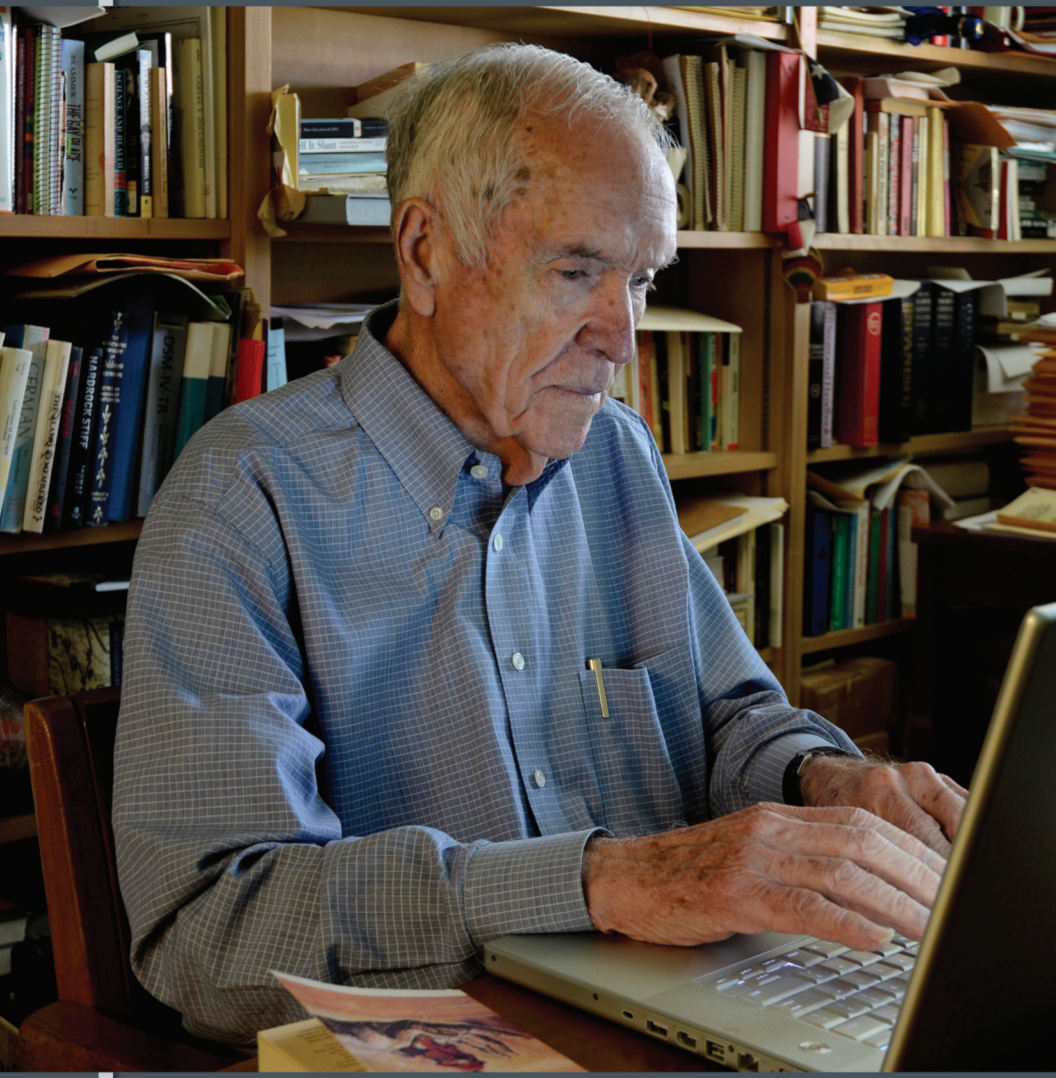
Rolando Hinojosa's Klail City Death Trip Series

A Retrospective, New Directions



Edited by Stephen Miller and José Pablo Villalobos

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Dedication

Rolando, many thanks for the trip.

Un "grand tour" para nuestros tiempos y espacios.

Acknowledgments

The co-editors of this volume wish to thank many entities and colleagues at Texas A&M University who made possible the publication of this volume. First among these are those which provided the funding for the February 2010 Symposium "Rolando Hinojosa's *Klail City Death Trip*: A Retrospective, New Directions": the Department of Sociology, the Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research, the College of Liberal Arts, and most especially Larry Mitchell, then Interim Head of Hispanic Studies. The generous funding allowed for the gathering of a very distinguished group of established, mid-career and beginning scholars all united by their desire to discuss the work of Rolando Hinojosa, the Ellen Clayton Garwood Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Texas, and the recipient of an Honorary Doctor of Letters from Texas A&M University in 2007. From that very successful meeting, a smaller group of scholars, formed both of some of those who read at the Symposium, and others who did not, answered our request to submit essays for publication in this

volume. More recently, sincere thanks are owed to Alberto Moreiras, the former Head of Hispanic Studies, and to Steven M. Oberhelman, Interim Head of the same Department, for organizing the funding for the subvention of this volume. Our gratitude also extends to Rolando Hinojosa: first for the *Klail City Death Trip* itself; and, second, for his participation in the Symposium and for other matters relating to the short interview that forms the appendix to this volume, as well as to prompt replies when we have queried him on matters relating to his biography and work. Finally, we thank the indispensable contributors to this collection of essays for their steadfast collaboration, and Nicolás Kanellos, the Director of Arte Público Press, and the staff of the Press for their encouragement and support.

S.M. and J.P.V.

Rolando Hinojosa and Contemporary U.S. Hispanic Literature

Stephen Miller and José Pablo Villalobos

> "It isn't true. The trip never ends. Only the travelers end. And even these can endure in memory, in stories. [. . .] It's necessary to return to the steps already taken in order to repeat them and to trace new paths beside them. It's necessary to begin the trip anew. The traveler returns to the way already travelled."
>
> —José Saramago, *Viaje a Portugal* (1981)

The present volume is meant as an homage to and continuation of *The Rolando Hinojosa Reader: Essays Historical and Critical* so ably coordinated and edited by José David Saldívar. That volume appeared first as a special number of the *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 12.3-4 (1984), and then was published in book form by Arte Público Press in 1985. Since then the *Klail City Death Trip* Series (*KCDTS)* has gone from five volumes or "stops along the way" to fifteen, with the last volume to date—*We Happy Few* (2006)—being published a full generation after *The Rolando Hinojosa Reader*. The present collection of essays, always mind-

ful of the scholarship and discussion of the field-shaping *Reader*, as well as subsequent scholarly work, is two things: a continuation of certain lines of research into the *KCDTS*; and a kind of "report" from the second decade of the 21st century on the new directions the *KCDTS* and critical conversation about it have taken since the early 1980s.

Rolando Hinojosa Smith's literary series the *Klail City Death Trip* may well be the most innovative and complex project of literary creation ever conceived and realized by a writer based in the United States. The *KCDT* consists to date of fifteen titles published between 1973 and 2006. While the starting point and time of the "trip" of the Series may be ultimately traced back to the 1749 arrival of the first Hinojosa to the Lower Río Grande Valley of South Texas, best known simply as "the Valley" or "*el Valle,*" the main actions of the *KCDT* are contemporary to the life of Hinojosa himself who was born in 1929. As sometimes happens in the roman-flueve series of other writers such as Benito Pérez Galdós, Emilia Pardo Bazán and William Faulkner, these actions and persons are centered in a fictional town and its surrounding area. Hinojosa's "Klail City," the county seat of the equally fictional "Belken County," is, like Orbajosa, Marianeda and Yoknapatawpha County, a composite which serves the writer to center "hir" own experience of the human and natural geography closest to "hir."

Hence, Klail City is not unlike Mercedes, Texas, the real Valley town where Rolando Hinojosa was born and where he spent much of his life before leaving the Valley; this happened after high school graduation in 1946 when he joined the U.S. Army in August of that year. After an eighteen-month hitch, which included training as an artillery man, he began studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Then, a little more than a year later, he was recalled to active duty and stationed in Japan as part of the Allied post-WWII occupation force. In June 1950, Hinojosa was incorporated into the hurriedly-formed Task Force Smith, the first U.S. response to the invasion of South Korea by the North. Hinojosa shares these

life events with the two main characters of the *KCDT*: Rafa Buenrostro and Jehu Malacara. They, like him, come from a small town in the Valley, go into the Army following high school,[1] spend time in Japan, see much action in Korea, and become graduates of the University of Texas at Austin.

Neither of these two characters, however, is Hinojosa, especially in their years after Austin and Korea. While Hinojosa earned a Ph.D. in Spanish literature in 1969 and began a university-teaching career that continues even today as the Ellen Clayton Garwood Professor Creative Writing at Texas, Rafa Buenrostro received a law degree, but then began his adult career as a policeman and detective in Klail City in Belken County. For his part Jehu Malacara is first, more Hinojosa-like, a high school English teacher in Klail City, but then starts his career as a Klail City banker working for the mover-shaker Cooke-Blanchard-Klail family, a fictional creation which evokes the extended, real-life King Ranch family. The cousins Buenrostro and Malacara may, perhaps, be best viewed as the fictional vehicles through which Hinojosa portrays the generational experiences of many young Tejanos, i.e., the Texas Mexican Americans born in the Valley around the beginning of the Great Depression. A fundamental point to underscore: Buenrostro and Malacara are *not* immigrants. For like Hinojosa himself, the cousins are descendants of an eighteenth-century, southmost Rio Grande/Bravo Hispanic population which became an increasingly abused ethnic-linguistic minority following the Mexican-American War of 1846-48. For in many ways the treaty that ended the war, that of Guadalupe Hidalgo, left Hinojosa, Buenrostro and Malacara's people as despised foreigners in their own land. This means that four generations after Guadalupe Hidalgo, both the author and his characters have not only historical and folkloric knowledge of their ancestor's struggles, but also of their grandparents and parents generation's and of their own first-hand experience of some combination of ethnic prejudice, exploitation, oppression and violence. The contemporaneous time of the *KCDT* stands witness to this happening first at home in Texas, then in the

upper Midwest of Mexican American migrant laborers, and then, while its protagonists serve in the U.S. Army, even in Japan and Korea. This said, Rafa and Jehu do have some good luck. Their early adulthood coincides with the ferment that began upon the return to the United States of WWII minority combat soldiers, accompanied by the G.I. Bill, and showed its greatest results beginning with the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s and the wide-spread change of attitude toward minorities which that legislation marked and progressively implemented.

So it is that the *KCDT*, as seen and lived by Hinojosa and all his Valley Tejano and Anglo characters, portrays the transformation of that place and its peoples. It follows them as they go from living in a sleepy agricultural and ranching backwater of Mexican and American society and history, from where they must sometimes go north "to work the Welch grape vineyards near Lake Michigan,"[2] to our times. These are as the active NAFTA site of industry and commerce, and also the conflictive frontier of new immigration and drug wars. Hence, the *KCDT* traces the evolving relations between Anglos and Tejanos, Texans and Mexicans, and, not to be forgotten, the emergence of the Tejana as an independent person. Her experiences, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, are different from those of her recently enfranchised brothers, male cousins and friends, yet her gender has a diminishing social role as she pursues the same kinds of personal hopes, expectations and possibilities that her male cohort does. The *KCDT* reflects, then, how the professions and business are pursued with increasing success through to our day by way of the *KCDT*'s synthesis of Hinojosa, Buenrostro, Malacara and their Tejano and Tejana contemporaries.

The content and manner of Hinojosa's fictive portrayal of this great advance may be what most distinguishes the *KCDT* from other notable novelistic series in American literature. Tonally more like immigrant author Saul Bellow's Chicago on-the-make than, for example, like Faulkner's defeated South, Updike's increasingly gentrified Northeast, and McMurtry's dying southern Great Plains, Hinojosa's Valley is a place where his group finds an ever

fuller present and more promising future as they become the majority population in Texas and, for that matter, across the American Southwest and (Alta) California. Moreover, while Hinojosa's Anglo author contemporaries center on those whose language of choice is English, Hinojosa's Tejanos and Anglos are often bilingual in Spanish and English and sometimes wholly bicultural. That said, the *KCDT* itself over time has become increasingly monolingual in English, and this fact has impacted the way Hinojosa has been perceived and read by critics. Some contextualization may help here.

The 1973 first edition of Hinojosa's first novel, *Estampas del Valle y otras obras*, is remarkable in many ways. It was the winner of the third annual Quinto Sol Prize for best Chicano creative work of the year, and was published as an illustrated bilingual edition with Hinojosa's Spanish being rendered into English by Gustavo Valadez under the title *Sketches of the Valley and Other Works*. Quinto Sol co-editor Herminio Ríos's untitled introduction in Spanish followed by his own version in English discussed the present and future readership of *Estampas* and other Chicano works, as well as the literary traditions to which such literature belongs.

Back in 1973 Ríos and his co-editor Octavio Romano had "two reading publics in mind."[3] The first was formed by "readers who are contemporary to the author, the work, and to the current efforts of the Chicanos" in literature and "all other disciplines of human knowledge" (7). The second group of readers, two generations later, is we now: we "of the future who will try to analyze and understand [the past Chicano] struggle" (7). Now, when one recalls that the first and second Quinto Sol Prizes were won by Tomás Rivera's Spanish language novel *. . . y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971) and Rudolfo Anaya's English-language novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Hinojosa's Spanish-language *Estampas*, with accompanying English translation, reminds us that in the past that was the present of 1973, the Chicano literary movement was a mix of Spanish, English and Spanish/English bilingualism. But in our present, the Chicano movement in general has yielded to a more

traditional form of American ethnic politics and today English is generally accepted as the public language of those interested in Hispanic/Latino issues in the United States. This evolution is reflected in the *KCDT* itself.

With the publication of the sixth title of the Series, *Rites and Witnesses* in 1982,[4] the *KCDT* signals definitively that English will also from then on be the primary language of the Series, while the second volume of the *KCDT*, *Korean Love Songs*, was written and published in English. This is because the first-person narrator Rafe Buenrostro tells of experiences in Japan and much more in Korea serving in an army in which English was virtually the only language of communication used among the officers and troops. Since the actions, characters and settings of the other early volumes of the *KCDT—Estampas del Valle y otras obras*, *Klail City y sus alrededores*, *Claros varones de Belken*—transpired mainly among the segregated, Anglo-subjected Tejano population and their primary language of communication was Spanish, it made perfect sense for Hinojosa to write about them in Spanish. For it was the language he and they used in talking with each other and remembering their common past. But with *Mi querido Rafa*, the fifth volume of the Series published in 1981, Hinojosa creates a totally bilingual Spanish-English set of letters from Jehu Malacara to Rafe Buenrostro. Ten years after Korea, Rafe is away from the Valley in a V.A. hospital because of persistent complications from the shrapnel wounds that required his hospitalization in Japan. The text is bilingual because the two cousins, living and working out of Klail City, are professionals whose primary language of business is English. Yet Jehu's bilingual letters to Rafe and, we assume, Rafe's to him, show the cousins sit uneasily astride the cultural-linguistic divide of the first decade of their professional careers: their early lives alienated them from the Anglo power structure, but both are now integrated into it. Meanwhile the bilingual, dying newspaperman P. Galindo, a generation older than the cousins and the third most important narrator of the *KCDT*, conducts the interviews which form the second part of *Mi querido Rafa* mostly in

Spanish. He uses English only when the interviewee is Anglo or is a Tejano who feels more comfortable speaking in English. Anticipating in fact part of the title of the next volume of the *KCDT*, *Rites and Witnesses*, Galindo is *the* witness of the linguistic and cultural evolution both of the Valley and of the earlier *KCDT* itself.

The final phase of this transition in the *KCDT* begins with the publication of *The Valley* in 1983. It is, to use Hinojosa's own term, a "recreation" from the original Spanish of *Estampas del Valle y otras obras* to a similarly idiomatic English.[5] Then followed recreations by Hinojosa into English of *Mi querido Rafa* (*Dear Rafe*-1985) and of *Klail City y sus alrededores* (*Klail City*-1987), and then of the Spanish-language recreation of the 1990 *Becky and Her Friends* into *Los amigos de Becky* a year later. Bilingual readers of the *KCDT* often comment that they prefer the Spanish originals to the English recreations, or, in the case of the Becky volumes, the original English to the Spanish-language recreation. While much can be said on this subject, important here is only that the four recreations in question are essential parts of the *KCDT* project. In light most especially of the bilingualism of *Mi querido Rafa* the recreations recall to mind Marshall McLuhan's dictum: "The medium is the message." Even without going so far as to affirm that the linguistic mediums of the *KCDT* are more important than the actions and characters of the Series, Hinojosa's linguistic registers—Spanish, English, bilingual in the two languages—require his readers to understand one thing above all: the experience of the "trip" that is the full *KCDT* stands the best chance of being completed only by the Spanish-English bilingual reader who can appreciate the differing cultural contextualizations that are part of his expression in each register. At the same time, and much as did the Chicano movement itself, Hinojosa came to terms with a fundamental reality. If he wanted to extend the potential audience for the *KCDT*, he had to make it more linguistically accessible. So while the editors of Quinto Sol and Bilingual Press, necessarily very cognizant of the need to sell books, published bilingual editions of *Estampas del Valle y otras obras*, *Generaciones y sem-*

blanzas,[6] and *Claros varones de Belken* which all included translations by others of Hinojosa's Spanish to English, it was a much more purposeful decision by Hinojosa to recreate linguistically and culturally his original texts. In a real sense, then, Hinojosa began with *The Valley* in 1983 to help actually create new works that would prosper with the second "reading public" hypothesized by Ríos ten years before, i.e., readers for whom the Chicano movement and *lucha* of the 1960s and 1970s would be the past, and who would be English-language dominant.

Another part of Ríos's introduction to the first edition of *Estampas del Valle y otras obras* concerns the traditions of Chicano literature, and, at the same time, is conceived of as a long term project. In large measure this is because, like Hinojosa himself, a Ph.D. in Spanish literature, many Chicano intellectuals from two generations ago who were interested in Hispanic literature and culture were steeped in the university-level study of literature written in Spanish, a tradition a thousand years long.[7] This fact contextualizes Ríos' assertion that "The fundamental issue before us is to establish the relationships that exist not only between Chicano literature and the rich Hispanic literary tradition," but also "within the scope of universal literature" ([7]).[8] To that end, Ríos asserts his position by making direct mention of not only Mexican and Spanish literary and cultural figures such as Julio Torri and Diego Torres Villarroel, but also U.S. and European authors like Norman Mailer and Thomas Mann ([7-8]). In combination with Ríos' view of there being two "reading publics" for Chicano literature and hence the *KCDT*, as early in its development as that body of literature then was, his point about tradition raises the following issue: to what extent did those early novels by Rivera, Anaya, Hinojosa and, it must be stressed, by their publishers, set the general course for all those authors male and female who would follow their early 1970s lead in the heyday of the Chicano Movement?

We know that with the passage of the decades since then, the original flowering of Chicano literature has spread to that of literature published almost solely in English by Hispanic/Latinos

descended in their great numbers from immigrants to the United States from Mexico, the Caribbean and other parts of the Americas. One of the aims of the present volume is, therefore, to view the fifteen volumes of Hinojosa's *KCDT* as it travels through more than thirty years of a growing national and international panorama of the increasingly pronounced Hispanic presence in the United States and the world. Essays in this volume have a steady eye on the "death trip" itself as they contextualize the distances and areas travelled while bringing to bear the perspective our present time affords.

I: Broad Studies of the *Klail City Death Trip Series*

Joan Barrett's chapter, "A Cultural Journey: The Transformation of the Valley in the *Klail City Death Trip Series*," takes on the *KCDT* nearly in its entirety as it links the changes in Rafe Buenrostro and Jehu Malacara to those of the Valley. As these characters grow and evolve, so does the community to which they will forever belong. Barrett makes use of notions of hybridity and transculturation to counter arguments that may see in the transformation of the Valley a move away from its roots in the direction of complete assimilation to the mainstream. As this chapter argues rather, the constant push and pull that occurs when cultures come in contact provides evidence of an agency that results in the creation of a third space; a necessary location unique to itself that is a constantly negotiated product of both.

Nicolás Kanellos advances the thesis that both Rolando Hinojosa and the *KCDT* are products of the hybrid culture of the Texas-Mexican border. Different from readings rooted in Chicano narratives of resistance to or overcoming of Anglo dominance, Kanellos formulates and advances the case for reading the *KCDT* as the new creation of a Mexican-Anglo culture that is neither one nor the other, but which can only be experienced as a new and developing historical and cultural hybrid: the literary epic of what he calls "the Mestizo States of America."

In "The Polifacetic Individualism of Rolando Hinojosa's *Klail City Death Trip*," Mark McGraw also takes a panoramic approach to the Series. This chapter focuses specifically on the plight of the individual's needs in light of the communal exigencies placed upon him or her by both formal and informal institutions such as the church, the military, academia and patriarchy—all of which play an important role at various points throughout the *KCDT*. As McGraw calls it, "Hinojosan individualism" is mindful and respectful of institutions, but never to the point of allowing these the power to determine or limit one's aspirations. In the end, be it the Church, ethnicity, or their career, Rafa and Jehu—as Rolando Hinojosa himself and many of the characters that populate the *KCDT*—march to the beat of their own drum and look to improve themselves and their surroundings. Never succumbing to a determined role, the characters in the *Death Trip* that are most sympathetic to its readers are those who succeed in the face of adversity, even when these adversaries take the shape of social organizations.

After surveying the scholarship on the presence of Spanish Peninsular authors and work in the *KCDT*, Stephen Miller develops further the conversation on how Hinojosa dialogues with specific aspects of the Hispanic tradition as found in medieval, Golden Age and realist Spanish literature. Special, but by no means exclusive attention is given to the picaresque novel and the production of Benito Pérez Galdós, the subject of Hinojosa's 1969 Ph.D. dissertation directed by one of the most prominent Galdosian scholars of the twentieth century. Posited and explained is the overall thesis that during the nearly two decades of Hinojosa's B.A. through Ph.D. Spanish literary studies, Spanish Peninsular literature occupied a position of prominence that may have made it become a kind of literary "country" for a writer wanting to write in Spanish about his ethnic group while living in the Hispanic-phobic, Anglo-centric Valley and country of the period.[9]

In "The *Klail City Death Trip Series*: A Trovador's Eternal Space for an Enduring Transitory World," Alejandro Morales approaches the work of Rolando Hinojosa from a distinct perspec-