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A Conversation with Michael Jamie-Becerra *February 3, 2006*

Michael Jayme is a native of El Monte, California. A graduate of the University of California, Riverside, his early work was collected in 1996 as Look Back and Laugh for the Chicano Chapbook Series, edited by Gary Soto. The following year he began publishing under the surname "Jaime-Becerra" and shortly thereafter a limited-edition collection of prose poems, entitled The Estrellitas Off Peck Road, was released by Temporary Vandalism. He earned an MFA in Fiction from the University of California, Irvine in 2001. His debut short story collection, Every Night Is Ladies' Night, is an exploration of place, cultural identity, and ethics. Published in 2004 by Rayo, the Latino imprint of HarperCollins, it has gone on to garner praise for its intricate construction and emotional honesty

We met with Michael at the Palm Court Grill in Spokane, where we discussed the conceptual difficulties of using bilingual dialogue in fiction, the intersection of art and commerce, and the influence of punk rock on his literary aesthetic. He responded to criticism about his manipulation of verb tense, and explained his latest attempt to incorporate nonfiction into his upcoming novel.

When asked about his characters and politics in fiction, he said: "I go with the story that needs to be told. To me, politics are very personal, so I don't worry about my stories having to represent a certain viewpoint, a certain belief, a certain anything. My characters have to act the way they're going to."

J.W. YATES

Do you believe a California literature exists?

MICHAEL JAMIE-BECERRA

People who aren't familiar with California have weird associations—it's all palm trees and surfers and movie stars. A while back I was in Joliet, Illinois, on the 4th of July, talking to these high school kids. They said, "Oh, you live in Long Beach. You got to know Snoop

Dogg.” A few years later I did a book talk with a group from Ohio, and they didn’t understand Mini’s poverty in *Every Night Is Ladies’ Night*. Mini’s a morning manager at McDonald’s. And they’re asking, “What problems is she having making it? She’s probably making a good living. She’s making like sixteen, maybe eighteen-thousand dollars a year back then; that’s good money.” But that’s not a lot in Southern California.

I’m happy I get to cast a different light on Los Angeles.

YATES

Do you think growing up in California shaped the way you use language?

JAMIE-BECERRA

The liquor store owners, a Vietnamese family near my junior high, spoke better Spanish than I did. You walk in and they say, “*Como estas?*” I say, “Good.” With the multicultural nature of L.A., it makes life much easier if you speak two languages. There are portions of the city you’ll go through and it’s all Spanish, all Mexican Spanish, or other places you go, it’s all Central American Spanish. Different accents, different idioms, different things going on. And then you’ll go to Monterey Park and everything’s in Mandarin. The street signs are Mandarin. Only the speed limit signs are in English. Everything else, you don’t know what they’re saying. Every culture has its space, its area, inundated with language. You can’t help but pick up something.

Growing up in L.A., I saw people move through languages. My dad would get on the phone and negotiate in English with the guys to clean the air conditioning ducts. Then he’d call my grandma and tell her about it in Spanish.

For me, it was important to have my Mexican characters—not my Mexican-Americans—speak in Spanish, because I’ve always had a problem where I read something with characters from Mexico, or from wherever, speaking in English. My difficulty there is that we’re seeing something in quotation marks, and the signal I’m getting is that someone actually said this, but I’m also somehow supposed to understand it’s not really what he said. That’s the narrator or the writer or someone else, taking what was said and putting it into another language for the reader. I wanted my characters to be able to speak for themselves and to be able to account for what they want to say on their terms rather than my terms as a writer, or the narrator’s terms of the story.

I don’t have to represent this dialogue in English; I can do it in Span-

ish. And I can do it in such a way that the non-Spanish speaker isn't lost. It was really important for me to try to convey a basic sentiment or basic emotion, just to keep them on track of what's happening through body language, sometimes through repetition if that's needed, or sometimes through reported dialogue, or have a character answer in English.

YATES

Was deciding what to translate, what to give context, a hard process?

JAMIE-BECERRA

I write it in English first. That's my first language. Spanish is the second one. So from that point I try to figure out how I can say this in Spanish. And not the literal translation, but sometimes to convey the same sentiment or the same kind of emphasis. Or to switch idioms. I'll write it like it's in American English. I have to switch it around in Spanish and translate it that way, and that's like the second level. Then the third level is all the technical stuff to make sure all my accent marks are in the right place and my spelling is correct.

YATES

If *Ladies' Night* were translated into Spanish, would you be part of the translation process?

JAMIE-BECERRA

I would like to be part of the process if that happened, but I'd definitely defer to an expert translator. If they had a question, I would want them to consult me.

There was talk of translation initially, but one of the things that's difficult there is the expense. Right now, I'm emerging, I'm up-and-coming. There may not be much demand for me to be translated at this point. I think it will happen eventually.

I know that the Spanish market's growing. I did a book event at a Latino bookstore in Long Beach, and this is the week Bill Clinton's *My Life* came out, and they had *Mi Vida*, by Bill Clinton, on the shelf, wall to wall.

THOMAS KING

The stories in *Ladies' Night* work together to create a sort of airtight universe. Did you mean for these to be interrelated so tightly?

JAMIE-BECERRA

I knew they were going to be interrelated, but the tightness of that weave came about through process. Before *Ladies' Night*, I'd written a collection of loosely interrelated prose poems. A character would pop up here or there, or a car would pop up. When I started writing *Ladies' Night*, I'd be working on one story, and a secondary character would emerge and then I'd take that person and write about them. The second story I wrote was "The Corrido of Hector Cruz." I wrote a line about Georgie, about how Georgie and his wife got married on their second date. I wrote it, and I got some ideas out of my head. Then I was looking over some of the stuff I had written, and I thought Well, let's earn this. If they get married on their second date, what was their first date like? And that's how "Georgie and Wanda" came about. Things grew like that. My goal was to have ten stories. Once I had ten stories, I put them all out on my living room floor, and said, "Okay, who's what? What goes where?" then I rewrote it, from page one all the way through and tightened everything up. I went through a couple drafts like that with *Ladies' Night*. In the initial draft, Lencho sort of occurred in two different characters, and I realized, Hey, wait a minute. This is potentially him when he was sixteen, and this is him when he's twenty-two. I can actually work with this, and make them the same person. At that point, the focus really came together.

My next project is continuing like that. In the new book, there was a line in there about a character named Joyce, about how there are two photos on the coffee table in her dad's house—one of her deceased mom and one of her deceased brother who was in the army and disappeared in Vietnam. And I'm thinking, Does she still go to see him every year—to his gravesite, where's he's supposed to be buried, but there's no body? Or I wrote a detail for a room, and I thought, What's going on there? That evolved into the second section of the book. It's forty-six pages right now, so I'm barely going. I'm not really attached to anything at this point, because I just want to get it out of my head.

PAUL SEBIK

Do you use any techniques in your new work that you don't use in the first book?

JAMIE-BECERRA

Yes. I'm excited about this second section because I'm incorporating nonfiction into it. Joyce's brother plays in a fictional garage band,

but they're trying to compete with real, influential garage bands from the 1960s era around Southern California—bands like Cannibal and the Headhunters, the Premiers, the Midnighters, bands that were big in East L.A. I want to have nonfiction bios about these real bands that add context to what the invented band is going through, and I want to do three or four of these through the course of this section so that by the end, there's something larger. It's a nice way of revealing character, especially since it's being told in first-person, present tense. My character doesn't have access to certain things: perspective, historical importance, interiority; all that stuff's not really available to him because I'm working in what is, to me, the most difficult verb tense and point of view to write in. He's always thinking about what's happening now; he's not really concentrating on what happened in the past, or stopping to reflect, because he's playing a song. And so, that's another way of getting information on the page.

KING

How does the nonfiction get onto the page?

JAMIE-BECERRA

Separate sections will be printed in italics, so people will see a visual difference in the text. And language-wise, my narrator's sixteen years old, not very educated—he's speaking in that voice—so as soon as you read the nonfiction stuff, you'll recognize you're into a different voice.

YATES

How do you achieve emotional distance in first person present tense, when the character is always in the moment?

JAMIE-BECERRA

Getting distance isn't a problem. It's overcoming distance that's a problem. I can have a character talking back and forth with another character, observing: he's cutting his lunch up, he's eating, he's chewing; that's fine because I can have a lot of access to immediate detail. It's overcoming that, to get the character thinking about what happened, those places of interiority, that's more difficult. I love backstory. Sometimes I dedicate entire sections to backstory, although my early teachers would tell me you don't want backstory in the middle of your scene. It slows you down or sends you backwards, and the reader thinks, Well, wait a minute. What happened to the present moment? One way I've

gotten around that with present tense narrators is to break it off, end the section, and start a new section and have it be the flashback. So the question isn't, Where is he telling this from? or Why is he telling this? It's just information the narrator's telling the reader, and that puts a lot less pressure on the speaker.

KING

How much thought did you put into where those sections ended in terms of carrying the drama over, so that when the story returns to the present moment, the reader knows where he is?

JAMIE-BECERRA

At first I didn't give it much thought. I just ended instinctually. I did that because I started as a prose poet. I have a sense of when small arcs end, with natural breaks and stops, which gives me a sense of how to finish a scene.

A lot of it is related to details, to description, to things outside the character's head, so that the character can describe something that happened. And it takes on meaning as the scene unfolds, as the story unfolds. I like to work with what I call positive tension rather than negative tension. Positive tension is when the reader knows what's at stake and how it's going to happen. Negative tension is when the writer keeps something from the reader and the only tension for the reader is wanting to see: What is this thing being kept from me? Positive tension, for me, is more truthful. And working with positive tension makes it easier to end scenes, because the reader trusts you and you're able to find those natural places to stop.

Another thing I like to do is overwrite a scene. I go as far as I can with a scene, especially with endings—I like to overwrite endings—and once I get everything out of my system, I go back and start chipping away, and I think, Can I stop here? Or what about here? Or here? And it's easier to find the ending this way, when you're cutting down, than it is to reach out and think, Is that the right ending? It's easier when you've got everything out of your system and you're working backwards, trying to understand where the character needs to come to rest.

KING

A critic in *USA Today* wrote that, "The stories from *Every Night is Ladies' Night* are mostly told in the present tense, which is a trendy tactic. Sometimes it gives immediacy to the narration, but more often

it's a sign of laziness from writers who like to describe their stories rather than tell them. I don't know why Jaime-Becerra joined the crowd, but he shouldn't have. He's good enough to do it the hard way." How do you respond to that criticism?

JAMIE-BECERRA

First person present tense is much more difficult to write, and I don't think of it as a fad. In first person present tense, your narrator has to remain in motion, like a shark has to keep swimming or else it will die. With past tense, you have a lot more recourse, you can take your time. You have the benefit of hindsight; "I walked into a room," and yet that walking might have happened five hours ago, five minutes ago, five years ago. First person present tense is happening in front of the character and the character often doesn't have the mobility to reflect on what's happening in front of him or her. You can pull it off, but that's one of the challenges. I respond to that criticism by saying, I wasn't trying to be trendy. I wrote in that tense because it seemed natural to me and it seemed natural to the story. But in *Ladies' Night*, six stories are told in first person and four in third person, so the book has a pretty good sense of balance, and that's one thing the quote doesn't take into account.

SEBIK

Do you map out what characters will do or wait to see how they respond?

JAMIE-BECERRA

I'm always willing to take a left turn with a character, but in general, it's easier for me to write when I know where I'm headed. The stories easiest for me to write are the stories where I know the end moment. The more difficult stories are the ones where I don't have an end moment but I know I have a character and I have a conflict and I know he or she is going to go through with it.

An example of a character surprising me occurred in this new project, when one of my main characters, Gaeta, is reacting to his wife leaving him. His daughter gets upset about why the wife has left and she doesn't understand because he's not explaining it to her, and every night she cries in her room. He's upset, he's ashamed, he feels horrible that he's been left. And he says, You know what, let her cry. She'll figure it out. And that's what he does. Now that was a surprise to me when that came out. That wasn't Gaeta speaking to me, saying, This is what needs to happen. But

what happened was a convergence of characteristics and that moment was me coming to an understanding about that person.

KING

What about a story like “La Fiesta Brava,” where that surprising event is action- based rather than character-based. Did you know that ending before you started writing?

JAMIE-BECERRA

I knew Benny’s ending. Benny pops up in different ways throughout the book and he’s sort of the bad guy. I knew I really wanted Benny to get his. I just didn’t know how that was going to happen. I wanted the kid in the story to have to live with what he’d done, for however long it was, long enough to where he knew things were different. That story ends with him dancing with his aunt at the church, that moment where he has to live with the knowledge of what’s happened to Benny, and he can’t talk to his aunt until the song is over. That’s the character confronting what I’ve put in front of him.

YATES

How can you surprise us with an ending that’s so inevitable?

JAMIE-BECERRA

I wish I had the answer to that. But I know the outcome begins with character. Flannery O’Connor is the master of that. All her great stories, the endings are like, Duh, that’s what’s supposed to happen. But you’re completely moved. Like “Greenleaf.” Mrs. May has a flaw, and because of that flaw she is going to get it in the end. The end emerges surprisingly because you’re so focused on character that you’re not really noticing the machinations going around that character. Because you’re concentrating on this fascinating person. And “fascinating” is an appropriate word, because Mrs. May is not a likeable character, but she’s certainly capturing your attention.

YATES

John Keeble suggests that one way to study writing is to find an author you admire and read everything he or she has written. Who is that writer for you?

JAMIE-BECERRA

Initially, it was Raymond Carver. And then, after Carver, I think Stuart Dybek. When it comes to form, Dybek is all over the place. He has these really long, crazy stories like “Breasts.” It just keeps going and going and going. Then he has a story like “Pet Milk” which is five pages and it’s brilliant. And the other thing with Dybek is that he loves Chicago, and if you didn’t know anything about him, if you just read two of his stories, you would pick that up immediately. And, for someone who’s really attached to the place where he grew up, like myself, Dybek is a great model. Reading him was like, This is how you can write about place and not have the place overwhelm.

I just read the big orange John Cheever book last summer, cover to cover and it was an amazing experience. Cheever was my coach. I was writing that Gaeta section, and as I said, I didn’t know where it was going to end. I was really struggling to access the character, actually wrote about twenty-five pages and I went back and scrapped them all, wrote them all again, because I figured I needed to streamline things dramatically. I rewrote the whole thing, and throughout that process, I was reading Cheever. It wasn’t as if I copied things from Cheever or took structural things, it was just a matter of reading great writing and finding that writing was like unlocking a door. I would say, I’m stuck here, and I would go to Cheever and read for an hour, and I would get an answer. Something would emerge. A word he used, the way it triggered something, was really useful.

KING

Have you ever kept anything out of a story because of political concerns or because you didn’t want to upset someone?

JAMIE-BECERRA

To me, politics are personal, so I don’t worry about my stories having to represent a certain viewpoint, a certain belief, a certain anything. My characters have to act the way they’re going to act. A good example is in Hector’s story. Hector’s mom is racist toward her own people. Hector’s brother is dating this woman who’s an illegal immigrant, and his mom’s freaking out about it. Hector’s getting ready for his prom, and his mom is bitching at him, saying, “She’s just using you, she’s just trying to get pregnant.”

I read in *El Monte* a couple years ago, right when the book came out, and I was excited about it because this guy I played basketball with

in junior high had contacted me. I wanted to read “Practice Tattoos,” which is a story set in the 1980s, when we were growing up, so I thought that would be funny. But I arrive at this reading and the mayor is there, the guy from the local community college is there, trustees are there, so I’m thinking, I’ve got to switch gears, because they’re not going to get half of that story probably. So, I started reading Hector’s story, not having scanned through it beforehand, and I started reading that scene. I’m reading and I know it’s coming, and there’s that line where Hector’s mother says, “She’s just a wetback.”

And I read that and the older people were aghast. My girlfriend says I perceived it worse than it really was, but I felt like the air had gone out of the room. I mean, I could see the word coming, and I was reading and reading, and I could see it there on the page, and the word was getting closer, and there was no way to edit or skip it, so I just went through with it. Afterward, people around my age, in their early thirties, came up to me and said, “That was really cool.” They understood that people are sometimes racist against their own people. Older people had difficulty with that. I think it’s a generational thing. If I were concerned about making everybody happy, I wouldn’t have put that in there, but those were Hector’s circumstances.

My obligation is to be true to my characters. Those are the people I’m writing about, and I don’t think of them as substitutes for an idea, substitutes for a theory or anything like that. They’re people, so I have to represent their lives as well as I can.

YATES

Do you think punk rock energy has informed your work? Your language?

JAMIE-BECERRA

If you look at writing, at language, it’s so often about restrictions. Spelling, punctuation, grammar. You have to work within that framework. But once you know the framework, the possibilities are endless.

Punk, for me, is more an ideology, a perspective; it’s not necessarily having a mohawk and wearing plaid pants. It’s looking at music without boundaries, looking at clothing without boundaries, hairstyle without boundaries. Having bright red hair is not revolutionary now, but twenty years ago it was.

And, if you look at things that way, a short story can become forty pages. For a long time, many people thought a short story shouldn’t be

longer than fifteen pages. Well, I'm writing one that's thirty-five right now, and I don't feel worried about it. I feel I can do other things with the length of a story—as long as the character and the conflict dictate that the length is necessary. I don't have to worry about cutting my thirty-five page story down to fifteen, because then I'm leaving something out. The confidence and willingness I have to do that is a result of growing up listening to punk music.

KING

Can you tell us a little about your early publishing history? You worked with a group called “Temporary Vandalism” that seemed to emerge from the same Do It Yourself ethic.

JAMIE-BECERRA

Temporary Vandalism is an imprint started by a college friend. He and his partner were really into punk rock, indie rock, goth rock—all that marginal stuff—and *Estrellitas* and those prose poems—stuff like “King Taco,” “El Mero Mero,” “Augie”—were my undergraduate thesis. I was sending it out to different poetry publishers and getting rejections, and my friend Barton said, “If you give us the poems, we can do something with them.” They were starting a magazine called *Freedom Isn't Free*, making them at Kinko's, developing a mailing list. It didn't even occur to me to keep sending to those same poetry magazines; I just said, “Let's do it.” I think they made 500 copies of that book, maybe less, maybe more, but nevertheless it was a great experience. I didn't have any qualms about doing it because I was excited to work with them.

With fiction, it's more difficult. If I've written a book, I want people to read it, so I have to work within that larger framework. But I'm still writing about things that interest me. I want people to read *Ladies' Night*. Even though the imprint publishing my work, Rayo, is part of a larger company, which is part of a multinational corporation—they're still doing things to change publishing. Books weren't always published simultaneously in English and Spanish. Books weren't published by an English publisher in Spanish. That's a different movement within the publishing industry. And that's something exciting to be a part of, too.

YATES

At the summer writing program in Squaw Valley, you told a story about a time when someone responded to your work by saying, “Your characters are brown, but they're not brown enough.” What does that statement mean?

JAMIE-BECERRA

That was implied in a rejection letter to the manuscript for *Every Night Is Ladies' Night*. We're talking about the point where art intersects with commerce. First, an agent has to love what you're doing on an artistic level, otherwise he or she will not represent the work, but I also think they have to recognize something that lets them know they can sell it. Part of what was being communicated to me was that they thought they couldn't sell the book because it doesn't easily fit into the categories that exist.

On the other hand, my agent could see where I was coming from, she could see that something could be done with the manuscript, and something was done with it. But these changes are still happening. Every year we see more books by Chicano writers, like *The People of Paper*, which is stylistically a much different book from *Ladies' Night*, but it's still breaking with the traditional ideas and stereotypes that people might have with Chicano literature.

SEBIK

You said in an interview that setting is central to some writers' aesthetic. Why is setting so important to you?

JAMIE-BECERRA

It's easiest for me to write when I can see what I'm writing about. El Monte has always been my home and I've always been happy with it as my home; it's where I was raised—the only reason I wasn't born there is because there wasn't a hospital at the time. When it came time to write, at first I was writing things and I wasn't even thinking about where they were set. And the stories were horrible stabs at wannabe Carver. But at some point, I wrote a poem about getting my dad a beer, and I worked through that, then I started to work out from my house. I wanted to write about my junior high, so I worked my way through that, and I worked on all the streets over there, and what developed was an exploration of my memory. Everything I wrote in *Ladies' Night* is pretty much set between 1982 and 1989, my adolescence. A lot of what happens with El Monte in the book is exploration, me indirectly being able to revisit these places. I write about the go-cart track, which is my first memory—being at the go-cart track when I was four. I write about things that are gone, incidental things to a lot of people that have meaning for me. I can capture them, use them as a setting, as backdrop, and that's fun but it's also important to keep my memory accurate in

some way. I'm not writing nonfiction—those stories aren't by any means nonfiction—but the places in there are definitely real in my memory, real in my imagination, and using them is a way to keep them fresh.

SEBIK

Did using where you grew up help you start stories?

JAMIE-BECERRA

It allowed me to be honest more immediately. One of the writing clichés I have difficulty with is the sense of voice. Some writers say, “I have to find my voice. I can't write because I can't find my voice yet. I don't know what my voice is.” I feel that it's not that one has to discover a voice, it's that one has to be honest and let the true voice emerge. It's not something you have to work and work on; it's not something you have to put coats of paint on and then you finally have it; it's more a matter of stripping something away and writing honestly and directly. Once I was able to get a setting down, some silly backdrop, like a basketball court from my old junior high that I could see clearly, I could write more directly about that place because I understood it better.

YATES

Do you fear a sophomore slump going into your latest book?

JAMIE-BECERRA

I felt that sophomore slump with the first book! [Laughs.] When I started working on the new book, I had to start over because similar territory was already in *Ladies' Night*. I think my response to that was to write through to the ones waiting for me, to the characters that were new. The first section in the new book is structurally the most complicated thing I've done because the conflict occurs in a triangulation rather than between two people. The result of my difficulty with understanding the dynamic for that conflict was that it took me a year to write those seventy-some pages. I got twenty-four, twenty-five pages in and stopped because I was like, Where am I? I realized I'd have to strip everything back and start from scratch. Then I reached a point, about fifty pages in, where I was like, God, I'm just completely lost and confused. I worked on it for the next two months, pounded my way through those last twenty-five pages or so, fifteen pages of which I ended up cutting.

So I know what you're talking about with that slump, but a lot of that slump is other people forcing the work to grow too fast when it

isn't fully mature. I'm writing diligently, and I can feel myself growing. Whether or not people will like it and embrace it the way I was fortunate enough to have happen with *Ladies' Night*, that's out of my control.

YATES

How do you decide on an acceptable level of pop culture references in your stories?

JAMIE-BECERRA

There's a lot of pop culture in *Ladies' Night*, and a lot of pop culture in what I write about. As long as nothing depends on the reference, it's fine. When a reader can understand the essential piece of information outside of the reference, then go ahead and use the reference. The one example that springs to mind is in "La Fiesta Brava," the guy who's "the worst DJ ever" because he plays the same songs over and over, "Brass Monkey" and "Jungle Love," which are pop culture references. In the context of that passage, you can understand he's a bad DJ without those two songs because he keeps playing the same ones. Those two references are just icing on the cake, not the cake itself. That's what I mean: the passage doesn't depend on the reference.

On the other hand, there's the example: "She looked like Joey Ramone when he was on stage." Unless you know who Joey Ramone is, you're out of the loop, right? If I said, "He was tall. He was gangly. He was skinny. He looked uncomfortable at the microphone. He reminded me of Joey Ramone," that's different.

YATES

Supposedly Kerouac said he wanted to someday be known as an American writer, like Steinbeck, somebody everybody reads, rather than just a Beat writer. Do you feel like you're being classified as a Latino writer?

JAMIE-BECERRA

I'd be happy to be classified as a writer, period. I think a lot of those terms are subjective and more reflective of the person assigning them. If someone wants to call me a Latino writer, for whatever reason, they need me to be one. That's the fact of the matter: I'm Latino. If you want to specify it further: I'm Chicano. If you want to take the Nth political version of it, then I'm Mexican-American. If you want to look at it from a global perspective, then I'm an American writer. I'm happy with whatever term, as long as people think of me as a writer.