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Interview no. 271

Ricardo Sanchez

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Ricardo Sanchez (1941-)
INTERVIEWER: Elizabeth Castellanos
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 8, 1976
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 271
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 271
TRANSCRIBER: Elizabeth Castellanos
DATE TRANSCRIBED: November 8-9, 1976

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Chicano writer.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; discrimination encountered in job experiences; the word "Chicano"; illegal aliens; the Chicano Movement; his writings.

30 minutes.
11 pages.

[This is an interview with Dr. Ricardo Sánchez, by Elizabeth Castellanos, at the Boy's Club on 6th and Campbell, on November 8, 1976 at 3:20 p.m.]

C: First of all I want to ask you some information pertaining to your background. Could you give me the date and place of your birth?

S: Born in El Paso, Texas, March 29, 1941.

C: Could you give me any information about your parents background, your father's occupation and mother's.

S: My father is deceased, and my mother is [on] social security and retirement benefits. They came from northern New Mexico. My family has come from New Mexico, sh!., for hundreds of years. I'm the first one in the family born out of New Mexico. I was born in El Paso on Mesa St. and grew up in el barrio del diablo.

C: Could you tell me any significant or interesting events during your childhood?

S: What type?

C: Anything that pertains to you being a Chicano.

S: The realization that from the very beginning we were already registered, stereotyped. We were processed to become the workers of Farah, workers of the City Sanitation Dept., that type of stuff. In grammar school, I expressed the wish of growing up to be a writer and my teacher at Zavala told me not to hurt myself, not to have those types of illusions that I would later find impossible to accomplish. She told me, "You are going to work for the city, Ricardo. I mean you're a Mexican, after all. What do you expect? Mexicans don't write. Maybe you might be fortunate and be a fireman or work for Willie Farah." That type of stuff. That led me ultimately to dropping out of school. And in high school, I told one of my Spanish teachers, Ceasar Mendoza, that I wanted to go to college. And

because I used to wear a duck tail, khakis, and french toe shoes, you know, he said, "Eh, the only colegio you're going to go to is La Tuna Tech." Those were the kind of things I found while I was growing up.

C: Is that what caused you to drop out? At what age did you actually drop out of school?

S: About 16.

C: And then from there, what became of your life?

S: I kicked around all over the place. Then I went to the army, but I didn't like being ordered around so I dropped out of the army and was peeing around California. Two of my brothers died in two different accidents. And I found myself in prison.

C: What was the reason for you going to prison? Why did they catch you or what did they catch you doing?

S: I was convicted for kidnapping, robbery.

C: And is that true?

S: Yeah!

C: It is?

S: I was convicted for kidnap and robbery. Did I commit the crimes? Yeah, I also committed them. As to the reasons for them, a lot of different reasons--psychological, you know; it might be pathological reasons.

C: Could you tell me the jobs you have held since you left prison? Was there any discrimination among your job experiences?

S: In many there were. When I left prison in '63, I started working for different people here in El Paso--the Plaza Motor Hotel, a trucking firm, and different places. And the discrimination was two-fold: one for being a Chicano, and the other for being an ex-convict. I went back to prison in

'65 and came out in '69. I started working for Vista M&P in the southside, organizing. After I'd worked for about a month and a half, and I was fairly effective in what I was doing, I was told by the regional office that I didn't have a job for real, that they had never hired me. Then I went to Machos, Project Machos. At that point I was offered a fellowship in Journalism, a Ford Fellowship. I went to Richmond, Virginia and completed one year's work in six months. From there I went to the University of Massachusetts as a writer, staff writer and professor at the School of Education. I was offered a doctorate, but I didn't take it then. I came to Denver to work for the Colorado Migrant Counsel directing a migrant health project. And keeping with the philosophy of the program, which was to develop the lower echelon people working in the program, I resigned my position as director of the program. In 11 months, me vine para El Paso to being to meet my publications. I started publishing a lot of books out of El Paso and other places. I was unemployed for a couple of years-- nobody would hire me because I had a record. There were too many program people that were afraid it might hurt their program because I had a record. From there I got a Ford Fellowship, graduate fellowship, and started to do Ph.D. work. I got my Ph. D. from Union Graduate School in about 14 months.

- C: When was the first time you became involved in your community and in politics? When was the first time you voted?
- S: I can't vote. I have no civil rights. I never had civil rights.
- C: Could you tell me why Mexican Americans have little representation in politics?
- S: It's an economic question, it's a class question. When you don't have the

economic power to control both the media and the way the political process works, you cannot have any representation. Whoever we have as governors or senators, whether it be Apodaca, or Castro, they're there as tokenism; they're just token window dressing--no tienen poder económico. And as long as we have no economic power, we cannot control our own destiny. That's why, you know, why vote? We only vote for whom they give us to vote. It's not a choice dialectically and otherwise.

C: When your family arrived here in El Paso, what was their first impression of Juárez and El Paso?

S: My father had been here a number of times as a youth. He left northern New Mexico and went to México; he was with Villa's people fighting la Revolución. Then he came back to the states, went into WWI, etc. My parents were migrating all over the country in the '30s. And my mother had never been questioned about her citizenship. I mean, she was northern New Mexican; as far as we knew, we were the land -- you know, through our indigenous and Spanish blood marriage and mixed. But when my mother first got here fueron a Juárez. And crossing back from Juárez the immigration stopped them and asked for their citizenship. My mother looked at the tonto, man, "Questioning me?"--you know, that type of look. He kept asking and harassing her, and she started responding in Spanish. And the more she would respond in Spanish the more she would be harassed. Finally, she got angry at the gringo migra and told them, "Hey, you son-of-a-bitch, don't start asking me where I'm from. My family was here before yours even swam the ocean to get over here. I'm from northern New Mexico, we've always been there." You know, that type of response. But somehow my parents kind of liked El Paso and stayed, and I was born here a few years later.

C: When was the first time you heard the word "Chicano," and what did it mean to you?

S: I heard it since I was a little child, I don't know, four years. I've always known I was a Chicano. It's not a new word, it's a very old word. In fact, I came across a book written in the southside about 1957, and it talks about Chicano culture, with that phrase. So it's not new; it's not a novelty. You know, in fact, it probably goes back way before that. What it means to me now is a political process. Political not in the sense of electing people to congress, not in the sense of electing a mayor --those are politics, usually very shoddy politics--but political in terms of people being able to affirm, confirm, define their own sense of reality, their own perspective of the universe and act upon it. The process concesación or contessinación, where you create your word for yourself, you act upon it through reflection analysis and other type of actions to bring upon another type of world you want to invision. It's a liberating term, very humanizing.

C: Could you give me your opinion of illegal aliens here in El Paso?

S: I don't think they're illegal. I think they have as much of a right to be here as anybody else. I base it on treaty law. The highest law of the land is the treaty that _____ for foreign countries. And the Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo says that people can go back and forth, and work wherever they want to, in either of the two countries; that the people have the right, la gente de México de venir aquí. After all, we have to realize that climatically, territorially, and other process--todo el jale--this is not to different from México, so they are not illegal. I see them as victims, being victimized by the same oppressing forces that

we ourselves are being victimized by, and that ultimately all the people of the world are victimized by--the conglomerates, the huge corporations, the hideous power manipulations from extreme levels of _____.

The rest of us are just victims. We're victimized when they try to pit us against them, una tontería, they are not the enemy. I mean, if prices are inflated and wages are deflated in El Paso, it is not the so-called illegal's fault. He is just used to buttress and to sustain a monstrous hideous system that is predicated on pure materialistic values and profits. But he is not...no es enemigo, es hermano. I see him hurting much more than I am. He can't threaten me job-wise. The job that he is going to do, I don't want and I'm not going to do. Not because I'm too good, /because/ I've done those type of jobs in the past--I've picked cotton, I've done all kinds of things--but because I don't want to do that type of work, especially ahora que ya tengo doctorado, even though right now I am on food stamps and unemployment, for political and economic reasons. El ilegal es víctima, Chicanos are victims, native Americans are victims, blacks are victims, poor whites in /the/ Appalachians are victims. And the illegal alien is not an enemy nor a threat. Al contrario, he might be an instrument that is used by the oppressor, to create all kinds of lies to hide the real problem. The problem is the type of process system we have, it's values.

C: Could you give me your opinion on the Peso Devaluation? How has it affected the people? Has it affected you in any way?

S: I think it has affected the poor from México a hell of a lot. The small businessmen in El Paso have been affected a lot también, you know. I think that people with a lot of wealth in México were able to buy a lot of

dollars before the devaluation, and /then/ turned right around and made a big profit. Once it stabilizes, you know you will make a very, very fantastic profit off of it. I think it was another power move by the people in power to do the types of things they want to do, in order to make sure they _____ more than what is due them by just choices.

C: Going back to the Chicano Movement, are you involved with anything that pertains to the Chicano Movement?

S: That's all I've been doing for the past seven years--movimiento in many different ondas, from community organizing in one point, community education, to helping develop some publishing processes Chicano Movement oriented, to doing things in educational areas of the university, conferences, community areas, festivales culturales. I see myself as an obrero cultural, a cultural worker. Therefore, my role is to help create those things that will bring consciousness, reason and awareness of who and what we are, and also the type of political thought that brings about a liberating change, a humanizing change. In those terms, sí estoy muy metido en el movimiento. I've been involved in the movement. If I wasn't, I wouldn't be unemployed ahorita. First chance I've taken, that's why I'm unemployed.

C: In all this that you've been doing, have you been successful in the goals you want to meet?

S: To some degree yes, but not completely. There's a lot of things I would have liked to have done. But in terms of being able to see the development and defining of a literary world that's Chicano, yes, I've had a part in that very much. In the past ten years we've developed a body of literature that we didn't have before. We /have/ an oral tradition /now/, but prior to the last ten years we had no oral tradition. But now we have

what you can point to that is in fact a body of literature, something that is real, that is very substantial. And I've had a part in that, a very good size part of it.

C: Right now you have a book out Canto y Grito mi Liberación.

S: No, I have more than one. I have a number of books. My first major work was Canto y Grito mi Liberación, published through Mictla, which I developed here in El Paso, and was later picked up by Doubleday for paperback distribution. I have a book which just came out from the University of California Chicano Study Center, by the title of Hechizos-Spells. That's a huge book about 350 pages, 8 1/2 x 11 in size. It's fully illustrated by one of our most outstanding muralist, Willie Aaron, from Los Angeles. I have a number of other things Mano a Mano, Obras, and Los Cuatro. Plus I have some stuff coming out in Spain in the next few months, Antología Española. And I don't know how many anthologies I've been put in. I don't know how many magazines I've written for. So in terms of publishing, I have a lot of publications.

C: When you have written these books, what is it you mainly talk about?

S: Diferentes cosas, lo que está pasando en el momento. Some of it has been poetry; each of the poems have been different, diferentes ondas. Some have been essays. Like in Hechizos-Spells, I have a lot of essays on concepts of liberation, on concepts of humanization, on literature, criticism of literature, art. I have some short stories, articles, essays, vignettes, and a lot of poetry. Todo depende.

C: Could you tell me what impact the Mexican Revolution has had on history?

S: Well, I think the Mexican Revolution is yet to be for real. What happened was another power play. Some of the greats in the Mexican Revolution,

their ideals were prostituted. I'm talking about people like Ricardo Flores Magón, Enrique Flores Magón. Eran anarquistas, escritores, que tenían unas ideas de la revolución mucho más amplias que abarcaban mucho más que los enanitos que andaban alrededor en la Revolución Mexicana. Gente como Zapata que era una persona grandísima, una persona magnífica también que fue traicionado porque había mucha gente débil. Madero fue débil. Madero pues armó otra vez sus enemigos y permitió que fracasara la Revolución. And we have to realize that much of what happened in the Mexican Revolution in terms of its failures was due to the very fact that the U.S. had a very, very partial interest in what went on in México, because México, again, was a country with some natural resources that had to be exploited by the ever expanding civilization and ever expanding society and ever expanding systemized process called the U.S.A. And the United States had its hand in making sure there was no real revolution, that the land was not really given over to the people, or taken over by the people, and that the country was not run by the people oriented towards the benefaction of masses. Al contrario, parte de la culpa fue intervención estadounidense. México was used by Pershing as a training ground for other wars later on.

C: Do you know anything about the Prohibition?

S: Only that a lot of people benefited during that period in El Paso, mucho contrabando. You know that it was a failure. It was striving to legislate morality by a lot of people who had very narrow moral ideas, and it was doomed to failure. You know, you can't tell people what to drink, when to drink, etc.. Just like we are seeing a lot of other things that they are trying to legislate now; it's failing. You can't legislate

morality for people. It was a moral issue; it should have never been legislated.

C: Would you like to add anything that has been significant in your life?

S: Yes, being able in the past seven years to have travelled all over the country from one end to the other, from one university to the other, from one barrio to the other, from one migrant camp to another, and being able to dawdle with a lot of people to get a greater understanding a deeper understanding on how people live, you know, what frustrates them, what makes them feel like human beings; and being able in that way to see what the real enemies are, seeing that we are not the enemies. We are not our own enemies, we shouldn't be. Being able to realize that in solidarity we can create the type of strength we need. Being able to see the growth, for example, of Carlos Rosas, the muralist. He just finished a mural for the Boys' Club. I remember him when he was just finishing high school, and took off, nervously, to Boulder, Colorado to the university to study fine arts, and then took a step from there and went to Latin America. He went all over Latin America, met a lot of great poets, great artists, and studied with them. He came back and went to Europe, West Germany and all the way to Moscow. He was able to dawdle with a lot of artists and see all kinds of great works all over the world, and then realized the type of place that Chicano art occupies in the world-wide spectrum. And he was able to relate that it exists, that it is legitimate, that it is real; and those things are very important. Once you go beyond your barriers, once you start having that type of mobility, you start being able to create the worlds that can be possible.

C: Dr. Sánchez, I wish to thank you very much for being very cooperative and

sharing your ideas for my Chicano History class. You have been very helpful, and this information will be of much use. Thank you very much, Dr. Sánchez.