
Book Review

Renaming the Earth: Personal essays

Ray Gonzalez

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Ray Gonzalez's *Renaming the Earth* is a native son's meditation on the borderlands of the American Southwest. The essay collection itself comprises a border discourse, situated at the generic intersection of scrapbook, personal memoir, prose poetry collection, Chicano/ Tejano and Texan history archive, and eco-writing journal. The central motif finds the most literal expression in the crossing point between the United States and Mexico. This space consumes Gonzalez, whose hometown of El Paso and its surrounding region (especially New Mexico and Ciudad Juárez, notorious for its unsolved *maquilladora* murders and escalating drug violence) remain a constant presence throughout these eight essays. Gonzalez's writing uses Mexico as a litmus test for understanding American citizenship values; the ancient culture, scarred by colonization, is what can change the "united" in the United States to "untied" through the simple shift of an "I."

Although now living and teaching in Minnesota, the author continually drifts back to the besieged *frontera* that abuts the Rio Grande. This earth, he explains, is riddled with footsteps of Texans who work in Mexico and Mexicans who work in Texas; undocumented immigrants and the government patrolmen who catch and release them; the old-timers and newcomers attempting to revive the region through heritage tourism; and the wildlife that thrives in the thirsty heat of the desert. The area is also metaphorical terrain for

the author's childhood, a crossing into maturity landmined by his father's adultery and subsequent abandonment of the family. Detailing his parents' divorce, Gonzalez lays down a barbed-word fence around the man whose eagerly received praise and love were replaced by passivity and absence. The most indelible memory of his father remains the stench of sweaty socks after the man returned from exhausting days in the used car lot. Only when the writer hears second-hand that his father is proud of him does a seed of redemption sprout, allowing Gonzalez to excavate some lost branches of his family tree.

The most striking moments of the text are autobiographical, primarily the two essays of Part I. Gonzalez immerses himself in contemporary US border discourses, including topics such as bilingualism, the Minutemen vigilantes, new Homeland Security legislation on immigration, Latino/a student activism in the shadow of figures such as the Chicano Movement's Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez and the rampant commercialization of Mexican cuisine. One particularly poignant trope is the "bi-tongue": "Two roots, two mouths, two ways of expressing how we live and how we survive in a region that has redefined what it means to live in the US" (1). Gonzalez sutures a bi-tongue to a Janus-face, looking back at El Paso and looking forward to the city's future, attempting to repudiate his hometown but paradoxically cementing that bond in the process.



The childhood vignettes, ranging from an awkward kazoo performance in a school talent show to his mother's near disastrous attempts at fixing his overweight and misaligned body, are where the writer is least likely to indulge in surrealist posturing. These experimental moments – when they do happen – detract from the power of his lived experiences, although they attempt to cross the border between ordinary and extraordinary perception (the poet's bailiwick). The sudden clash of the two styles, straightforward exposition then a flash flood of figurative language, leave the unaccustomed reader gasping. One example: "Not for the beauty of a meaningless word that thought it could reinvent love as a window beside the roar of the man who knew how to adopt silence whenever he broke eggs open on the stone oven, cooked them as the hungry king that always knew how to guess which wing brought him food, which sound brought him wisdom, which monkey in the trees brought him a way out of the castle" (147–148). This kind of denseness may be construed by some readers as exquisite stream-of-consciousness technique, but it follows an effortless paragraph where Gonzalez describes the simple, sublime experience of tasting blackberries in the garden with his wife. The contrast is jarring but not disastrous.

As editor of the *Bloomsbury Review* for over two decades, Gonzalez is obviously well-informed about stylistic experimentation. In "Get on the Poetry Bus," a compact *ars poetica* dusted with wry humor and dry cynicism, he congratulates himself for having a poem included in a city bus poster campaign. This is a major victory even for a veteran in what he describes as an oversaturated poetry market (or, as he mockingly terms it, the "po-bizz"). In terms of overall unity, this essay has the strongest capacity to detach itself from the oneiric quality of the environmental writing or the historiographical thrust of the travel writing. Although an honest exploration of the corruption, pandering and ego-mongering that pockmark the

deceptively serene face of the creative writing industry, it falters for its lack of resonance with the larger thematic preoccupations of the book.

Gonzalez's prose is most effective when unadorned, like the sun-seared crucifixes and hand-patted adobe walls of a hacienda he encounters in Mesilla Valley, New Mexico in Part III. Across this and the two subsequent sections, startling descriptions sprout like vibrant desert flowers: how a wasp's nest has gray convolutions resembling those of the human brain (162); how a reputed witch poured honey over a troublemaking boy and then released a dark cloud of bees (87); how sexual athlete and revolutionary Emilio Canales had 32 children by different women and kept meticulous records of these encounters to avoid any possible repetition (93). The writer revels in minutiae, whether incredible animal facts (an owl's three eyelids, the velocity of a dragonfly's wings, a housefly's germ transmission rate) or eerie newspaper stories from old El Paso and the windblown corners of the forgotten Southwest.

A porous border exists between personal and public history, Gonzalez explains; this truth makes *Renaming the Earth* a deeply personal endeavor. Leaping from postcolonial critique of Hernán Cortez to the kitsch of Mexican Revolution postcards, he rarely strays far from an awareness of his ancestral roots. Much of his connection is embodied in the folkways of his grandmother, Julia, in whose house he was born. Like a traditional matriarch, her wisdom reinforces intimate connections with the earth, a grassroots environmentalism amplified by storytelling and myth. Small joys from nature (a ladybug's mysterious and constant presence on 9/11) collide with reminders of past and future pain (his father's silences, his mother's domination, punishment for speaking Spanish during grade school and racist threats from both the KKK and even his own campus community). Formerly a "quiet, fat one who never fought



back,” the poet morphs into an Old Testament prophet by predicting racism’s escalation to a “great rain of blood” (89). One wonders what effect this purported flood will have on what W.E.B. Du Bois observed of the United States back in 1903 while meditating on the problem of the color line: that it was a “dusty desert of dollars and smartness.”

To Ray Gonzalez, “Renaming the Earth” means revivifying histories of the land with the knowledge that to name something does not mean to claim it in any lasting way. As names

have power – individual, familial, metaphysical, legal and historical – the continuous act of naming and re-naming acknowledges the need for an adaptive vocabulary. The author loops word after word of barbed and yet incandescent prose around the meeting point of two nations, inviting us to step into the electrified zone with bare feet and an eye squinting against the sun for other crossers.

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