Maja Neff

Approaches to a Hemispheric America in *The Rag Doll Plagues*.
An Interview with Chicano Author Alejandro Morales.

Maja Neff (MN): Alejandro, you have come to be known as a Chicano writer, a writer publishing bilingual books in Spanish and English, as someone discussing concepts of transnationalism and heterotopia. In an interview, you once mentioned that the initial thought to develop the plot of your novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* was a story on Chicanos being ‘deported’ to a hospital against their will. Remembering this event as a motivator, I wonder what made you create the borderless zone of LAMEX in the third part of the book – was there also an event or a situation inspiring you?

Alejandro Morales (AM): In the first part of the book taking place in Mexico City around 1788, you have Europe migrating to the New World. Once they established their economy, the Spanish were beginning to push North and South, migrating to different parts of the continent. In the second part of the book, set in Orange County, California, in 1979, you have the issues of Mexicanos coming across the border. So there is migration, racism, different cultural, ethnic, economic groups are all working and living together in that area. Looking at these developments, I then decided to go forward in time. What’s going to happen in the future? Will we have to deal with the same issues? Will there still be a border? That is how I started writing the third part. I tried to develop a vision of what the area between Los Angeles all the way to Mexico City is going to look like a hundred years from 1979. In that third part, the LAMEX part of 2079, you don’t have a border. There exists a triple alliance brought about not by economic nor political nor military reasons – the triple alliance between Canada, the United States, and Mexico is brought about because of ecological reasons. So those three countries all organize themselves to try to deal with this, to avoid great ecological disasters. But you cannot control what they have already done, the damage to the ocean, the dumping of thousands and
thousands of tons of garbage out in the Pacific Ocean. This is the idea the novel presents: Three different times, same scenario with some kind of a great plague threatening the people and all taking place in basically one area. The last part of the book is a vision of the future, one of those themes that I really like to work with. Even books that I am writing now definitely deal with the relationship of Mexico and the United States and how that relationship is getting stronger and stronger. The history of the United States in the future is tied to the future of Mexico. I don’t believe that these countries can survive without each other. The future of Mexico is going to be the future of the United States and the other way around. The Southwestern United States and Northern Mexico will drastically change and there will be a broad general change in both countries. To me, the border will slowly disappear.

**MN:** *The Rag Doll Plagues* has a particularly transnational approach with its characters experiencing constant transformation and adaptation due to the borders they keep crossing. Looking at the movement within the American continent and the apparent delusion of borders, do you consider the LAMEX corridor to be more than just fiction?

**AM:** Yes, I think so. Look at demographics and the last forecasts based on the census in the United States that predicts that California will be a majority minority state with Latinos. It’s going to happen in the cities, it’s going to happen throughout the United States. You now find Latinos, Mexicanos everywhere in the United States. People from the South are coming almost as a natural thing, they are going North. So I think that my vision of the future is not so far fetched, sort of based on these projections of demographics and what is happening in Mexico. The United States policy is trying to develop business in the border region with the *maquiladoras* and NAFTA allowing more and more trucks to cross from Mexico to the United States, allowing Mexicans here in the United States to use their Mexican identity cards for identification purposes, to open bank accounts in California. They are exploring the possibility of developing power plants in Baja California, which is close to the idea that I present in *The Rag Doll Plagues*, where they are eventually to develop atomic power plants and then send that energy North. Also, middle class Mexicans living in any Mexican city: they see the same shows, they like the same music. This global culture is impacting all of us, and in a sense Mexicans are thinking in a way *Norte Americanos* are thinking and the other way around, they all seem to want the same. There is a value system, they want good education, nice homes, nice cars: that’s one world in a sense. So, I believe that this sort of fictional view of that area in the future is not so far fetched. Although we have these real hardcore – how would I say … “nativists”, who want to shut the border, control American culture, control American language…

**MN:** ‘American’ meaning U.S. American?

**AM:** U.S. American, yes. Control U.S. culture, U.S. language, control our borders. To me those are impossible things to do! You cannot control language, language is a dynamic living thing. To me, in the United States we should know at least two or possibly more languages. If we are one of the greatest countries in the world, we should know different languages. As far as control culture, you cannot. Culture again is another dynamic living process that is constantly changing. Control the borders? I don’t think you can control borders either. Especially not between Mexico and the United States!
MN: Since you say United States and Mexico will grow together because the one cannot really do without the other, people have the same value system and so forth, don’t you think people in Mexico are afraid of being overwhelmed by U.S. culture?

AM: Yes, I guess that is kind of a natural knee-jerk reaction to change. But in the United States the same thing is happening. You have people here who are very much afraid of the waves of Latino invasion, the Latinization, the Mexicanization of the United States, the impact of these new immigrants in a sense. People are afraid. In Mexico, the same thing is happening. Mexico, I think, has always been resistant to this—in a sense—global culture. But there are the kids wanting Levis, the kids wanting Coke. I am talking about middle class Mexicanos who can afford these things. Obviously, there’s another Mexico, too. There’s an indigenous Mexico, there’s a México that is very poor. But even that indigenous Mexico still has a TV, still has a radio. You cannot escape it. So I think you are right, Mexicans resist, they resist the influence of the United States in a global culture to a certain extent, but they love to go see movies of the United States, listen to the music of the United States. Both countries have this kind of love-hate-relationship that is definitely there.

MN: The Rag Doll Plagues can even be considered a ‘hemispheric novel’ describing the creation, growth and possible future development of the Western hemisphere. Part one takes place in late 18th century, reflecting the relation between Europe and America with the final emancipation of the later. Part two deals with the conflictive situation between Mexico and the U.S. in 1979, to a certain extent transferable to the entire North-South conflict of the American continent. Part three, then, represents a hemispheric approach with the creation of a borderless zone, the LAMEX area in 2079. Considering the possible concept of such transnational zone between the United States and Mexico, do you think novels anticipate future processes?

AM: I think that certain novels do. To me, people who, for example, write about Latinos today, are creating a new knowledge, their novels in a sense could be prophetic. Events are occurring very fast and novelists, poets, artists seem to be those who write about or paint, who compose music about these things. Also, they talk about topics such as negotiation of space. We are constantly negotiating space. As well as negotiating identity. So novelists are writing about this negotiation of identity, negotiation of culture, space and so forth, are writing about the future. And I guess they are writing about certain kinds of political truths they sometimes stumble on. I think that is why literature is becoming more and more important. It seems to me these are not just Latino writers, but these are ethnic American writers. I see that in African American writers, take the novel Beloved by Toni Morrison. But also native American writers such as Leslie Silko. One of her books, Almanac of the Dead, has kind of a prediction of the future, she is kind of pointing to a possibility of the future. I like the idea, I like to work with it. I think there is always some view of the future in my books, too, whether it is very obvious such as in The Rag Doll Plagues or hidden in the context, in the plot line or in the characters or the development of my books. But it is always pointing to a future. Even if I write about the past, it is moving, it is viewing towards the future. Like the scholar Iain Chambers said “roots in the past are routes to the future”. You are digging roots, but those roots will lead you from the past to