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Entrevista/Interview

Placing the Placeless: a Conversation with Rodrigo Rey Rosa¹

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Rodrigo Rey Rosa was born in Guatemala City, Guatemala, in 1958. As a young writer, he lived for several years in Tangier, where he became a friend of the late Paul Bowles, who first translated and introduced his work to English-speaking readers. Rosa has also lived for several years in New York City. Based now in the Petén region of Guatemala, he continues to travel frequently to Tangier, Barcelona, and New York, and at this writing is in India. Of his numerous books, the following were translated into English by Paul Bowles:

¹ This interview took place on 21 May 2001 in New York City.

The Beggar's Knife (El cuchillo del mendigo)(1985), *Dust on Her Tongue* (1989), and *The Pelcari Project (Cárcel de árboles)*(1991), all published by City Lights. These and other books—*El salvador de buques* (1992), *El agua quieta* (1992), *Lo que soñó Sebastián* (1994), *El cojo bueno* (1996), *Que me maten si...*(1997), and *Ningún lugar sagrado* (1998)—have also been translated into French and German. In 1995 he scripted one of his stories and directed the film, “The Proof”, for Laurie Parker, in Los Angeles.

Perhaps fifteen years ago, I began to notice Rodrigo Rey Rosa's books, translated by Paul Bowles, on the shelves of City Lights bookstore in San Francisco. I had lived for half a year in Tangier in Bowles-Burroughs days, when I was 21. I had also, coincidentally it now seems, spent the last half of the 1970s in Guatemala, where I returned in 2000 on a Fulbright, to teach a course at the University of San Carlos. A Spanish friend of mine was directing a series of readings and discussions at a cultural center called “El Sitio” in Antigua, Guatemala, and had invited Rosa, who had just come back to Guatemala after living several years in Tangier, to read. I arrived at the discussion to find the young novelist and short-story writer in jeans and turtle-neck sweater, addressing the usual group of a dozen or so writers and artists, but also thirty uniformed high school girls who had read a book of his and had come prepared with questions. I was impressed by Rosa's response to one question in particular: Does it matter where one writes—Guatemala, Morocco, New York City? Rosa said that, for him, it did not. Since his most recent novel, *La orilla africana*, is set in Tangier, with a vivid sense of locale, the reply intrigued me.

Two months later I took the subway from New York Penn Station to the East Village, got off at Lafayette Square and walked a few blocks up East 11th to visit Rosa in a small second-storey apartment he was borrowing from a photographer who was out of town. We talked about travel, place and writing, and about the

situation in Guatemala as well as that in Tangier. In the course of the interview, I asked Rosa about birds, because they appear often in his fiction, particularly in this recent novel where the entire story hinges on the pursuit, exchange, and finally the liberation of an owl. He answered that birds had no special meaning for him. A few weeks later, I came across this account in Paul Bowles' short diary book *Days*:

"February 6 [1988].

Rodrigo has bought a falcon. When Mrabet heard this he decided that he was going to get it away from him, and began to announce his plans for teaching it to hunt.

"February 12.

Rodrigo brought the falcon here. A beautiful bird. Rodrigo wants to take it to the top of the mountain and set it free.

"February 13.

Abdelouahaid and I drove with Rodrigo and the cage to the high point above Mediouna. There was a hard climb over sharp rocks to get up there. Abdelouahaid helped me. When the cage had been opened and the falcon had been persuaded to come out, Rodrigo threw it upward into the air, and we stood watching it as it flew. There was a strong *cherqi* blowing which seemed to keep it from rising very far. It flew straight toward the northwest over the pine forest, as though it knew where it was going. Little by little it went up."

1 Gray: What brings you to Manhattan?

Rosa: I wrote the text of a catalogue for a painter friend of mine—Miguel Barceló. His old gallerist, Leo Castelli, died, and the gallery closed down, so he's having an opening at a new gallery, a big event, and they invited me. The gallery is Grant Selwyn. I haven't been here since '97.

2 Gray: When I met you in Guatemala, we talked about place and its relation, or sometimes lack of relation, to writing. How was it

growing up in Guatemala, and how and when did you leave and begin traveling?

Rosa: I traveled a lot first with my parents. We traveled in Mexico and Central America, and we went to Europe. But the first time I went by myself was just after high school, when I was eighteen. I went to London and then traveled through Europe. I had little money, and had to work in Germany. Then I went to Spain and traveled all around. That's when I actually started writing. I intended to go to Morocco at that time, but I ran out of money. I spent a year in Europe all together. Then I went back to Guatemala for about a year, then left again..

3 **Gray:** Where did you go next?

Rosa: New York. I came to New York, really because I didn't want to live in Guatemala anymore. I was invited by a friend who had traveled in Guatemala. As you know, it was a very bad time to be in Guatemala—it was 1979. He was a friend from Spain who lived here, a photographer. He was going on a trip to Thailand and offered me his place here, just to help me out. So I took that up and then decided I wanted to stay here. He had Paul's [Bowles'] *Collected Stories*; that's how I got acquainted with his work. And by coincidence—I was looking for a school, to get a student visa, in order to stay here legally—I didn't want to go underground—I was shopping around for a school, and I walked into the School of Visual Arts, where there was a big poster advertising a summer writing workshop with Paul Bowles. As I had tried to go to Morocco once and failed, I looked into that and it was a good deal; it wasn't so expensive. To go out and spend the summer in Morocco and at the same time to enroll in this school without having to go through all the normal requirements. I didn't have all the papers I needed to get

into NYU, for instance; the School of Visual Arts was much more relaxed on that score. So I decided to sign in, and they needed a short story for admittance, so I did that—I wrote a little short story in English....

4 **Gray:** You'd been writing by that time—

Rosa: I'd published one short story, just at that time. I'd left it in Guatemala with a friend, who gave it to the *Imparcial*. So....I'd been writing seriously for about a year.

5 **Gray:** I didn't know the School of Visual Arts had a literary program.

Rosa: They had that creative writing workshop—they had it for three years—and then stopped. But I enrolled for film. I wasn't interested in studying literature really.

I wanted to catch up with film because living in Guatemala I didn't know anything about it; I'd missed a lot of it. For me it was more just general culture, but it was very useful.

6 **Gray:** How long did you stay in that program?

Rosa: Two years, and then I dropped out. That was 1983. I spent most of '84 in Morocco.

7 **Gray:** After the six-week session with Paul Bowles, did you stay on in Morocco or come back to New York City?

Rosa: No, no—well, everything happened very fast after that. I didn't really have anything in common with the other students. They were most of them much older—some of them in their sixties. I decided I

wanted to travel inland, and Paul gave me tips on where to go. I left some of my stories with him, and I went. When I came back, I went to see him at his apartment, to say goodbye I guess, and he asked me if he could translate my stories to give to a publisher. A small publisher here in New York had asked him for material, and he said he didn't have any at the time, but that they might be interested in these short stories of mine. I said "of course," and we started. He sent me the translations here to New York—I had come back to enroll in school. We corresponded for about two years, until this book came out, and then I went back to visit him. I didn't stay that time, but I looked into an apartment that I could rent and a year later I did go, and spent three months or so there. I decided it was a good place for me to work. I think it was half a year later that I quit school here to go and stay there permanently.

8 **Gray:** So by the time you got to Morocco you were still very young—19? 20?

Rosa: I was 21.

9 **Gray:** Were you able to get by in Morocco, just on savings?

Rosa: Rent was very cheap. I paid \$80 rent, and food was also cheap; that's why I decided to go there...well, actually I took most of the SVA tuition—which was very expensive—for the next year, and I lived on that.

10 **Gray:** It's interesting that you were the one who dropped out of class and traveled around, yet you were the one who ended up being translated by Bowles. Was the class just revolting to you?

Rosa: Not revolting, but I had nothing to do there. Part of it was that people were reading each other's work. And Paul, when he realized I was writing in English, said, "You should write in Spanish, don't try writing in English." And of course he was right. I didn't know, before going over to Morocco, that he knew Spanish. And anyway he wasn't taking the class too seriously. He said that he didn't believe one could teach writing, but that he'd try to help anyone who had questions.

11 **Gray:** What was the first story that Bowles translated and had published?

Rosa: It was called "The Path Doubles Back."

12 **Gray:** Oh, the title story from that collection. How would you describe the structure of that? Are the vignettes related to each other?

Rosa: No, Paul rearranged the order and numbered them like that. And he came up with the title. He said, "We need a title for that," and I said, "Well, I don't have one." "Think about it," he said. So he sent me the translation, and I still hadn't come up with a title. And he said, "well, it's in the text. It's a sentence from the text. Maybe you'll like it," and I agreed.

13 **Gray:** I assume that Bowles had an influence on you. What other literary influences do you feel in your work?

Rosa: At that time, by far the greater influence and my guide in the world of books was Borges. And Paul was a fan of Borges. We had that in common. (We didn't have much more in common.) Paul was the first translator of Borges into English. He translated "The

Circular Ruins” for *View*. He edited a Latin American number, in which he translated an episode from the *Popol Vuh*. He also translated a Spanish writer and a couple of Mexican writers for that number.

14 **Gray:** That’s interesting because I was thinking of Borges as I was looking at one of your earlier stories in *The Beggar’s Knife*.

Rosa: Oh, they’re very Borges—

15 **Gray:** But you moved away from that, didn’t you? I mean, there’s a certain kind of fabulous mythical quality to the Borges pieces, and it seems your pieces are now more rooted in actual places; for example in *La orilla africana*, the actual detail of Tangiers.

Rosa: Well, that’s written almost twenty years after. My early stories are more abstract as far as place is concerned; they’re more inside the head of someone. There’s hardly any description of landscape. I think it’s a different kind of writing, much more dream-inspired. Some of the stories—for example, in *The Beggar’s Knife*—are dreams.

16 **Gray:** I was remembering the case of Raymond Roussel, who never really looked at the places he went to. He was an aristocrat and had this sort of baroque Winnebago, a bizarre vehicle he traveled in and never left, but all his writing was imagined, nothing observed. Some of your pieces seem to be placeless, and even in a book like *Dust on her Tongue*, where something terrible has happened, we don’t quite know what, and we don’t know quite where—perhaps it could be anywhere. So, I just wanted to pursue this question that I asked you in Antigua, whether place impinges on you, whether you work from notes on your surroundings.

Rosa: They help me if I'm already writing, because everything sort of fits in. They provide detail. When I'm already writing, everything becomes....material. But before I'm writing, everything is meaningless. When I was writing *La orilla africana*, I would go to the places I was writing about, and then take notes about the objects I was seeing. To go back and weave it into the text. I would write in the morning, and then go to the market to see what I had forgotten or missed, and then I would add it. Especially because it was description of very concrete places. And I would go and see, and say "Oh, I missed that," and I would put it in. But it's just adding a comma. Enumeration.

17 **Gray:** *La orilla africana* is a special case in that you've got two converging plots, each occupying half the book: one concerns an Arab boy, Hamsa, who steals an owl and the other an exiled Colombian who buys an owl in the market—how does something like that evolve?

Rosa: Well, I was in the middle of the novel without having written a word about the Moroccan boy. It was only when the action goes to the house and he steals the owl that I realized that I could not get away without explaining why he took it. And that made me create the character so as to explain that action.

18 **Gray:** So you wrote about the theft of the bird, and then....

Rosa: Then I stopped. I had to stop for a couple of days. I didn't know how to solve it at first. And then I decided I had to write his story. So in that sense it was not planned at all and wouldn't have existed without the theft.

19 **Gray:** You also played with the chronology after that?

Rosa: I started writing about him. And then I had to figure out how to make his part fit in—it was a kind of puzzle, until things just fell in.

20 **Gray:** And why did Hamsa's story have to come first?

Rosa: It didn't have to, but I thought it worked better, so the action wouldn't be interrupted.

21 **Gray:** I wonder if method has changed at all for you, the way a story comes from or to you. Someone said that all short stories should be written in one sitting—no matter how many drafts or notes you might make beforehand—so that it has continuity. How would you describe your own experience of this?

Rosa: I agree that short stories should be written at one sitting—*ideally*; I don't think it's a law, because it doesn't always happen like that. But usually if they come at one sitting, it means you already have the action clearly defined in your head. I think that helps for a short story.

22 **Gray:** Do *you* usually have the action well defined in your head when you sit down to write?

Rosa: For a short story, I think I do have a ... I see where it's going. That's a five- or ten-page story. Not a forty- or fifty-page story. And then with a novel, of course, I think you should *not* know what's going to happen.

23 **Gray:** What do you think about writers who say the characters surprise them? Others repudiate that completely; Nabokov thought that was nonsense, for example.

Rosa: Well, I thought it was nonsense before I wrote a novel. Now I see that it's true. Characters do take on a kind of life, and they might not do what you want them to do. You start following them in a way. That's not a mystification. I used to think so, but I've changed my mind. If one follows a character, through a sequence of actions, it's very hard to go wrong. As in life, time arranges itself. The action fits in, unless you forget, unless you're very distracted. And then if you write another chronologically simultaneous action that another character is going through, it's just a matter of being careful how you edit it.

24 **Gray:** So there's an organic quality to time...

Rosa: I think that's it—organic is the word. That's why some stories fail. Try not to go ahead of the action. Go through all the motions to get there, instead of thinking "Oh, you know, I have a scene there where this happened." Then it makes everything more complicated together, false. If you can go there step by step, it's safer. That's something that I had to learn: not to go ahead of myself. Live with the character, and go through all the motions. Even if I don't write all that down, but just live it through. Work it out.

25 **Gray:** You mean in the sense of not being in a hurry to get to a scene that you've imagined?

Rosa: That's it. I think it's a bit like in life: I can imagine I'm going to go have coffee with a friend, and that this and that is going to happen, and then when it actually happens, it's different. In fiction, there's a danger of thinking the future is there already, when you haven't gotten there. That creates confusion.

26 **Gray:** So, in this way—I'm coming back to the idea, with stories at least, of writing it all in one sitting—is it possible for you to come back to a piece that you left days or months ago and keep working on it?

Rosa: Yes, it has happened to me. But I think it's better to complete it, or just move on. It has happened to me with a couple of pieces that I left because I got sick of them, or ... I might go back and just cut something off.

27 **Gray:** You're able to pick up again, or change?

Rosa: Edit, I would say. Because it's a different process; it's not writing anymore.

28 **Gray:** You're known for a very sparse style. Do you write quickly?

Rosa: I wrote *La orilla africana* in a month and a half. I don't write more than five pages per day, but when I'm really working, I think that's a lot of pages.

29 **Gray:** Some writers write quick drafts and then go back and revise, while others try to get each sentence right as they go. I wonder which category you'd belong to.

Rosa: For me, it's a little uneven. I try to write it as I want it to be. But sometimes I guess I get tired, and I write quickly, and then I have to revise that particular passage. I guess it depends on my mood, but I tend to write and not revise a lot. In the case of *La orilla africana*, it's mostly as it was written.

30 **Gray:** When you're writing, do you think of an audience?

Rosa: Well, Paul was my audience for a long time. After that, it's been, you know, a girlfriend—the person to whom the book is dedicated. For me, that's important. Maybe it is a trick, a kind of invocation. It's very hard for me to write thinking of an audience in the abstract.

31 **Gray:** I remember all the kief stories in Bowles' book *A Hundred Camels in a Courtyard*. Tell me how it is now in Tangiers. I remember the teashops, where you could smoke *kief* with your mint tea, and there were dancing boys.

Rosa: Oh, that's all gone, all gone. Kief has become criminalized, because of the European influence.

32 **Gray:** Even in the Casbah, in the old parts?

Rosa: There's a couple of cafés where you can still see people smoking, but really only a couple. Kief is much more expensive, and it's persecuted. The government has to make believe that they are after it. They are not really, but

33 **Gray:** Even though alcohol is against Muslim law and kief isn't?

Rosa: But it's looked down on by Moroccans.

34 **Gray:** Because it's an old or backward way?

Rosa: Well, now they have hash, which is “in.” But still, a true Moslem would be against it, not as strongly as against wine or alcohol, but still, a virtuous man would not smoke. It's a weakness, a blemish.

35 **Gray:** Do you smoke kief?

Rosa: Yes.

36 **Gray:** Does it enhance writing?

Rosa: For me it does help concentrate. It makes me want to stay in rather than go out. It gives me a slight paranoia, which I think is conducive to work.

37 **Gray:** Conducive in the sense that it keeps you inside, or conducive in the sense of imagination?

Rosa: Well, it keeps me inside, but then, I think, in the sense of imagination too. For me, it works.

38 **Gray:** And would that be a good reason for being in Morocco too? The fact that you can get good kief on the street?

Rosa: No, it's not so easy anymore. But, yeah, I think it has something to do with it. But of course you can get it in Guatemala just as easily.

39 **Gray:** Perhaps you could talk about coming back to Guatemala and your reasons for returning.

Rosa: Well, I went back to Guatemala in 92 or 3, and since then I've been in and out. I moved out of Morocco—I mean I had a flat there and I kept my things but I put them in a warehouse—and I moved back –and then I came to New York for a year, and then I went to

Colombia for some time, went back to Spain, and kept going back to Morocco to spend two or three months at a time to work.

40 **Gray:** So you're mostly in Guatemala now? In Guatemala City?

Rosa: When I moved back, I moved to Petén, between Cobán and Petén. I have a house in Petén now.² I bought a piece of land, and I built a hut. You know, that's why you live in Petén, to be in the jungle. It's near Sayaxché, by the river La Pasión.

41 **Gray:** How did you *find* that?

Rosa: Actually, when I was just moving back there, I came with a group of Catalán friends, and we made a tour of Guatemala. I had been there before, but I was so impressed with the place that I went back, and I met this old man who was a story-teller. He was a guard at one of the Maya ruins. And I decided I wanted to tape some of his stories. I went back and there was an American there, a Mexican-American who had an inn. He liked the idea of my recording that old man, so he let me stay there paying almost nothing. And he had this great place *in* the jungle, in the forest—he hadn't cut down any trees—really wild. So I stayed there for about three months, working with this old man. And someone offered me a piece of jungle for almost no money, so...I didn't buy it then, but I went back a year later, and the land was still there. They had cut or burned down half of the trees. I decided I have to buy this piece of jungle before they finished it off. So I bought it and ended up staying there a long time.

² The Petén is the northern part of Guatemala, bordering on Yucatán. It is mostly jungle, sparsely populated, and the site of Tikal and other famous Mayan ruins.

42 **Gray:** So the solitary life suits you, it seems, whether in Morocco or in Sayaxché.

Rosa: Well, I need that to work, really. I never had much of a social life in Morocco. And that's part of why I've been able to work. I would go there always with a desire to work—not with an idea but predisposed to work. My social life was limited to Bowles' tea hour. I would go there and have tea, and I met many, many people there. Now I have an apartment in Guatemala City. After the Peace Accords and all that, I was curious about the Guatemalan scene. But it's not a place where I can work. I have never been able to work in Guatemala City. So I have to get away.

43 **Gray:** Yes, Guatemala's changed a lot. I left in '78. Bad things happened, but the worst....

Rosa: ...was coming.

44 **Gray:** So, in the course of your travels, you've kept in touch with the events.

Rosa: Through my family, I was able to keep up.

45 **Gray:** This may be a less "literary" matter, but Rigoberta Menchú has come to occupy such an important moral position in the U.S. and Europe. Her work is part of the core curriculum at Stanford and other elite schools. Yet in Guatemala I hear these Rigoberta Menchú jokes; I thought perhaps this was a Ladino or anti-Indian thing, but I found among the Guatemalans I spoke to, even among the poorer or

working people, that opinion was not that high about Rigoberta Menchú.³ What do you make of this?

Rosa: I think it's a racist reaction. Envy. And I think they really don't think that things are the way she says. And I think they're wrong.

46 **Gray:** Maybe the most bizarre criticism I've heard was in David Stoll's book, where Stoll criticizes Menchú for knowing Spanish, as if this were a damning thing, as if it revealed her inauthenticity.

Rosa: Well, you see, even someone of Stoll's—academic stature, I would say—can say that. So in Guatemala—I mean, it is a racist country, there's no question. It is not a political thing; the Left is just as racist as anyone else.

47 **Gray:** Wouldn't the Left tend to support Rigoberta Menchú?

Rosa: Not anymore.

48 **Gray:** And what would their argument be?

Rosa: Oh, she's an Indian! Of course there are different kinds of Left in Guatemala, but you know the intellectual Left is not Indian, usually. And they are very racist, and...it's a kind of contempt...I think Guatemala as a state is almost as racist as South Africa.

³ Not all readers are acquainted with the term *ladino*, which means a non-Indian or someone who was Indian but has stopped wearing *traje* or Indian clothes and has discontinued other Indian ways of life. Since this is seen as a process, one speaks of "ladinization."

49 **Gray:** What do you think about [President Alfonso] Portillo's appointing indigenous people to government posts, like Otilia Cotij as Minister of Culture?

Rosa: I have the feeling it's a kind of smoke screen, but it's good. That they think they have to, that they think *that* is important is a good sign. I don't know how significant it is, but it's a good sign that they feel they have to at least have the appearance....And of course the Indian population is very complex and also in conflict within itself. So it's a very delicate subject. As an anecdote, when the Stoll scandal was going on, *Newsweek* sent a journalist down to Guatemala to get some idea of who was Rigoberta Menchú and what people thought. I met this journalist through a friend, and he wanted to see what people, what rich people thought of Rigoberta Menchú. Rich, "normal," you know, bourgeois people. So I suggested we go to a bar and ask at random. We went to "El Establo"—maybe you know where it is—a small bar on the Avenida de la Reforma, sort of an American bar. I approached these two girls, they must have been in their thirties; they worked in real estate. I said there's a journalist from *Newsweek* who'd like to interview you, and they said "What does he want to know?" And I said, "He wants to know what you think of Rigoberta Menchú." [Laughs.] They said, "Why does he want to know that?" "Well, he's writing this article." "Okay, I'll talk," one of them said, "but first I want you to know something: I am a racist." That's how she *started!* [Laughs.] And then she started saying, you know, how if anyone like Rigoberta Menchú got into power, the country would be fucked up, and...just let go. And then we went to a restaurant. I don't know if you know..."Jake's"? Sort of a fancy place...

50 **Gray:** In zone 10?

Rosa: Zone 10. And this girl, a friend of mine, knew Jake, who's a New Yorker, and she said, "Well, we're ready—Jake, what do you think of Rigoberta?" And he went, "I don't know what I think, but if she comes here, I would not serve her," [laughs] knowing that this journalist would not print any of that. But, later someone in El Salvador asked me to write an anecdote about Guatemalan life, and I wrote this story—it was called "Who's Afraid of Rigoberta Menchú?"—as I told it to you, more or less. Immediately after that I got three outraged open letters in the newspaper saying that I was lying, that Guatemala was not like that—letters from left, progressive newspapermen, saying that I just wanted to satisfy the American taste for this sort of thing.

It was a commentary on the *Newsweek* reporter too, because he didn't want to print that. He printed a very watered-down version. It was not against her or for her, just saying that she had a difficult time. But it highlighted some of the supposed "lies" that Stoll accuses her of telling. That her brother was here and not there, and so forth.

51 **Gray:** Which *Newsweek* was that?

Rosa: It was about a year ago.

52 **Gray:** And where did your article appear?

Rosa: Well, now it's going to appear in *Magna Terra*, a Guatemalan magazine also. But it appeared in *Buho*, which was the Sunday supplement of *La Prensa Gráfica*, sort of a literary publication. It was a good publication, but it recently folded.

53 **Gray:** It would be good to write something like that for the U.S. press. The perspective would be valuable.

Rosa: Who would print it? I don't know....

54 **Gray:** It's amazing that Menchú has made the strides that she has, given the attitude in Guatemala.

Rosa: Well that's why people hate her, because she's become so prominent. She projects an image of Guatemala that people don't really admit.

55 **Gray:** When I left Guatemala a couple of months ago, and when you left, more recently, charges from Spain—á la Pinochet—had been brought against Ríos Montt and other generals, and counter-charges had been brought against Menchú for treason! What's the progress of that?

Rosa: Oh, I think that's been dropped—the charges against her. And the charges against Ríos Montt are being taken up. They were deliberating, and now I think the trial's going to go on in Spain. I mean, who has ever done anything as valuable as that?

56 **Gray:** Let me ask you more about literature and publishing. You started out with Bowles, and I wondered how the publishing process has gone since then. How have editors reacted to your work? Do you have a standing relation with Seix Barral in Spain?

Rosa: Well, Seix Barral contacted me. I never dared send anything. The editor of Seix Barral is Pere Gimferrer, the great Catalán poet. I think it was after *Dust on her Tongue*, there was a review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and through that they got interested in who I was, and they wrote me through the City Lights' agent in Spain. At that time I had this sort of amateur agent, who lived in

Morocco part of the time. I already had those three books out—in English, and of course in Spanish, but published in Guatemala. So Seix Barral asked, and I sent the books.

57 **Gray:** What are you doing now?

Rosa: I'm not doing anything.

58 **Gray:** So it's very clear to you: you're either not writing or you're writing. There's not some area in between. That must be a relief. You can really enjoy, you're not anxious.

Rosa: Well, I might get a little anxious, but then I usually start writing. But I haven't written anything, I mean fiction, since *La orilla africana*. That was the end of '98. It's almost two years.

59 **Gray:** What have you been doing in that time?

Rosa: I translated a book by a French writer last year, Paul Léautaud—a kind of journal, a "*journal particulier*," which Seix Barral asked me to do. Between my last two books, I translated *The Missionaries*, a book by Norman Lewis.

60 **Gray:** The travel writer?

Rosa: Yes, but he's written ten or so novels also. He's at least 90, and he's still working. His first novel takes place in Guatemala: *The Volcanoes Above Us*. The story's set in the fifties, during the counter-revolution.

61 **Gray:** Arbenz and Arévalo and....

Rosa: Castillo Armas, overthrowing the Arbenz government. It's not his best novel, but it's an interesting one.

62 **Gray:** Are his other novels set in Central America?

Rosa: No. One is set in Italy, another in Spain—he knew Spain very well. He has two books set in Spain and another in Libya. He's sometimes compared to Graham Greene—there's a similarity. *The Missionaries* is a kind of travel documentary, an indictment of the American missionary activity, like the operations of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. It has two long chapters on Guatemala, one on Venezuela, and another on Paraguay.

63 **Gray:** Is Seix Barral also publishing that?

Rosa: No, that was published by another publisher, Herder, in Barcelona in 1998.

64 **Gray:** I was struck in Guatemala this time that so many Guatemalan writers—Monterroso, Arias, Montejo, Liano, and others—are living in Mexico, Nicaragua, Los Angeles, Italy, here in New York, and so on. Now you've returned to live in Guatemala from Tangiers. I wonder if the phrase "Guatemalan writer" has any meaning to you.

Rosa: Not really. Not intrinsically. For me it's an accident, being Guatemalan.

65 **Gray:** You wouldn't say there's a sensibility, then, whether in Asturias or Martínez or current writers?

Rosa: Not in my case, anyway. And not really in Asturias. He made himself into a Guatemalan writer because of the French context, the take they had on that. I think that it was natural that they were interested in that aspect, and so he went farther in that direction because of those expectations. I may be wrong.

66 **Gray:** What do you think of the Latin American “boom” novelists?—you know if you ask a fairly literate North American the name of a modern Latin American writer, they’d say “Márquez.”

Rosa: Márquez. Or Isabel Allende now.

67 **Gray:** Or Isabel Allende. Do you think the “boom” writers have set up expectations for other Latin American writers? How do you feel as a Latin American writer, writing in Spanish, I don’t want to say in the shadow of Márquez, but in the context of Márquez, Allende, and others?

Rosa: For me, it’s totally indifferent. It doesn’t go into the equation. Borges much more so, for me. He’s the dominant figure. Márquez for me is an accident—a big accident, granted! But I don’t think Márquez was possible without Borges, without what Borges did with the Spanish language.

68 **Gray:** Who were some of the writers you read while growing up? Was yours a happy childhood?

Rosa: It may not have been a happy childhood, but it was good. Looking back, I see it was a privileged childhood. It was sort of wild; we were on the outskirts, or what was then the outskirts, of Guatemala City—almost like growing up in the country. I hated school. I was by myself a lot of the time. My parents didn’t let us

watch TV, so...as I said, I don't think it was happy, but it was good. I read adventure stories. Karl May, a German who wrote westerns, who had never been here. [Laughs.] And Salgari, I read all his work. Emilio Salgari, a tacky Italian writer, writing about pirates in Malaysia, where he never went. [Laughs.] I read those two—they published each over twenty novels—I read *all* of those novels. I'm also fond of a bad Guatemalan writer, Virgilio Rodríguez Macál, who wrote *Guayacán* and *El Mundo del Misterio* and *La Mansión del Pájaro Serpiente*.. Adventures in the Petén, where *he* had been. [Laughs.]

69 **Gray:** So, like a Guatemalan Stevenson...?

Rosa: Oh, Stevenson is far better! But Macál has good passages of adventure. Ideologically, he's totally...*wrong*. [Laughs.] So right-wing—he liked the United Fruit Company! But he wrote about the life of the *chicleros*, the people who live in the jungle, and he lived that life. He came from a rich family. I don't know why, but he ended up living in the Petén, for a long, long time. In the jungle. So it was very interesting. I don't know if he was copying, or was influenced by *La Vorágine*, which is of a higher quality. Do you know it?—José Eustacio Rivera, a Colombian, turn-of-the-century novelist. *La Vorágine* is strange—a natural, rich platter, very romantic and sentimental—but if you leave out, you know, the love part, it's just amazing description of the jungle. It's a must, a classic. He wrote it in Barcelona, actually. He died rather young...

70 **Gray:** I think of Kafka once in a while in your earlier pieces, but then Borges also was feeling that influence—don't you think?

Rosa: Some of Borges is *very* Kafkaesque. I really got into Kafka later, after I was here in New York.

71 **Gray:** What writers now are compelling to you? Who are you reading?

Rosa: I mentioned Norman Lewis. Adolfo Bioy Casares, who died a year ago. Cormac McCarthy. Jim Thomson, also.

72 **Gray:** Anybody who, at this stage, could still exert influence on you?

Rosa: I don't know.

73 **Gray:** Have you read Flannery O'Connor's stories?

Rosa: Oh, I'm a fan of her work.

74 **Gray:** Do you know her novel *Wise Blood*? There's an owl and a pretty unsavory protagonist...

Rosa: I didn't read the novel, but I saw the movie. (Laughs.) I don't think her novels are as good as her short stories.

75 **Gray:** In your story "Proof", a boy accidentally or foolishly kills a canary and both the maid and the father, independently, try to replace the canary. There are the parrots of *The Pelcari Project*. And then there are the double owls of *La orilla africana*. This is why O'Connor came to mind. Is there something going on here—with birds and doubles?

Rosa: No. But I think they're very interesting—owls.

76 **Gray:** It's never quite explained why the Colombian buys the owl.

Rosa: Well, he falls in love.

77 **Gray:** I suppose the tendency is to look for symbols with canaries and owls.

Rosa: No, no symbols—not for *me*.

78 **Gray:** By the way, were you in Morocco when you wrote *La orilla africana*?

Rosa: Yes that I wrote *in situ*.

79 **Gray:** When did you start thinking you wanted to be a writer? You said you started writing at eighteen.

Rosa: I started then but I gave up, somewhere along the way. And then, back in Guatemala, reading Borges—I remember exactly, reading *Ficciones*, I decided I wanted to really, you know, try to do that.

80 **Gray:** And you were eighteen then.

Rosa: I was nineteen.

81 **Gray:** Did you think about fame or notoriety? Did you think about being read by millions?

Rosa: Not really. But, of course, one is ambitious when one is young. It was very ambitious to think that one could write like Borges. To create worlds like that. That was my ambition, rather than being read by millions. Or being liked by people that I admire,

like Bowles. Or another professor, to whom I showed my first things—he's very old now, probably will die soon—I wanted him to like my work; that was my ambition.