, libraries, and at our own spaces. I once had an office at the famous Self-Help Graphics Studios in East LA. Spoken word has been big for Chicana/o poets since the 1960s. This interest of mine followed the powerful reading I attended in Berkeley at age eighteen—I seemed to be drawn to spoken word performances.

Then I moved to Chicago in 1985. In a couple of years, I was attending the birth of poetry slams and other poetic expressions. By 1988, I was reading my early poems in bars, cafés, libraries, clubs, and theaters. I became quite active and central to the burgeoning Chicago poetry scene that in time would influence the whole country and places in Europe. I began Tía Chucha Press in Chicago in 1989 to capture much of the best slam poets of the time (who were good on the stage as well as the page) of all ethnicities, such as Patricia Smith, Lisa Busciani, Tony Fitzpatrick, Michael Warr, and David Hernandez. I’ve been known in the United States as one of the leading Chicano performance poets. Now I make a living by my talks, workshops, and readings throughout the country in universities, colleges, public and private schools, conferences, prisons, juvenile lockups, homeless shelters, migrant camps, Native American reservations, and many other venues.

JM: I would like to ask about the link between poetry and memoir. Why choose traditional memoir form over autobiographical poetry? One difference (in my opinion) is related to tenacity—prose writing can be a hard slog while poetry can be a bit more spontaneous, and poems can really pack a punch in a different way from prose. What are your thoughts?

LJR: I was influenced early on by the autobiographical writings of Malcolm X, Piri Thomas, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, and Claude Brown. Somehow in the back of my mind I wanted to be the Chicano urban writer of the barrio street experiences. As you’ve heard me say many times, there was no book about the

Chicano gang life from an actual participant (although there were many poems from ex-gangsters and prisoners like Ricardo Sánchez and Raul Salinas). While I loved to write poetry—the voice, narrative line, but also language that is used for the music and sense of a poem—I had this gnawing need to do a prose book about what I went through as a teen. I was most fortunate as a barrio gang member and drug user to be in the fire and not get totally burned. I was shot at more than a half a dozen times, including by machine gun fire and at point blank range, although never hit; I overdosed on heroin and other drugs three times but came back; I was in and out of jails, including facing charges of murder and attempted murder, and twice in juvenile hall but never convicted until age eighteen, and then for a far lesser charge of “drunk and disorderly,” although I faced a hard time prison conviction for fighting with police officers.

For all that I went through, it ended on a whimper. I was saved many times from the brink of gang/drug hell—including with a political mentor who helped me find purpose and meaning in the protest movements of the time. I felt one of my obligations was to tell the story of those who did not survive (I lost twenty-five friends by the time I was eighteen) or who ended up lifelong addicts or prisoners. Memoir also meant I’d have a larger audience, if I could get the right publisher and right publicity. This I finally achieved with the publication of *Always Running* in 1993—a year after the 1992 LA rebellion that drew large national and international interest in LA gang life for African Americans (Crips and Bloods) and Chicana/os / Central Americans (Sureños gangs, 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha-13, among them).

JM: Your latest memoir, *It Calls You Back: An Odyssey Through Love, Addiction, Revolutions and Healing*, was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2011 (autobiography category). As far as I am aware, you were the only Chicano author to feature on the shortlist for any of the categories (and not even just this year but for the past couple of years). Does this come as a surprise?

LJR: If I’m not mistaken, only Juan Felipe Herrera, the Chicano poet, was a winner of a National Book Critics Circle (NBCC) Award for poetry (and he may have been the first Chicano ever to be a finalist) about two years before I was a finalist. The NBCC Award is one of the big three of literary prizes in the US, including the National Book Award and the Pulitzer. It’s an honor to have gotten this far although it’s taken fifteen books and almost twenty-five years since my first book. I understand from the two Chicana/os on the voting committee (they were the only two Chicana/os, and [there were] only four Latina/os among the voting group) that it was a battle to try to get my book to win, to no avail. In fact, none of the four people of color who were among the thirty finalists in various categories won an award this year. Yet, I must say, it was still great to be considered. My publisher—Touchstone Books / Simon & Schuster—brought me to the finalist reading as well as the awards ceremony in New York City. The first day, I read

a short three-minute section of my new memoir to critics, publishers, writers, and agents in the center of the publishing world. Many had never heard of me. So for me this was crucial and quite a privilege. I was able to talk to another major publisher for possible future books, and I signed an e-book contract for four of my previous books with the leading integrated media publisher during my time there, so all is well as far as I'm concerned.

JM: Other than the obvious reasons for authors wishing to win awards to raise their profile, do you think Mexican American literature “needs” awards?

LJR: As a writer, I don't need awards. I'll write as I have all my life without them, nor do I write under the shadow of possibly winning awards. But I've been fortunate in this regard. I've won a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers Award, a Lannan Fellowship, a Carl Sandburg Book Award, a *New York Times* Notable Book, the Best of the West from the *Los Angeles Times*, a *Chicago Sun-Times* Book Award, a Sundance Arts Writing Fellowship, a Parent's Choice Award, a Paterson Poetry Prize, a PEN Josephine Miles Literary Award, and others over these past thirty years.

But as a Chicano these awards are important. They are a means to break our isolation, our marginal status in publishing, and to be recognized for our voices and stories in the vast world of literature in the United States [where] tens of thousands of books [are] published every year. The competition for acceptance and acknowledgment is harsh, and this is not even counting trying to make a living as a writer (very few can do so). So, in this regard, I consider these awards and recognition important. We need Chicana/os to be fully embraced by publishing, movies, television, radio, the Internet, and other media—we are part of this culture, even in our own way, and quite large in numbers and influence. However, we have yet to get the proper acknowledgment except in a few cases (Sandra Cisneros, Victor Villaseñor, Dagoberto Gilb, Luis Alberto Urrea, or Ruben Martinez, to name a few).

JM: I am intrigued by the dynamics between your two memoirs. I know you wanted to make your second memoir different than the first, a book which stands on its own merit. Did you want to do this in terms of content as well as style?

LJR: Yes, the new memoir covered forty years of life—a lot more ground, including stages of my adult life. *Always Running* was essentially about me as a kid and teenager, so the writing in *It Calls You Back* had to be more mature, more nuanced, and able to cover this ground with the proper tensions. I summarized aspects, then I extended scenes of key incidents in my life, then I summarized some more. Both the summary and the extended scenes had to use clear, compelling language to keep the reader in the story. *Always Running* was more like a series of vignettes, incidents, and thoughts growing up—quite a different style to fit the different content.

JM: Indeed, I believe that part of the mesmerizing quality of *Always Running* for young adult readers is the violent gangbanging episodes, which were then replaced with conversion and movement away from the gang. For me, part of the fascination of *It Calls You Back* is your journeys to Mexico and details of indigenous traditions. But is this, for want of a better word, as “sexy” for young people as the gangs of *Always Running* (or the details in *It Calls You Back* of Ramiro’s involvement with gangs)? Am I underestimating young people’s potential interest in cultural heritage and history?

LJR: I’m not sure, but my sense is that young people won’t gravitate to *It Calls You Back* the way they did to *Always Running*. The new memoir should be for older readers, perhaps those who loved *Always Running* when they were younger and who now have families, work, careers, and a need for healing. I have close to twenty years of readers for *Always Running*, which I hope to bank on as the core group interested in the new memoir. You never know—many young people might “get” the new book. But again, the themes and struggles in *It Calls You Back* are more about young fathers, young writers, adventurers, lovers, and what politics, healing, and family life should be about.

JM: Is there a sense of community behind the Mexican American writing scene? Are you in regular conversations with other Chicana/o authors?

LJR: I must say, for the competitive nature of the writing business in the United States, Chicana/o writers have been most gracious and supportive. From the beginning, writers such as Jimmy Santiago Baca, Sandra Cisneros, and Victor Villaseñor have stepped up to help me, connect me, and provide guidance. I think most Chicana/o writers are like this—I’m friends with most of them (Denise Chávez, Dagoberto Gilb, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Michelle Serros, of the most well-known). Less well-known writers support what I do as I try to support them. Problems only arose once with Alisa Valdes Rodriguez, who became the highest paid “Latina/o” writer (although she’s Irish and Cuban) and who pioneered the “Latina Chic Lit” genre. She is not representative of Chicana/o [literature] although she began to tell publishers and booksellers what to do about Chicana/o writing. I had to confront her publicly at a Book Expo panel. I haven’t talked to her since then. But mostly Chicana/o writers get along even though I’m sure there are some issues between them. I try not to get into any of this when I find out about them. Too much energy is wasted in mostly petty matters. Again, for the most part, Chicana/o writers have been most generous.

JM: I know you have written some interesting critical materials about Chicano machismo. Do you think Chicana voices are still gaining sufficient ground, perhaps in prose more so than poetry? Of course Gloria Anzaldúa (and later Cisneros) paved the way for feminist Chicana voices, but are authors still capitalizing on that?

LJR: Chicana voices were so crucial to the development of our literature, voices, and stories. In the 1980s, this was led by Cisneros and Ana Castillo (both from Chicago) and others like Denise Chávez (non-Chicanas were also in the mix like Julia Alvarez). Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga were also key to the development of Chicana/o literature (both from California) with their academic and literary contributions. There are whole classrooms studying their work and their contributions to the feminist side of social justice in this country. This phenomenon was capitalized by agents, publishers, and the media who helped create “Las Girlfriends” mystique and later (although not necessarily in a good direction) the aforementioned “Latina Chic Lit.” I’m not sure this is still true.

JM: Quinto Sol, Arte Público, and the Bilingual Press remain dedicated to Chicana/o and Hispanic/Latina/o literature. Why did you want to take Tía Chucha Press in a different direction and to what ends and effects? I am thinking of the back cover of the *Dream of a World* poetry collection, released by Tía Chucha, which emphasizes the Press’s dedication to diversity.

LJR: Tía Chucha Press grew out of the diverse and exciting Chicago poetry scene. This scene was mostly white but had many writers of color at the heart of it, such as Puerto Rican David Hernandez; Chicano Carlos Cumpian; African Americans Patricia Smith, Michael Warr, and Elizabeth Alexander; and Asian Americans Nick Carbo, Kyoko Mori, and Dwight Okita. I published all of them, including the best of the white writers—Tony Fitzpatrick, Lisa Buscani, Jean Howard, and Cin Salach, to name a few. This is why Tía Chucha Press is so diverse. But I also made sure to include many Chicana/o voices, such as Andrés Rodríguez, Ricardo Sánchez, Alfred Arteaga, Linda Rodríguez, and José Antonio Rodríguez (none of the “Rodríguezes” are related to me). I’m glad this quality of our diversity is our calling card, what we’re known for. In fact, articles have appeared in at least one major black literature review about the invaluable role Tía Chucha Press has played in publishing strong African American poets. This has spread our audience and connections. This is more what America is truly about. I’m not against any of the Chicana/o oriented presses—you need them—but Tía Chucha’s birth and growth has been with cross-cultural literary expression.

JM: I am fascinated with how Tía Chucha Press runs today. Are you still very much involved, for example, with selecting manuscripts?

LJR: I continue to be the sole editor and publisher. Even though Tía Chucha Press is now the publishing wing of Tía Chucha’s Centro Cultural and Bookstore, I get the manuscripts (for a time it was around two hundred a year although it’s fallen down significantly in recent years) and select the poets/books we plan to publish. When I was in Chicago doing this, I had a small editorial team that helped me. This summer we did hire an intern to help with Tía Chucha Press. She has been a tremendous asset. I also rely heavily on the talents of Jane Brunette, who has been

our book designer since the beginning (for close to twenty-five years). She's Menominee (Native), German, and French descent and an extraordinary book designer. She's such a great gift to what we do. We also have a national distributor in Northwestern University Press (we could not survive without them and their resources and national ties to bookstore, libraries, and other institutions).

JM: May I ask about your own personal publishing experiences? I know Curbstone was very good to you during your early days of poetry. They also published *Always Running* as a hardback, and the paperback would later be snapped up by Touchstone. How do you negotiate larger (corporate) and smaller (cultural) presses such as these, particularly as a Chicano author?

LJR: I have been published by a spectrum of publishing possibilities. First I self-published through Tía Chucha Press (now a legitimate small press); then with a small press, Curbstone, which did three poetry books (*The Concrete River*, *Trochemoche* [2012], and *My Nature is Hunger* [2005]), a children's book (*America is Her Name* [1998]), then the hard cover of *Always Running*. I also had Seven Stories Press do a major book of mine, *Hearts and Hands* (2001). Children's Book Press (now this book is with Lee & Low Books) did my most well-known children's book, *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way* (2004). The big publishers include Touchstone Books / Simon & Schuster (with the paperback of *Always Running*, then the original hardcover and paperback of *It Calls You Back*) and Rayo Books / HarperCollins (the short story collection *The Republic of East L.A.* and the novel *Music of the Mill*). Small limited edition art books and broadsides—sold to collectors and archives—were made of poems such as “Seven,” “Dos Mujeres / Two Women,” and “Making Medicine” by C&C Press of Pajaro, California. I've also had audio books by Dreamscape (*It Calls You Back* and *Always Running*), and I now have e-books through Open Road Integrated Media (*Always Running*, *The Concrete River*, *Trochemoche*, and *My Nature is Hunger*). I hope to try an original e-book with Open Road in the future.

I've also co-edited four books, one with the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless and three with Tía Chucha Press. The most recent is *Rushing Waters, Rising Dreams: How the Arts are Transforming a Community* (2012) with Denise Sandoval. This book has essays, interviews, poems, photographs, and colorful artwork about . . . [the role of] the arts—including the key role that Tía Chucha's Centro and our press has played—in reviving the economy and community in the northeast San Fernando Valley section of Los Angeles, a largely Mexican and Central American working-class area. I co-produced a forty minute documentary of the same name, written and directed by John Cantu.

I have a literary agent in New York City, which is how I deal with all publishers, magazines, newspapers, and Internet outlets that want my work. She makes sure my rights are secured and that I can get paid (which is becoming less and less as the economy slides down). She became my agent after *Always Running* came out,

which was done without an agent, even when Touchstone Books / Simon & Schuster negotiated the paperback rights to that book. Most importantly, I have a lecture agent in California, allowing me to travel around the country and other parts of the world addressing all manner of audiences, from tattooed gang youth in Central American prisons to Japanese “lowriders” in Tokyo to academicians and students at European universities.

JM: In terms of the co-edited collection *Honor Comes Hard: Writings from the California Prison System’s Honor Yard* (2009), you clearly believe in the pedagogical/redemptive power of writing as demonstrated by this collection of poetry written inside prison. Could you tell me a little more about this notion of rehabilitation through writing while incarcerated?

LJR: Writing is healing, a process of self-discovery, self-analysis, and, for many of us, highly redemptive—like any art, like any spiritual practice. People are in different kinds of prisons and writing can be a key to “get out,” to be liberated in spirit if not in body, to find a path toward one’s passions, purpose, and destiny. This is as true for actual prisons as for figurative ones. In my thirty years of working in prisons, I’ve found highly intelligent, creative, and decent people. Many with whom I’ve worked in prisons did major crimes, including murder. Yet I’ve never had a bad workshop, talk, or reading in a prison. Prisoners can tap into deep self/soul depths even surrounded by razor wire, concrete walls, and, in many cases, with violence and possible death at any corner. Turning inward to stay alive, to stay human, they write. My way of giving back for having escaped major prison terms, long-term drug addictions, or getting shot or killed, is to facilitate writing workshops in prisons and juvenile lockups throughout the United States but also in Latin America and parts of Europe.

JM: In the collection *Dream of a Word*, there are study questions for all the poems. These questions are presented as being suitable for middle-school, high-school, and college-aged learners. What was the reason for this pedagogical undertone to the collection? Was it your decision? Do you always have studying in mind?

LJR: The study questions were suggested and added by the editors. I thought it was a good idea, precisely to attract the interest of teachers in high school or college classes of literature. Both editors—Ali Lansana and Toni Asante Lightfoot—teach as well as write. I may not do this with other books or anthologies, but it seemed to work perfectly for *Dream of a Word*.

JM: I would like to ask about the international market for Mexican American fiction. For example, I know it is not taught as widely at universities in the UK as African American literature. Some may argue this is because the Chicana/o canon has a shorter historical trajectory (some critics even contend Chicana/o literature did not really establish itself as a body of work until 1900). But it still surprises me

that it has not garnered the same amount of university attention worldwide. Why do you think this may be? Do you think it is now on equal footing with African American literature at US universities?

LJR: The United States is a highly competitive place, and even literature is affected. Many voices, peoples, and stories are competing for space in the marketplace. African Americans have a crucial historical and cultural place in the United States and have been part of US literature for generations. Their stories, books, and novels are necessary for everyone. Likewise, Chicana/os, Mexicana/os, and other Latina/os have a strong and vital place in the history, culture, and direction of this country. We need to be seen and heard more. We are largely absent in the mass media, television, radio, books, and film despite the growth of our numbers, now surpassing African Americans (if you include all Latina/os, including black, native, white, Asian, and mixed-race Latina/os). I don't see this as competing.

There is, however, a longtime narrowing of the official narrative of this country—largely white and black (mostly white). Native peoples are on the side, and Latina/os are confusing, weird, hard to categorize, and easy to forget. In Arizona, laws have been passed to outlaw Chicana/o / Raza studies and many books from the educational curriculum—a narrowing down of our story. We fought in the 1960s and beyond to be expansive, to include everyone's story and voice, including women's literature, queer literature, and more. We are still in that fight, affected no doubt by the largely working-class (and less reading inclined) nature of many migrants from Mexico and other countries. In LA, for example, in most poor, black, brown, and working-class neighborhoods—I mean for miles and miles—there are no bookstores. In the northeast San Fernando Valley, with 500,000 people and seventy percent consisting of Latina/os, Tía Chucha is the only trade bookstore. This situation is worse in South Central and East LA. I don't think this is an accident—those same areas abound with liquor stores. I'm for more books, more publishing, more book outlets, and even with technological advances like e-books. Tía Chucha Press, albeit at a low level, is doing its part.

JM: In closing, tell us about an upcoming project that excites you and how we can find out more about it.

LJR: My wife Trini and I continue to run Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural and Bookstore (with workshops in all the arts, a performance space, bookstore, an art gallery, and an outdoor literacy and arts festival) as well as Tía Chucha Press. However, we are working on a succession plan to engender new leaders among our staff, our volunteers, and our engaged community. I'm excited about the continuing community work with the arts, not just as a nice thing to do but to reimagine and remake all our relationships and survival systems. A new world

needs to be regenerated. Also, in 2012 I was the vice presidential candidate along with Rocky Anderson for president of the newly formed Justice Party. And our youngest sons—Ruben and Luis—will be University of California students in Los Angeles and Riverside, respectively. Trini and I will be left with our dog “Chula,” a Chihuahua/Terrier mix that has lit up our lives since we got her a year ago. My daughter Andrea is doing well as director of a preschool cooperative. My son Ramiro has been out of prison for two years and is now drug free, gang free, and crime free—a leader in urban peace and gang prevention/intervention work. I also will continue my work with gangs, in prisons, and with the healing practices of indigenous cultures in the United States, Mexico, and Central and South America. In 2012, I was part of a delegation to El Salvador to access and advise a gang peace truce there between the Mara Salvatrucha-13 and 18th Street gangs, which I’ve studied and worked with for around twenty years. My work has taken me to the most violent cities in the world like Ciudad Juárez, Mexico (where I lived when I was born); Guatemala City; Buenos Aires; Los Angeles; and Chicago. But from the heart of violence is where true peace, healing, and transformation are imminent.

JM: One final question: do you have any literary ambitions that have not yet been achieved?

LJR: I have goals of doing a short story collection, this time based in Chicago; another poetry book; and a book of essays based on my writings from my blog, my magazine column in *The Progressive* (“Writing to America”), and places like the *Huffington Post*. Perhaps a young adult novel. I plan to keep writing and producing books as long as anyone will have me. I am also working on a possible film of *Always Running* with friends of mine and a production company I started called Barking Rooster Entertainment, and I’m now working with the “Three Louies,” an unrehearsed conversation with three leading Chicanos in journalism, literature, and music—Luis R. Torres of radio and journalism fame in Los Angeles, Louie Perez of the Grammy Award-winning rock band Los Lobos, and yours truly. We’ve performed at East LA College; the Pasadena Crawford Family Center in Pasadena, California; Casa Zacatecas in Riverside, California; and the Aspen Literary Festival in Aspen, Colorado. I have high aims, not just for me but for the Chicana/o people, for other Latina/os, for the working class, and for anyone who’s ever been pushed aside, written off, or neglected.

Notes

1. Of course, I appreciate that the term *classic Chicano author* does not carry significant resonance; there is little consensus on what the quintessential Chicano

- author may be. Instead I hope the reader recognizes that I am merely referencing a vernacular author whose work is infused with specific cultural experiences.
2. I am drawing loose discursive points of comparison here and am not rigidly categorizing Rodriguez as part of a militant poetry tradition or the protest poetry tradition of the 1960s and 1970s. To categorize Rodriguez as a militant poet would ignore his meditative tone or the existential quality of his work (which arguably lends itself to a more solitary reading experience). Similarly, the protest poetry read at rallies fifty years ago was meant to be heard live whereas many of Rodriguez's poems lend themselves to close, introspective readings because of the ways in which he has embedded metaphorical complexities in his work.
 3. Rodriguez's official website lists these awards.
 4. For example, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* (1993) can be found in historical studies such as Kevin Starr's *Coast of Dreams: A History of Contemporary California* (2005); David Wyatt's *Five Fires: Race, Catastrophe and the Shaping of California* (1999); and Victor Valle and Rodolfo Torres's *Latino Metropolis* (2000). References to *Always Running* can also be found in social science and criminology sources, including Martin Guevara Urbina's "Latinos/as in the Criminal and Juvenile Justice Systems" (2007) and Claudia Durst Johnson's *Youth Gangs in Literature* (2004). *Always Running* has been discussed in pedagogical articles, including Antonia Darder's "Latino Youth: Pedagogy, Praxis, And Policy" (2006); Susan Roberta Katz's "Teaching in Tensions: Latino Immigrant Youth, Their Teachers, and the Structures of Schooling" (1999); and J. Singer and R. Shagoury's "Stirring Up Justice: Adolescents Reading, Writing, and Changing the World," (2005). Lastly, for sample studies of *Always Running* in literary frames, see Vincent Perez's "Running and Resistance: Nihilism and Cultural Memory in Chicano Urban Narratives" (2000) and Amaia Ibarra Bigalondo's "Wolves, Sheep and *Vatos Locos*: Reflections of Gang Activity in Chicano Literature" (2003-04).
 5. For example, see Luis Rodriguez, "Voice and Empowerment: The Struggle for Poetic Expression" (1995), "On Macho" (1996), and "Nemachtilli: The Spirit of Learning" (2005). For literary studies of his work aside from *Always Running*, see the references to his children's book *America is her Name* (1998) in Christopher Robbins, "'Por Que Soy Tonto?' Exposing 'Invisible' Interactions in a(n) Multiracial (American) Classroom" (2001). *Music of the Mill* (2005) and *The Republic of East L.A.* (2002) are analyzed in Jens Martin Gurr's "The Multicultural Marketing of Urban Fiction: Temporality, Language, Genre, and Readership(s)" (2008). See also an analysis of Rodriguez's poetry in Andres Rodriguez's "Contemporary Chicano Poetry: The Work of Michael Sierra, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Luis J. Rodriguez" (1995) and Julian Murphet's *Literature and Race in Los Angeles* (2001).
 6. Nonetheless, I am surprised that B. V. Olguin makes no reference to Rodriguez's works while Raul Homero Villa mentions *Always Running* only briefly in a footnote to support his point about urban planning (248n6).

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7. My phrase “socially/politically charged literature” refers to liberal-centric publications. At this juncture in multi-ethnic literary publishing, there is a plethora of right-wing capitalist authors of color who also fit into this category albeit with diverse social and political viewpoints.
 8. George Michael Zimmerman was tried for the 2012 shooting of the young African American teenager Trayvon Martin; he was acquitted of second-degree murder and manslaughter during a high profile trial the following year.

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