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EDGARDO VEGA YUNQUÉ

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Literary pre/occupations: An interview with Puerto Rican author Edgardo Vega Yunque

RICHARD PEREZ



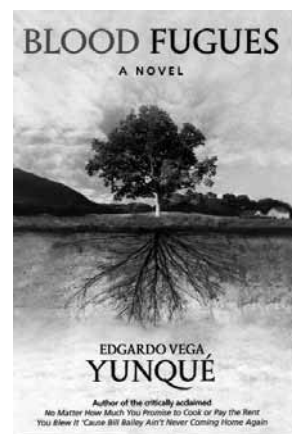
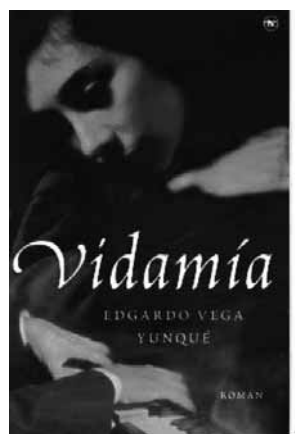
The Vega Yunque family at their home in Cidra, Puerto Rico (1941). From left, Rev. Alberto Vega, five year-old Edgardo, three year-old Abby, and Abigail Yunque de Vega.

[All photographs courtesy of Edgardo Vega Yunque. Reprinted, by permission, from Edgardo Vega Yunque.]

On September 11, 2003, I sat with Puerto Rican author Edgardo Vega Yunque to discuss his forthcoming novel *No Matter How Much You Promise to Cook or Pay the Rent You Blew it Cause Bill Bailey Ain't Never Coming Home Again: A Symphonic Novel* (2003). Vega Yunque has had a prolific literary career spanning over two decades. His works include the recently published *Blood Fugues* (2005) and *The Lamentable Journey of Omaha Bigelow into the Impenetrable Loisaida Jungle* (2004) and earlier works *The Comeback* (1985), *Mendoza's Dreams* (1987) and *Casualty Report* (1991). Significantly, our conversation had 9/11 as a tragic backdrop, reminding us of the ethical importance of language and literacy as a vital response to violence and retribution. The violence with which the United States decided to act echoed a history of imperialism palpably present as Vega Yunque and I, both first generation U.S. Puerto Ricans, wrestled with questions of power and identity. The specter of war stood in contradistinction to our dialogue about a life in/as/of literature. The novel this interview is concerned with *No Matter How Much You Promise to Cook or Pay the Rent You Blew it Cause Bill Bailey Ain't Never Coming Home Again: A Symphonic Novel* (2003) narrates the after-affects and afterimages (Vietnam War and post-colonial Puerto Rican identity) left over by of a logic of violence uncannily repeated in the U.S. responses to 9/11. At its best, Vega Yunque's work offers a complex relationship to grief, calling for an ethical injunction, an exhortation of justice through non-violence, and highlighting the pressing necessity of a multifaceted intellectual process that challenges us to preserve and examine life via the powers of the imagination.

While 9/11 served as the ghostly background to our conversation, it is Vega Yunque's life and his relationship to literature that this interview details. Our discussion takes on

a labyrinthine feel, moving jaggedly from his autobiography, to his unorthodox reflections on politics, to the details of a massive, nearly 800-page, novel, and his assorted aesthetic processes. What becomes dramatically evident in this exchange, for various psychic, historic, and philosophical reasons, is that Vega Yunque, from very early on, is driven by an incorrigible relationship to literature. This connection can be characterized as a haunting or a repetitive sorting out (he tells us how he finally understands Faulkner's *Sansy* "after the forty-first or forty-fifth time of reading the first page") of a post-colonial Puerto Rican identity through the intense labors of reading and writing. It is a journey through the written word whose imaginative project is to actively envision in New York a supplemental and displaced Puerto Rican community. His exposure to literature is at once liberating and brutal. The shock of reading, which he narrates, emphasizes an estranged sensibility in negotiation with the multifarious literary offerings of a middle class childhood drawn to the power of texts by a fragmented past and future. He describes an important reading experience in traumatic terms. "I stayed up all night. I came down to breakfast after finishing the novel and my mother said, 'What's the matter with you, you look like you have just seen a ghost.' And I said, 'I don't know I just read this book.' I still had it in my hand. I just couldn't let it go. And I told her that I had read this amazing book. She said, 'Oh, really you look so strange.'" (Emphasis mine) What grips us about Vega Yunque is his enormous literary range, or his relentless pursuit—"I just couldn't let it go"—of ghosts, citing influences that include Greek playwrights, William Faulkner, Lope de Vega, Jorge Luis Borges, and Mayra Santos-Febres. There is here a "strange" and possessed Puerto Rican trying to create, in the middle of the night as it were, a mode of articulation in an English-dominant, Eurocentric culture. The force of his talent and ambition moves us. What troubles us is a conspicuous evasion in his work of Puerto Rican masculinity. Instead, his oeuvre places its detailed eye on white male characters like Bill Bailey, who serves as the masculine center of *No Matter How Much You Promise to Cook or Pay the Rent You Blew it Cause Bill Bailey Ain't Never Coming Home Again*:



From left: Covers of the Dutch and German translations of *No Matter How Much You Promise to Cook or Pay the Rent You Blew it Cause Bill Bailey Ain't Never Coming Home Again: A Symphonic Novel* and of *Blood Fugues*.

A Symphonic Novel and promises a racial diversity that doesn't sufficiently question the politics of whiteness or Latino male expression. Yet the presences of Vidamía and Elsa in the novel are complex renditions of Latina subjectivity that require the reader's careful attention. Our conversation, ultimately, unfolds around these representational tensions, allowing a glimpse into the artistic machinations of an important Puerto Rican writer.



Edgardo with his mother, Abigail. Cidra, PR, 1937.

As we left the Greenwich Village café, where the interview had taken place, the absence of the World Trade Towers loomed over our discussion. 9/11 infused our words with a political urgency, reminding us not only of the aesthetic immediacy of literature, but of the inexorable role it plays in transfiguring society. In many ways, this interview, even if not always explicitly stated, grapples with the politics of reading, writing and social change.

Richard Perez: I want to begin with a series of autobiographical questions. First, can you talk about your background, that is, where you were born and where you grew up?

Edgardo Vega Yunque: I was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, at St. Lucas Hospital on May 20, 1936. My father was a fledgling Baptist minister, so he was given the responsibility of heading up a congregation in the barrio of Ponce called Corral Viejo, and we were there a year. Then he was given the responsibility as the minister in Cidra, a town that borders Aguas Buenas, Cayey, Caguas, and Aibonito, in the mountains, in the center of the Island. That is where I grew up until I was about twelve years old.

RP: Then you moved to the United States?

EVY: Then my parents came to the States because my father decided that we should go to New York, and my parents and my little brother went ahead in 1948, and I remained with my uncle, who was the principal of a school which I attended for a year in a community called Mameyes near Río Grande. My sister stayed with my father's cousin in Río Piedras, and after a year we came to the United States with my aunt, who was going to do a Master's at Columbia University. My father had gotten a position as the minister of a Spanish-speaking congregation in the Bronx. The members had bought a kind of Lutheran mini-cathedral. It was a beautiful church, and right next to it was a three-storey house where we lived. I like apartments because I always lived in houses. The church and house are still there. It was in an Irish neighborhood, which was very important in my development as somebody coming to the United States. I didn't know any English.

RP: When did you know that you wanted to be a writer? Was there a definitive moment when you were blown away by a piece of literature? For example, it is said that when Gabriel García Márquez read Faulkner, he knew he wanted to be a writer. Of course, we know that those stories are often more myth than reality. On the other hand, was there a writing experience when you realized that you had a gift with language? Or was it something slower, more deliberate, where you developed a relationship with language and literature over time?

EVY: It's complex because my family was literary, so I read from the time I was very young, seven or eight years old. By the time I was ten or eleven I had read Dumas's work and *Don Quijote* and all of that. Reading was a normal thing. They had poetry readings at the house, and my aunt was a minor poet. But coming to the United States and knowing no English I had to go through a process. And this is



With Ntozake Shange to accept the PEN Prize for Literary Excellence for the Bill Bailey novel, Oakland, CA, December 2004.

probably the defining moment, although I did not know it. I joined the Air Force after I got out of high school, and I came home from leave before going overseas. My sister and a girlfriend had gotten a job cleaning out an estate in upstate New York, and they asked the owners if they could bring me to do some work. So we went up there, and the second day I was there I was asked to clean out the basement of this guest house. I found, what they called pocket books with the baby kangaroo sticking out the mother's pouch; or what are now called paperbacks. I found a thousand of them and two huge suitcases. There were some books with covers of women with their busts showing. So I picked out all the books

that had sexy covers and brought them home. I picked out about four hundred or five hundred novels and began reading them. I didn't know too much about American literature. So I started reading Mickey Spillane's detective stories and Frank Slaughter's writing about doctors and nurses. And then I read *Of Mice and Men*, and I was like, Wow! Then I began looking through the books to see if I could find more Steinbeck. I found the rest of what had been written up to that time: *Cannery Row*; *Grapes of Wrath*; *East of Eden*. I don't know if *East of Eden* was written yet at that time.

Then I found a book called *Sanctuary*, like García Márquez, although I don't know if it was *Sanctuary* that García Márquez was referring to. I began reading it after dinner one night, and I almost gave up. I said to myself: this fucking guy can't write. What the hell is he trying to do? I couldn't understand. But after the forty-fourth or forty-fifth time of reading the first page it finally clicked in, these periodic sentences, his rhythms and everything else clicked in. I stayed up all night. I came down to breakfast after finishing the novel and my mother said, "What's a matter with you, you look like you have just seen a ghost." And I said, "I don't know; I just read this book." I still had it in my hand. I just couldn't let it go. And I told her that I had read this amazing book. She said, "Oh really, you look so strange." I said I stayed up all night, and she told me I shouldn't do that. I should sleep. I told her I was going to sleep after I ate breakfast. Back then in 1955 I brought home, all that Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair and other US novelists had written. I even had John Dos Passos's *USA*, which was a very important and seminal book. I had three more weeks to go on my leave, so I just stayed in my room and read all of this. At the age of nineteen, for some reason, I had absorbed this trove of American literature and was able to, without any literary training, except for the books I had read and the conversations I had heard, to distinguish between a literary novel and what I call a formula novel or what people now say a genre novel. I was able to begin understanding American literature. When I went back to the Air Force I just stayed in the library reading. Of course, I played ball for the sports teams on the base like baseball, basketball, and whatever they had, I played. The rest of the time I was just hanging out with my friends and reading novels. I also read European authors.

Then I was sent to Greece, which was a tremendous experience, and while there I met a girl. I don't have any beliefs in supreme beings but I believe in the kinds of things that happen between people. I met a girl there named Melpomene, which is a very strange Greek name. Other girls used to laugh at the name because they said it was an old name. Her nickname was Melpo. We became friends, and she would take me to see Greek plays and explain things to me, in Greek, not in English—I was starting to learn Greek but understood very little. We communicated in this kind of weird language since I was learning Greek. But we went to see Greek plays in an outdoor theater at the foot of the Acropolis: Euripides, Aristophanes! Then I went to Delphi, and I had a very strange oracular experience at the ancient theater. Anyway, I got back and went to college in California, then I came to NYU, and in a classics class I encountered the name Melpomene, which is the muse of tragedy and I said, "Wow, this is strange." But it was in Greece that I decided to become a writer, I was twenty-two years old, and one day I decided that I would become a novelist and short story writer and try to emulate these people that have inspired me: Steinbeck, Faulkner, Thomas Hardy, Doestoevsky, Zola and many others. Then when I went to college I continued, first in California, to read more European and American literature; going back to Walt Whitman, Emerson, Melville.

RP: I can't help but notice that you have not mentioned any Latino writers who have influenced you. Were there any Latino writers that have influenced your work or inspired you in some way?

EVY: When I was at NYU I studied Latin American Literature. I was taught by a wonderful Spanish novelist, who had also taught at the University of Puerto Rico, named Francisco Ayala. And in the other courses I read the great Spanish writers like Azorín, Lope de Vega, and people like that. But the people that I really liked were the Latin American ones in Ayala's courses: Borges, Ernesto Sábato, Quirogas, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and poets like Neruda, Mistral, and later, García Márquez's work.

RP: How long did it take you to write the novel?

EVY: The history of *Bill Bailey* is a long and complicated one. I was raging because I had all this passion and writing in me, and I was trying to create a style of my own. By the way, when I was in Greece I was twenty-two years old, and I decided to become a writer. I wrote to my parents telling them that this was the decision I had made, and my father was very gracious. He sent me a book called *Cuentos de boy: la generación del cincuenta*, the stories of this generation of the 1950s like [René] Marqués and Pedro Juan Soto, who wrote *Spiks*. I read a story called "En el fondo del caño hay un negrito" by—I can't remember his name [José Luis González], he was a communist who left Puerto Rico and went to Mexico. He died about three or four years ago. My inspiration was, after having read all this American and European literature, to go back to Puerto Rican literature and see myself in prose. After hearing my complaints my wife says to me, "Why don't you write a novel that will make the United States cry." Because I was pissed off at the United States, it was hard; they don't understand us; that we have an identity. They always want to make us be ghetto people and gang people.

I write about the middle class because that is what I know. I also write about the ghetto because I have friends who live there. So in 1987 I saw a family band in the subway, and I was very moved by this family playing. I came home and began writing this novel. I wrote out the title first. I had heard them play the song "Won't You Come Home Bill Bailey," so I wrote out the song title, and in 1987 I began in the fall and finished the first draft in 1992 or 1993. Then I was able to get an agent. My agent



At the Third World Writers Conference, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 1991. Third from left: Bbarati Mukerjee (India), Farouq Khalid (Pakistan), Edgardo Véga Yunque, Sembene Ouamane (Senegal), Ana Sebastian (Argentina), Hugo Pos (Surinam).

shopped it around and sold it to this publishing house, and they paid a very large advance. This is a subject that might be controversial to some people, but to me it has to be discussed. They had an imprint inside the publishing house for people of color, and “people of color” is a term I despise. I don’t submit to it. I think it is the stupidest thing that ever came down the pike.

RP: Can you elaborate on that final point regarding your feeling of the term “people of color”?

EVY: I protested and wrote a long letter saying, “You bought this book as a work of literature, and you are trying to ghettoize it, and that isn’t what I am about.” I don’t care about being a Puerto Rican writer as such. Yes, I write for my people, but it this is not what this is about. I said, “If you bought the book as literature, you should publish it as such.” So they killed the deal. They said this was unpublishable. They wanted their advance back, but I never answered them. How dare they! At the same time my agent had gotten me involved in PEN, in a newly-formed committee called the open-book committee. It was there that I first heard people using this term “people of color,” and I said, “Wait a minute, why are you including Latin Americans in this people of color agenda of yours since color is not what defines us. If you look at Nicolás Guillén, the Afro-Cuban poet, and you look at Ariel Dorfman, who is a Germanic Jew from Chile, the thing that unites them and their work is the Spanish language. One is a blond guy, and the other one is an African. Are you going to divide these two writers because of color when what unites them is the Spanish language?” So I became persona non grata, I was accused of being ashamed of my African heritage and all of this other bullshit. And in the novel in *Bill Bailey*, you know that that is one of its themes—when Wyndell Ross and Vidamía are arguing about color.

RP: The title of your novel is an interesting and unorthodox choice. Can you discuss how you came up with it, and why you chose such an elongated title?

EVY: Because of the song “Won’t You Come Home Bill Bailey.” When I heard the family playing it: I came home and I was totally inspired because I picked up something tragic in the experience [in the song’s lyrics]. During the 1970s I taught a good number of Vietnam veterans at Hostos Community College about the history of the United States involvement in the war. The involvement of the French with Indo-China. [Ho Chi] Min came to the United States in the 1930s and asked for help, but the United States turned him down. The Japanese came to Vietnam and said,



Signing copies of Bill Bailey at the Harbourfront Festival of Authors, Toronto, Canada, October 2004.

“Let’s make an alliance, a pan-Asian alliance,” and Ho did not want to be part of Japan’s imperialistic designs. The Vietnamese had to survive, so they fought the French, and the United States then decided to help the French. These kids after being in Vietnam in combat were totally amazed that they had been used as cannon fodder. Most of them were Puerto Rican, Marine and Army veterans. I had heard their stories of soldiers who had seen their buddies die, and that inspired me, so I constructed the novel that way.

RP: Music plays an important role, as your title indicates, in your novel. How does music symbolically function in your novel? Also, how does it structure your novel?

EVY: When I came to the United States, to the Bronx, I would flip through the radio. I was very fortunate because my mother tried to learn English right away. She was in the United States a year, so in 1949 when I came she had made a great effort to learn English. She knew no English before that. Alexander’s Department Store had a contest on your favorite American president, and she wrote an essay on Franklin D. Roosevelt and won an eight-inch television set with a magnifying glass in front of it to enlarge the picture. So I was exposed to American culture very early on. I would invite all my Irish friends to come up and watch television with us since we were the only people that had a television set. They would come up and watch Notre Dame football games and New York Rangers hockey games. I was learning how to play roller hockey. But later on when we moved to East Harlem I also used to listen to the radio, and the music that captivated me was jazz, the Milkman’s Matinee, and Symphony Sid’s program. So I used to stay up listening to jazz. I also had older friends who played in Latin bands, and by sixteen I was big, and they would take me to these clubs. I would sit at the bar next to Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, all these jazz greats. The important thing about my prose is that it is based on the solos, the great, digressive, free jazz kind of thing.

RP: You say in your author’s note that jazz has transported you to a world of mystery. I am really intrigued by this sense of mystery in jazz myself. Can you discuss



Edgardo Vega Yunqué while teaching at SUNY Old Westbury, 1971.

this mystery that is so much a part of jazz and in similar ways part of your novel?

EVY: Jazz is the only art form that the United States has given to the world. Some people say film, but film was being developed simultaneously in Europe. Jazz is based on improvisation, freedom, dialogue. I had a very strange experience. In jazz there is something called trading, where a piano will play eight bars or four bars, and the saxophone will come in and then a bass, and they will trade. One time I was listening to this and my eight-year-old son said, “Daddy, it sounds like they are talking, like they are having a conversation.” And I said, “They are, that’s what it is about, about musicians

communicating.” You can pick out musicians—one from Dallas, one from Los Angeles, one from New York, one from Chicago—and bring them into a studio and without any charts say, “Let’s do ‘On Green Dolphin Street’ in b flat,” and the pianist will sit down and start playing. It is the most amazing thing. They know the tunes and the changes, and they just improvise. For me that is the most fantastic human quality. It is a thing that emulates having dinner with your friends, or having a love affair. Jazz, improvisational jazz, has all those elements. And in order to play jazz, you have to be a virtuoso on your instrument. Sadly, because our society is a consumer society most of the music, and I don’t have any interest in putting down other music, I just want to recognize jazz for what it is, most music is banal, and it is designed to be monotonous and therefore not wake people up. Jazz, when you get into it, wakes you up.

RP: Why jazz and not salsa or bomba or plena?

EVY: That is all in there—in *Bill Bailey*. This is an American novel. As I say in the author’s note, if I learned about the U.S. through Irish eyes, then I learned about the U.S.’s soul through jazz. And I do have Tumba Santiago, Vidamía’s *abuelo*, who is a *conguero*, and the *clave*, which is the essence of salsa. Of course, I don’t consider salsa a monotonous music, and it had tremendous musicians like the Palmieri’s, Charlie and Eddie, and Tito Puente, who blazed a trail in Latin jazz.

RP: Jazz takes on a healing function in the novel, especially for Billy, but also in some sense for the rest of the family. Discuss this restorative power that jazz has in your writing.

EVY: My love of jazz is so personal because during the time I was writing the novel I listened to WBGO. From the time I came into the house until the time I went to bed I had WBGO on, so I listened to jazz during the writing of the novel, and in many ways it healed me. What you get is the same thing happening in the novel. Vidamía being introduced to the music because of the love she had for her father and that in itself has a healing function. But more than that, jazz is the poetics of the novel. I quote E.M. Forster, who says a novel can be musical, can have the same function as music where you remember the feeling. That’s what I was reaching for with *Bill Bailey*.

RP: I also want to ask you about the way you use language in this very diverse way. You use not only English but also Spanish and the English you use moves and

changes. For example, you use different ethnic Englishes and Englishes from different regions in the United States. Can you talk about this linguistic range and the impact it has on the novel?

EVY: To my great detriment I could not help anyone write technically. I can help them by encouraging them, but I don’t know the English language or Spanish language technically. I know what a past tense is, but I punctuate by rhythm. I know what a parenthetical clause is, but beyond that my understanding of language is musical, it is through my ear. What I hear is what I write down. I don’t have any technical expertise; what I do have is an ear. A very fine jazz musician, whose name is Benny Carter, died when he was 100 years old, and he was amazing because he never learned how to read music. It was just his ear. Not only was he a sax player, but he also played trumpet, and he was amazing. He composed, but he never read music. I am that way; it is what I hear. It is about the language I hear. I have a peculiar habit that makes certain people uncomfortable. If you bring me to a bunch of Italian dock workers I will start talking like them. If you bring me to an Irish saloon, I am there five minutes and I start talking like them. If you bring me to Dublin, I will start talking like the Irish. If you bring me to Alabama, within fifteen minutes I will start talking like they talk.

RP: Which, verbally, is a kind of improvisation in itself.

EVY: Yes! It is, yeah. The only accent I don’t do well is a Puerto Rican accent. I have a very tough time doing a Puerto Rican accent. That’s because I made such an effort, since I came here at thirteen, to enunciate because I did not want to be discriminated against. If you had something against me, let it be something solid, not that I don’t speak English correctly. So I made a great effort to speak English and write English. I also feel that in a way my writing of English is a way of using this language as a shield for our situation. I don’t want to say weapon because I have too much love for humanity to use English as a weapon, but it is a way of responding to our situation both as a colonized people and as a people not fully respected in the United States.

RP: You also use language, and you have answered this question in part already, but you use language in a way that creates, on the one hand, a certain tension and, on the other, these unexpected fusions. Can you talk about this double movement in your language?

EVY: Can you give me an example?

RP: Sure. For instance, there is a way in which Vidamía’s Irish family, who live on the Lower East Side, talk and act more like “Puerto Ricans,” and I put that in heavy quotations, than Vidamía does. And Vidamía, interestingly, learns, in some ways, how to be Puerto Rican from them: especially from her relationship to Cookie. Why this reversal?

EVY: Yes, of course. I love the contrasts that a city like New York provides and that the United States provides. For me it is a pity that that isn’t exploited more, the differences. I think it is great that we live in such a complex and varied city like New York and that the United States has a beautiful opportunity to allow its people to be themselves rather than being all the same. I think Latinos have a tremendous advantage in the United States because I have seen people from Puerto Rico who are doctors and lawyers and professionals and come here and go through hell the first year because what most of the people use is a very simple English that is based on Anglo-Saxon roots. When you begin ascending the professional ladder, English becomes more Latinate. So if you are doctor and you are in a hospital, people say kidneys, and the Puerto Rican doctor might think what the hell is that? But if they

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2. NOMBRE Y APELLIDOS DEL NIÑO Edgardo Alberto Vega Yunque

3. Sexo Masculino Femenino
4. Gemelo, triple, etc. No
5. No. en el orden de nacimiento No
6. Fecha del nacimiento 20 May 1976

7. PADRE
8. Nombre Alberto Vega
9. Residencia Calle Canal Viejo, Ponce, PR
10. Color o raza N
11. Natural de Ponce, PR
12. Oficio, profesión u ocupación Ministro Evangelista

13. MADRE
14. Nombre (de soltera) Allegail Yunque
15. Residencia Calle Canal Viejo, Ponce, PR
16. Color o raza N
17. Natural de Ponce, PR
18. Oficio, profesión u ocupación Domestica

19. Industria o negocio en que trabaja En su hogar
20. Fecha en que trabajó por última vez en esta ocupación Mayo 1976
21. Años que ha trabajado en esta ocupación 6
22. Fecha en que trabajó por última vez en esta ocupación Mayo 1976
23. Años que ha trabajado en esta ocupación 6

24. Número de hijos que ha tenido la madre (incluyendo al presente) 2
(a) Nacidos vivos y viviendo actualmente 1
(b) Nacidos vivos y que han fallecido 0
(c) Nacidos muertos 1

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Dr. De Diego

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(DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH)
GOBIERNO DE PUERTO RICO
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Copy of Edgardo Vega Yunque's birth certificate—showing that Yunque is really his mother's last name and not a 'nationalistic' attempt to connect to El Yunque and to Puerto Rico.

say a renal malfunction, it is the same as Spanish, *riñones mal funcionando*. So the language as it becomes more complex in English becomes more Latinate. The Latin roots in the English language surface. In effect that happened to me: I didn't do as well in high school as I did in college because in college things become more complex and therefore Latinate. It is a pity that so many people in the United States have such antipathy toward Spanish since it would make them smarter.

RP: Memory also plays a very important part in your novel, and in a way it has a life of its own, a force and tangibility, which works differently with different characters. Discuss the complex ways you use memory in the novel.

EVY: Absolutely. I consider myself a writer of memory and conscience. In other

words, I cannot forget who we are as a people, nor does my conscience permit injustices to go unnoticed. That doesn't mean I hold a grudge, but I can't forget how I was raised or who I am. I give my characters that same respect. How can Alfred Butterworth forget how he was treated by his stepfather? How can Billy Farrell erase from memory his experiences from Vietnam or his father's death? He did manage for a time to erase the music, but Vidamía brought him back. How can Vidamía forget reading *Roots* and not be affected seeing how African-American people were treated? So all of those attributes that my characters have are part of my great belief that to try erase memory is to murder them. So I am very interested in the memory aspect.

RP: Yes, that's very powerful. There are various kinds of memories at work in your text. There is cultural memory, but there is also a traumatic memory. Which is a different kind of memory, and it too has a tremendous intensity, especially with Billy, but not just him, also with Vidamía when she is looking for her father. Can you talk about traumatic memory as a different kind of memory in the novel?

EVY: I am not sure myself whether there is a post-Freudian element to the novel because tragedy is inevitable. I think that the thing that bothers me the most is that people try to erase certain aspects of their past. I lost my youngest son in 2002, ironically two weeks after I signed the contract for this book. He was a tremendous artist and probably a better writer. Through different circumstances and quirks he passed away in his sleep. People have told me you have to put it behind you, and I say I am not going to put it behind me. How can you bury your own son, your youngest son, and not be affected the rest of your life. I don't want to forget. That was extremely traumatic for me. But the thing that I found interesting in writing the end of the novel... I had one friend who said the novel should have ended when Billy committed suicide, and I said no way. Another person said to me, "I was reading this novel, and I didn't want to read it because I knew I would be destroyed by this novel." But he said, "I kept reading it and was devastated." I think a function of my own make-up made me go back and show the strength that could emerge after traumatic loss.

RP: That's interesting. You didn't want it to seem that Billy's death becomes a tragic moment that breaks the family?

EVY: Yes. Nor does the symbolism appeal to me. I have children who live in the United States and grandchildren who live in the United States, and the United States belongs to them. After what happened on September 11th, humanity has to go on. Not just the United States, they are part of it, but the world has to deal with trauma and go on. Humanity has to triumph ultimately. I wanted Billy, who represents a certain aspect of the United States...he dies and it is significant that Alfred Butterworth, who represents another aspect of the United States also dies. You have this straight white male who dies and an African-American man who dies. What comes out is this youth, Vidamía, Cookie, Rebecca Feliciano, the pianist.

RP: Why does Fawn die? She is intersexual, which is fascinating.

EVY: Because what I am addressing here, and somebody else said to me, "I am reading this book, and I am Puerto Rican and those kids from Avenue B, the four horsemen of Ave B, why did they have to be Puerto Rican?" And I said, "Because it is true that there are kids like that. There are people like that who are ruthless and I am not in the business of promoting that Puerto Ricans are this perfect people because we are not: we have a lot of flaws." There are things we have to straighten out. But we can't blame the Man, society. We have to police ourselves. We have to really work on ourselves. What I am pointing out is that the United States as a violent culture has a problem with differences. And Fawn was different.

The country also has a problem with art. It doesn't understand art, and Fawn was a poet. A weird kid. A different kid: different sensibilities, different understandings, different yearnings. And this force, this evil which is not even conscious destroys her, destroys that difference, that beauty, destroys that amazing young being, destroys poetry.

RP: If Fawn is an embodiment of art, then part of what you are saying is that art is gendered male and female.

EVY: Always. I am a man and I was raised as a macho that played sports, taught to defend things and all that bullshit. Yet this book is about women. It is dedicated to my daughter Alyson. I also list the names of her mother and grandmothers. It honors those women. The epigraph by James Baldwin says that it takes a man a lot longer to grow up and he couldn't do it without women. So this is kind of a prose poem in praise of women.

RP: Can you talk about Billy's relationship to his Puerto Rican friend Joey? What does Joey's death symbolize?

EVY: I haven't thought about it much. In a way it drives the novel but in another way not. It is just an accident.

RP: That is the safe novelist answer.

EVY: I plotted it, but I don't think it means anything. It represents some of my students who went to Vietnam as Marines and Army and got wounded. I wrote a short story, called "Casualty Report," about one of my students who walks around with a plastic foot because he lost his own in Vietnam.

RP: One of the interesting things about Joey is that even though he is dead from the beginning of the novel his presence is enormous. He is always in the novel; he is always in the characters' memories. He haunts the novel, and in some ways he is as full a character as anyone else.

EVY: Wow. I hadn't thought of it like that. In some ways, then, I suppose what could be extracted from that is the notion of the sacrifice Puerto Ricans have made on behalf of the United States. If one were to reach for symbolism and the attempt that has been made to dismiss us in some way. That is why this "people of color" agenda bothers me so much: it means we get amalgamated and homogenized into this thing that, in effect, is a bankrupt agenda. Even though there is racism in the United States, color is a smokescreen.

RP: Can you expand on that?

EVY: There are countries in the world that are almost homogenous and still have the same problems that we have in the United States. So the problem in the United States appears to be race, but basically it is a class problem. A small number of people have all the money. The rest of the people have to fight each other for it. The percentage is not going to change by making everyone people of color. It is not going to become a greater force because there is only a finite amount of money and resources allotted for the rest of us who are basically working people.

RP: Are you suggesting then that this term "people of color" serves to obfuscate a material analysis that should be taking place?

EVY: Yes. It is also a way to garner political support, and political support is in some ways meaningless because of the mammoth nature of the American government.

RP: But race as well as class is a very important issue in the novel. There are a series of cross-cultural relationships in the novel, Vidamía and her siblings for instance, or Billy and Butterworth, who is in many ways a father figure. Why did you decide to make the novel so racially entangled?

EVY: Because that is the way the United States is. Love doesn't pick and choose. You love people for who they are, not because of their race and color. So I wanted to write something that would highlight, that would place under a microscope this amalgam of people and the kind of relationships that I have seen. In my own family, my sister married an Irishman, my brother married an Irish girl, and my youngest daughter, to whom the novel is dedicated, married a guy from Dublin. I know many people who have married Puerto Ricans, and that fascinated me: that people from distinct cultures can love one another and can enhance their own humanity. In the case of Africans it becomes a big problem, and I have never understood why people can't be left alone to be stupid and trade bodily fluids, no matter their color. I wanted to create this character Vidamía, who represents the best of what the United States is, this real compassionate, beautiful, young person, and this culture, which is very young.

RP: Can you discuss Elsa and her relationship to both the Puerto Rican community and her Afro-Latino heritage?

EVY: She is Puerto Rican in all the complexity of what we are: loving; confused; angry; talented; bright; deceitful. That is who we are. A lot of people have criticized Elsa to me. They say you are giving Puerto Ricans a bad name. I say bullshit. Elsa is my homegirl. I love her. As confused as she is sometimes, as crazy as she is sometimes, she is us.

RP: The geography is also interesting. It moves from the West Coast to the East Coast to the South, and Puerto Rico is always there. Can you talk about why the novel has these large geographic shifts and what it says about "American" identity?

EVY: I do these things purposefully. I wanted to touch every part of the United States that is significant. When I taught at the New School, I taught the short story. The short story is a beautiful form. It can be taught and examined. I don't believe in giving criticism to students on their work. If they are going to be writers they have to read and hear their own voices. So I never gave feedback orally or in written form to my students. I used to tell them from the beginning: I don't give literary criticism. I will talk about dramatic structure, about style and the poetics of the short story. They would criticize their own work within certain parameters. With that said, I would illustrate on the chalkboard a journey from the beginning of the story.



Edgardo Vega Yunqué as founder and president of the Centro Cultural Clemente Soto Velez. New York, 1998.

They would have to look in terms of a railcar, a train traveling on tracks toward a conclusion of the short story. At the same time you have different stops. The protagonist of the short story has an inner dialogue. And you let the reader know that he is going to visit his son, whom he hasn't seen in thirty years, and at each stop you keep telling the story of why. What I wanted to do in writing *Bill Bailey* was to take the reader on a journey. On a journey not only of the characters but how they go back and forth from Tennessee to New York or Wyndell Ross coming from Denver to Boston, back to the West Coast and then coming to New York. Vidamía goes on vacation to Puerto Rico. My interest was not only to go on this journey throughout the United States but to get people in touch with the United States and its history. The novel goes into the Civil War and the displacement of the five tribes from Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama to Oklahoma. I wanted to make that connection between the Cherokees and the Blacks. I spent a week in the Schomburg library researching black cowboys and the Indian wars, the Sandcreek massacres. I wanted to create a geography of the United States to bring people in touch with what a beautiful country it is and how complex it is because that is also a part of memory. Geography is also memory.

RP: Toni Morrison begins *Sula* with the powerful and enigmatic character Shadrack, who has just returned from WWII. Upon his release one of the first things he sees is his deformed hands or at least they are deformed in his traumatized imagination. There is a way in which his hands symbolize a profound loss of control. Can you talk about Billy's hands and what the deformities of his hands do to him?

EVY: Your capacity to control your environment depends on your capacity to handle your environment, and in Billy's case the fact that he was a jazz pianist obviously hinders his capacity to continue to develop as a creative person and as a human being. Not being able to handle your environment damages human beings. In many respects the fact that we have a destiny has disabled us as a people: Puerto Ricans but also Americans. Americans are very disabled in many respects. The anxiety about being American and becoming American, being mostly English and German, disables people. What I wanted to do was begin addressing that disability. Having someone who was young and idealistic and compassionate get her teeth into the problem and attempt to pull this damaged father, this disabled father back into reality.

RP: Vidamía's name is very provocative and powerful. Can you discuss its symbolic significations?

EVY: My friend Laura Restrepo, who is a fantastic Colombian novelist, said to me, "Are you aware that for the next century people are going to name their daughters Vidamía." To be a novelist is to be blessed because these things don't happen often by design; they just happen. I have Billy Farrell finding Elsa and getting it on in this project apartment. She is trying to impress him by saying "vida mía" like in the novelas, and he latches on to it. It means my life; I am your life. The name came about during the writing of the love scene. I didn't plan it beforehand—writing this love scene. Later, after Elsa kicks Billy out, her mother, Ursula, asks him what he wants the baby to be named, and he says, "If it is a boy, Joey, and if it is a girl, Vidamía." Elsa wants to name her Samantha or some name like that, but her mother says no, Vidamía. Elsa says "Mami, that is not a name," and Ursula says, "It is now." For me, Vidamía represents the actualization of each person who reads that novel knowing that it is his or her life, and it is his or her responsibility to take life and make it grow and have the courage to confront whatever it is that is there. And particularly our own people need to recognize that each individual life is important.

RP: It is interesting because Vidamía has the individualist idea that this is literally my life but embedded in it is also the notion of self-love through a kind of collective love, that my life is our life.

EVY: Yes. Exactly.

RP: What are some of the stereotypes that you are taking on in this book?

EVY: What do you mean?

RP: There is a way in which this novel has a series of reversals: wealthy Latinos, poor white family. Are you trying to deconstruct certain stereotypes?

EVY: I am addressing certain issues, and one is obviously race. Another is the notion that Puerto Ricans are worthless human beings. Elsa's siblings, other than Joey who went into the Army and got killed, become successful. School teachers, one is a principal, Elsa is a psychologist. So I am addressing, in a way deconstructing our existence here in the United States. And it is not just in New York. In the party I mention the fact that Elsa has invited relatives from all over the Midwest, where Puerto Ricans have gone.

RP: Why do you choose to write about such a wealthy Puerto Rican family when so many Puerto Ricans are working class and working poor?

EVY: I am going to say something catty: because Piri Thomas, Abraham Rodriguez, and Esmeralda Santiago already did that. And Esmeralda has done pretty well. She went to Harvard. That's cool. I write what I know about. I was raised as a middle class kid, and that is what I write about. I know very wealthy Puerto Rican people who are university professors and who live in nice houses. We have some dynamite lawyers, doctors. A Puerto Rican woman, Dr. [Antonia] Novello, served as Surgeon General of the United States.

RP: Can you discuss the relationship between Vidamía and Elsa? There is a strong tension and ambivalence that colors their relationship. And can you compare it to Vidamía's relationship to Billy Farrell?

EVY: Elsa is screwed up; she needs therapy.

RP: Ironically, given that she is a therapist.

EVY: That is another element of my chagrin with the United States. To me the helping profession is the most screwed up. Crazy people are angry at the system. There is something wrong with the system, and they see it. So they go to therapists and the therapists are going to help them cope. Who the fuck is crazier? The therapists want to help people cope with an insane society. They want to say an insane society is ok, so who is crazier? You have to understand that Elsa is very young. She has Vidamía at sixteen, so when Vidamía is sixteen, Elsa is thirty-two. By the end of the novel Elsa is only thirty-four. That is a pretty young woman. That is a woman who is still a babe. She is still a very vital and sexual, and she begins to see this threat unconsciously of this girl that she raised to be a white girl with all kinds of advantages of wealth. And all of a sudden this girl wants to go back to her roots in the Lower East Side and hang out. With each year this kid starts to become what she dreaded most, which is to become a homegirl. Her little white girl starts talking Afro-Rican and mouthing off, and her mother is very strict about the use of language.

RP: And that rigidity, in a way, is a denial of where she came from? How about Vidamía's relationship to Billy?

EVY: She is just a kid who loves her father. She becomes like his parent.

RP: You say that your intent in the novel is to pay homage to jazz and the Mexican mural paintings. How do the Mexican mural paintings play into this book?

EVY: My interest is to pay homage to the two art forms from the Americas.

One is United States jazz, and the other is the Mexican mural. It is a symphonic novel, but from the point of view of looking at the characters, it is like looking at a mural. I go from one character to another. When you watch a mural of faces, of peoples, of figures, you go from one to another. There is no linear thread. And even though my plot in the novel is linear, I also have this digressive element, associated with the style of the mural paintings, where you can focus on one person then switch to another and then go to a third and come back to the second and go back to the fourth. So that was my interest in the structural aspect of the novel. It just struck me in composing the novel: I wanted to give it that feeling.

RP: And the question of class is so important in Mexican murals, which almost always depict working people.

EVY: That's right. The Mexican muralists were very socialist, but in the United States they were supported by the Rockefellers. The big Mexican murals at Rockefeller Center and the New School were all paid for by American wealth. Also my interest is to free myself from the constraints of the traditional novel. So I set out purposefully with the symphony and the mural to free myself, to improvise. I quote Orozco that you can draw on the plaster while it is wet, and I basically wanted that freedom to stretch out. Some critic said I am an ambitious novelist.

RP: I haven't seen a Latino novel attempt this kind of epic narrative.

EVY: Someone said this raises the bar of the Latino novel.

RP: Having said that, then do you consider yourself a Puerto Rican writer? A Latino writer? An American writer? Or do you reject those categories?

EVY: I am without any question a Puerto Rican novelist. My nationality is Puerto Rican. I cannot get around it. I cannot forget where I came from. And I cannot put aside that we belong to the nations of the world. At the same time, as I said in my Op Ed article in the *New York Times*, I love my homeland of Puerto Rico like a mother, but I am also wedded to the United States as one is to a generous but difficult wife. So if people want to say *Bill Bailey* is an American novel, great. There is no question that *Bill Bailey* is an American novel. If they want to talk about me, please include me with Enrique Laguerre, Luis Rafael Sánchez, Ana Lydia Vega, and Mayra Santos-Febres.

RP: That's where you belong on the shelf.

EVY: Yes. Those are my homeboys and girls. Even though I have no problems sitting with writers from U.S. literature. It is an also an honor to be told that my novel belongs on a shelf with Melville and Ellison.

RP: You say you were introduced to the United States through Irish eyes. What do you mean?

EVY: The fact that I came to this Irish neighborhood to live. I stepped out there and didn't know English. I became Eddie to them. Since I was big and fast, they included me in their games. They had a team called the Shamrocks. They taught me football and hockey. In the summer I would play baseball, and I would hit the balls onto the roofs. I have always had a soft spot in my heart for the Irish because their situation mirrors ours. We are both islands that were invaded by more powerful military and political powers. They both have this love of words. They are enormously talented even at the working class level. Fantastic storytellers our people and the Irish. This is not to say that other people are not great storytellers, but I see the congruence between the Irish and the Puerto Ricans. So I admired that and became absorbed into that human aesthetic of telling stories—defending your individuality because you were being attacked. The Irish are very proud of their identity as Irish and equally proud of their writers, something I wish happened with

us on a greater scale. But ultimately it was the example of the Irish using the English language as a tool or as a weapon to defend their identity that I admired most, from Swift to Joyce to my friend Colum McCann, who coincidentally writes about Latinos and Blacks with as much respect as he writes about his own. That is my debt of gratitude to the Irish.

RP: Why don't you mention Puerto Ricans in your author's note?

EVY: I think in the final version I say that most of my inspiration comes from Puerto Rico, from my people. But I also owe a debt to the Irish.

RP: What are you reading and listening to now?

EVY: I have a granddaughter who is half Japanese, who is a brilliant child. She is seventeen years old and wants to be an actress. She is very dramatic, very beautiful young woman, and I am really interested in Japanese culture. I am working on a small study of the Japanese novel. I am also reading people like Mayra Santos-Febres, who is a brilliant young Puerto Rican novelist and short story writer. I also just finished reading a terrific book by Colum McCann, who is an Irish writer. He wrote a book called *This Side of Brightness*, and his novel is along the same lines of mine because he is writing about blacks. So another aspect of my writing is having the freedom to write about anybody that I want to as a novelist. And not to have a niche that says I can only write about Latinos. No, I'm sorry. I have an eye, an ear. I walk around New York; I see Jews, Irish, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans. I write whatever the hell I want, just like a painter paints whatever he wants, and I think that kind of freedom is healthy. McCann's novel is extremely moving. He is writing about a black guy who dug tunnels for the subways in New York City.

RP: I have many more questions but I think, since we have been talking for over three hours, we can stop here. Thank you for your time and a very provocative contribution to Latino literature and American letters.

EVY: You are welcome, and thank you for your thoughtful interview.



In Athens, Greece, 1958.

