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Ray González: 03-10-2004

Ramon Gonzalez

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The author, Ray Gonzalez reads the poem A Tiny Clay Doll with no Arms from his book *The Hawk Temple at Tierra Grande*.

You can read the poem here online:

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/tiny-clay-doll-with-no-arms/>

Anne Panning:

Welcome to the Brockport writers forum, a long-standing reading series, conversation about craft with visiting writers and videotaped archive collection.

My name is Anne Panning and co-director of the writer's forum and joining me here today are my colleague Ralph Black and fellow co-director of the writer's forum, and poet, essayist, and fiction writer, Ray Gonzalez. Thank you for being here, both of you.

To introduce Ray Gonzalez, he has seven books of poetry to his credit, three of them with BOA editions and one of them, "The Hawk Temple at Tierra Grande", was a 2002 nominee for the Pulitzer Prize. In addition to his poetry, he has two short story collections, "The Ghost of John Wayne" and "Circling the Tortilla Dragon". His most recent book is a collection of essays called "The Underground Heart: A Return to a Hidden Landscape", published by the University of Arizona Press in 2002. An earlier memoir about growing up in the Southwest, "Memory Fever", was published in 1993 and reprinted by the University of Arizona Press in 1999.

Originally from El Paso, Texas, Ray Gonzalez now lives and teaches in Minnesota and is here today to talk to us about his work.

Thank you for coming Ray.

Ray Gonzalez:

Thank you for having me.

Anne Panning:

I'd like to start out talking about your most recent book, "The Underground Heart", the collection of essays.

You had told me, and I think I'd read this somewhere, that this was, in your words, "the most difficult book you've ever written".

And I was wondering if you could get inside that a little bit and talk about why specifically and how so, and what was the biggest challenge of that book?

Ray Gonzalez:

Well, you know, originally coming from the desert Southwest, I think the landscape in the U.S. Mexican border really dominate my poetry, earlier essays that I've written. And so I didn't want to do the same old thing and having been gone from the Southwest now for over 20 years, I wanted to go back and do something different. I didn't want to write that all the cities were now larger, more freeways, and so forth. And then after going down there over a period of several years, I came upon an idea visiting a very strange museum in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the Atomic Museum, the history of the atomic bomb here in Albuquerque.

So the main theme of the book and, again, it took four years to really think it out, to go down there and visit familiar places, find new places to visit in New Mexico and Arizona.

The idea is Heritage tourism where states like Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, rewrite history, rewrite local history to draw in the tourist dollars and they create and build very unusual museums, many of them that I visited, the Atomic Museum, the Border Patrol Museum in El Paso, and a couple of others to kind of capture versions of this revised history for that book. So I knew in a way kind of an abstract theme, but at the same time I had to dig behind the familiar landscape of home and family and bilingual issues and try to find things around that theme and so that's why it took so long to write.

Anne Panning:

How did you do that? How do you reach beyond the familiar? I mean, how do you go back to a place after 20 years where you grew up and not be the person who grew up there? Like, I know, I know in some of the essays you actually played tourists, like you would go along on these tours and go see, you know, the place of Pancho Villa and see all these things, how, I mean, were there other ways you sort of went undercover?

Ray Gonzalez:

Not so much undercover, but when I knew that I had to go on some of these museum tours and pay my 10 dollar bus ticket to go to Columbus, New Mexico, the battle of, where the battle of, you know, with Pancho Villa took place. A part of me is coming from that area being raised and growing up in that area, I kind of knew in the back of my mind, I've been here before on my own and I know a lot about this place, but I have to kind of play into the, again, the official Chamber of Commerce version of historical events in the area.

And then back to the familiar themes and in my work, I think, when you begin a book like this, it's very comforting and almost like a security blanket, I started writing essays about the landscape, the desert, nature, the natural world, essays inspired by that. But then I have to find a way to kind of work this new angle of being a tourist in my native area, go visit the museums, but maybe even redefine and relook at the natural landscape of the place. So I could kind of make, make myself familiar with the place again but also go in a different direction that I had never written about before.

Anne Panning:

Well one of the things I found interesting about the Pancho Villa section, the general on the border, I think it's called, you went in thinking, you know, I want to figure out who, you took sort of a package tour kind of deal and you said, I want to see kind of who these people are who go on these tourists, and it seemed like a lot of them were from El Paso.

I mean that was surprising to me, it was like people who lived there trying to find out about it. But they were equally obnoxious, I mean they were obnoxious as an outsider tourist in some cases.

Ray Gonzalez:

Yes, they were and I think I was also surprised with that that so many people who had either grown up there or moved there and lived there and worked there for many years, even they didn't know the, you know, the actual history of the region.

And a lot of the stereotypes, cultural, racial stereotypes that really dominate and kind of hold up many of these tourist places and museums. And so it was quite a revelation to go back there and find that many people were also curious about, you know, Pancho Villa, probably the most famous Mexican, leader of the Mexican Revolution, but also the most stereotyped "Mexican bandit" in history.

And so the challenge to the writer is, how do you get beyond the stereotypes? How do you deal with local history in a place where you grew up in? As a writer, could I kind of take a different angle?

And, you know, yes, go through the whole tourist routine and play that out, but also as a native, bring my own interpretation to it, but also as somebody who had been gone for a couple of decades, be able to give it a fresh focus coming in from the outside.

Ralph Black:

So you have a kind of, you know, insider, outsider perspective in the essays, which I think is a strength for sure, but when you're talking about these organized tours and these labels, these kind of new labels that are being hung by the Chambers of Commerce, I keep thinking, this is just a new version of colonialism, right?

Ray Gonzalez:

Yes.

Ralph Black:

This is, you know, colonialism and commercialism all over again, it's the same, it's a really familiar story in the Southwest, isn't it? The replacing of traditional names with Anglo names, is that something that you're interested in trying to examine that history?

Ray Gonzalez:

I think so and I think it's one reason there's an essay in there about going to Albuquerque and writing a bit about the Pueblos in an exhibit I saw at one of the, I think the Hispanic Cultural Center that really had a lot of the history, the Southwest history and the history of the conquest by the Spanish of the Pueblos from the point of view of good versus evil, almost like many of the Mexican American people there had taken on the roles of the good, the good guy and the native people, of course, once again the conquered people were the bad guys.

And so it's kind of risky to include an essay about native people being conquered in New Mexico when it's probably the most common theme in many Southwest history books.

But what could I do a little bit differently?

And so what I tried to do was to show that even the Mexican American culture, the culture that I come from and grew up in had also bought into the idea of this revised history. And again as a native person and including my family and sisters and parents in some of the essays, how could I integrate even their attitude as native people who had stayed there, how could I integrate their own revisionist view of things and at the same time try to uncover the real story of why the conquest was being played out again, and this time through museums and the tourist dollars in an essay in there about going to Santa Fe and all the jewelry and all the, you know, the tourist traps in Santa Fe.

Again, the whole thing being played out in a large casino in the middle of the desert that had never been there when I was growing up there, it was almost the commercialization of history in the Southwest that many people thrive on and depend for, you know, their economic survival.

Anne Panning:

Did you see yourself when you were writing this book as deliberately, or at least consciously, trying to write a revisionist history in a way? Because there's scenes in there where you're the narrator, or you, is actually standing, you know, looking at a museum plaque or listening to a tour guide and noting all the fallacies and misinformation that's going on, and then you as the writer get in there and sort of correct it, you say that what they're not mentioning is this, this, this. You know, was that, was that like a deliberate move on your part or is that just something that's more organic to your process?

Ray Gonzalez:

Well I think that was the biggest challenge where, you know, I couldn't go in there, yes, the person who grew up there and being very familiar with the place, it had changed in so many ways, I didn't want to go in there and say, oh wake up, this is actually the way it happened because I'm from here so I know better.

No, it was a way, I guess for me as the writer, as the narrator in the essays to admit that as somebody growing up there I also bought into. Slight disruption in the video:

But not poetry?

Not poetry, every now and [background conversation].

Just take a little pause and then ask the question.

Anne Panning:

Okay. So when you set out to write "The Underground Heart", was it was a deliberate or conscious decision at all to sort of say, I'm going to do revisionist history here?

Because there's times when you're actually looking at a plaque or listening to a tour guide and then you, you know, it's not in a condescending way I don't think presented at all, but you say, what they aren't mentioning is this, and then you sort of provide the right information.

Can you speak to that at all?

Ray Gonzalez:

Well it was very tempting, you know, as somebody that grew up there to try to correct everything in these essays. But I think I was realizing that, that I have, I had also bought into a lot of that history growing up there I think with a kind of Texas public school education that I had there.

I think probably the one of the most important things that came out of writing this book is that I really needed distance from my home and to live away from the place for several decades, continue to write about it. But once I came back and started researching this book and realizing that I had bought into a lot of the history, even though maybe I knew other things about it that other people who had not grown up there knew about, I really needed that distance and coming back, and it ties into the

subtitle of the book, A Return to a Hidden Landscape. That as a native of the area, a lot of the truths and a lot of the real meaning of the border had been hidden from me because, again, I had grown up in the official education of the place. So as the writer, I had to leave and come back, not so much to revise the history of the place or even my own history as a native there, but really give it a different point of view that ultimately I think really helped me as a writer to maybe come to terms with a number of things that I had been obsessed with writing about like the desert, the border, all the bilingual issues, and things that I, you know, that I keep writing about.

Anne Panning:

So you say, you sort of had to go away to actually, for you even to learn and come to understand what the place is really about.

Ray Gonzalez:

Yes. And I think you needed to do that, I needed to do that in order to have these quirky, odd museums kind of jump up at me as a tourist and push me to want to go there because I think if I had stayed there as a writer, I might still be writing about the place, but I probably would not have had any reason to go to Albuquerque and do the tour of the Atomic Museum and a number of the other places that I, you know, that I got to see really for the first time.

Ralph Black:

What was, is there something particular that surprised you in your travels back home, either things that you saw, I'm not talking about, you know, the growth of cities or, you know, the lakes outside of, you know, condos in Phoenix but something particular that surprised you, about the place or about the writing?

Ray Gonzalez:

I think that, well I met many people who were not from west Texas or the Southwest that once they moved there for a job or for education, whatever, really fall in love with the place and like despite getting the, you know, the revised history and the heritage tourism, they love the landscape, they love the desert, they love the Southwest. And so it was fun to kind of like share some of that with other people who maybe didn't know and several, I don't know, obscure places in New Mexico that I knew about and maybe I could talk to them about that.

I also discovered and I think it's one of the, maybe sad, the sad tone in some of the essays is that New Mexico, where most of the essay's focused on, even though there's several about other places in the Southwest, New Mexico is still, despite the growing population, a very harsh, violent, poverty-stricken area, despite the tourism in Santa Fe and the whole thing of, you know, the land of enchantment.

And, again, back to what you asked earlier about conquest, it's almost like many people now in the late 20th century and the new century are really playing out this all over again and still a lot of racial division underneath, you know, the tourism and the so-called growth and economic growth of the Southwest.

So in a number of the essays, you know, things that really stood out at me like driving back from Santa Fe to Albuquerque where I was going to go to some other place and there's a billboard at the side of the road,

some woman had been murdered and the murder had gone unsolved and I don't know whether her family had paid for this giant billboard on the highway, if you have any information about her murder please call and then a number.

And several other things that I saw, even in the museums, where the stereotypes are continued to be reinforced and, again, that's a totally different world and what goes on underneath that. And so I don't think it's, in the end, a sad, tragic book necessarily, but it was almost like as a native of the area who has lived away for decades and then you go back and as a writer you discover a whole view, different view of your home, it's almost like you have to accept that sad, tragic part of your home, to almost in a strange way love it even more than before and maybe appreciate it in a very different way than if, you know, if I had just stayed there, you know, my whole life. So, again, I think that's one reason why it's a tough book, I mean, it's a very emotionally tough book to come to terms with such a thing.

Anne Panning:

Well, I'm glad you mentioned tone because that was one of my questions, you know, in a lot of the book, there's a lot of different things going on in the book, you know? But there's a really, there's a bold cultural critique, I think, in some of the essays, but there's never a time when I felt a really angry or bitter narrator, not that there would be anything wrong with that, there would be reason for it, but I didn't feel that, instead I felt there was a great sense of love and loss. I think like you were just saying about things that have died, but not an anger which almost surprised me because some of the things that you encountered in the people, in the tours, in the museums seemed like it would set off an anger from somebody who belongs to that place. Can you, was that, you know, was that something, again, you tried to stay away from or it just wasn't thought about or?

Ray Gonzalez:

Well a couple of friends of mine who read the book closely have also commented on that, I think, again, accepting the place for what it is and maybe trying to write about two different histories, again, the heritage tourism and maybe the reality of the place. But again, not as somebody that has all the answers or, you know, has a gift for, you know, discovering something new. But really once I realize and, again, looking at the landscape, a desert landscape which is so prominent in my poetry, that the older I got, you know, as a person and as a writer and the more I wrote about the place, I realize that I wasn't so enamored or so romantic about the desert landscape and its power that dominates my poetry that I could actually write about other things that in a way reinforce the fact that I had never, you know, stopped yearning for the place or stopped, you know, loving the culture and my family there or the landscape that really shake me as a writer.

But again, that distance and that time and being able to write about different things that I probably wouldn't, might not write about in my poems, helped me to accept the reality of the place and the conflict among people down in that area. And so once I was able to do that, and again, four years to write the book, maybe it did away with that anger. Or it was more kind of redemption, you know, for something that, you know, not the, as a writer, not the easiest thing to look at, but again,

a very different approach than my poetry. And it doesn't mean that my poetry necessarily totally changed after writing this book, which I finished about three or four years ago, but maybe it's given my poetry a different dimension.

Anne Panning:

It sounds like the form then, the form of nonfiction itself was the right form for this, you know what I mean?

It sounds like subject and form went together. But can we just, before we leave the nonfiction book can, you know, the ongoing debate and Ralph and I we've been talking a lot about creative nonfiction this year. You know, there's all kinds of issues with truth, time compression, character composite, just the notion of what is true and what a nonfiction writer's responsibility is to the reader.

Do you find that debate useful and engaging or tedious or none of the above, you know, how do you situate yourself with all of that?

Ray Gonzalez:

I think it's very important in two examples among many that really hit home, and again, they kind of tie into some of the longer essays in the book, especially the last one that closes the book, the very long one.

Annie Dillard, in her first book, the "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek", you know, won the Pulitzer and, you know, has been read by, you know, people all over the world, translated into many languages. Decades later, she admits that the early scene with the cat with the blood on in its paws was fiction.

A more recent essay, Mary Karr, "The Liars' Club", where she wrote about her dysfunctional family in Texas. She interviewed her sister for months and months and months and her sister told a completely different story of how they grew up. And she read Mary Karr's book and she said, no this isn't right, and Mary said, I had to make up some of the scenes, especially about our father, in order to keep, you know, the character alive and she felt that the mother the, incidents about her mother were more truthful to the point and her sister agreed that the father, you know, she took some freedom there.

And I think with nonfiction, I think one of the big questions is going back to a place like the Southwest or, you know, Anna Dillard at Tinker Creek, wherever, how far back as the writer can you take your imagination and will that imagination capture something accurately?

What if you're working on the book for several years and say you're writing about, my grandmother appears in a couple of the essays, my mother, what if I, in describing my grandmother when she was growing up and crossed the Mexican border into the U.S. and she was wearing a blue dress and I describe it as red? Or maybe her hair was, I don't know, long and black instead of, I don't know, brown or whatever it may be.

How far as the writer can you use your imagination to sustain the character and the larger truth in your essay and the reality that you're trying to put together when, if you stick to the actual facts and maybe they don't support the character that you're trying to re-create through memory.

And I think that's a really tough one for, you know, for nonfiction writers. How far does your imagination allow you to bring in maybe some, I don't know, you want to call them untruths or fictitious elements in

order to sustain the other person, the family member, the museum, the desert landscape, that's going to allow you in a stronger, clearer way to convey the truth that you're trying to get at behind your book. Because if you stick to the truth, what if the details are either so vague or you've forgotten about them, or say your sister, like Mary Carr, remembers them in a totally different way? If you take her details and what if it destroys your essay?

Anne Panning:

Well, how do you answer the question for you? For your two memoirs, and are they different in each one, would you say in terms of that issue?
Ray Gonzalez:

The earlier book "Memory Fever", short, short essays, very different in this book about growing up, you know, a lot of them about childhood. I think a lot of them originally began as ideas for poems that never worked. And so I know that in a lot of them, I really stretch the truth and, you know, they're more, I think, metaphorical and more, I don't know, poetic prose in "Memory Fever", and I get maybe that's why most of them are very, very short, three or four pages. So I know I bent a lot of the facts there trying to stay with the idea of a child of a young boy waking up for the first time to the desert landscape and becoming a writer.

"The Underground Heart", again, part of four years of working on it, a lot of research, a lot of details and the intensity that I, of the things I uncovered about the clash of cultures, about history, it was almost if I wanted to stretch the imagination, all the things I was finding in these museums or interviewing people or going on the Pancho Villa tourist ride, almost like they didn't allow me to stretch the facts or to bend the stories. There was too much reality, you know, hidden year in and year out of trying to gather everything and write the essays. So again, I think very two different approaches to nonfiction.

I think the subject matter, I think of any memoir or a collection of essays, even if each essay has a different subject matter, really dictate how far, you know, the writer can stretch the truth, you know, to tell that nonfiction story. I don't think "The Underground Heart" allow me to do that, [inaudible] book.

Anne Panning:

Right, you had to get it right if you wanted to make your point, right.

Ralph Black:

I keep thinking about Elliott and the idea of form being, you know, always an extension of content. And for you as a writer, you are writing in so many genres, and I wonder whether, you know, in a way I was thinking before, why is this question never asked of poets?

Anne Panning:

What question?

Ralph Black:

The question about telling the truth, the question about, you know, did this really happen? Did you make up the cat with the bloody prints or not? I mean, poets don't have to worry about that. But, and I wonder why

that is, whether it's, I think it's more than just the stamp on the back of the book that says, this is nonfiction, this is autobiography.

But I wonder for you Ray with your work writing in lyric poems, writing lyric poems, writing longer poems, series of poems, prose poems, fiction, I mean for you when you're, when you're writing, is it a struggle for you to think, you know, this is the image, this is the question I have, where does it fit? Since you're doing, you're juggling so many balls. Or does it come pretty naturally?

Ray Gonzalez:

I think in the early years of writing a lot of poetry it was very natural and I just, you know, went with it. And really the impulse was to write in the early poetry books a lot of the short, you know, linear lyrical poems.

And what you were asking earlier about, you know, why aren't poets quite often, you're not confronted did this really happen, I think a lot of people naturally think that poetry has, you know, a hundred hidden meanings, each poem has a hundred hidden meanings and so the truth must be there somewhere and the illusions are behind the language that, you know, people can understand or whatever.

And so part of it, again, back to distance and the way "The Underground Heart" came together. I do believe that my poetry has changed over a period of time, but again I needed that distance to get away from home, get away from that dominating landscape of the desert Southwest.

And so that's when I started, like, you have "Turtle Pictures" there, I started writing in different forms, combining prose, poetry, with some nonfiction and some longer poems.

I think also the surreal tone of the U.S, Mexican border, and I've spoken to a number of writers from the area about the same thing, sooner or later that surrealism of the just the unusual landscape that perhaps has dominated their work in a more traditional sense also kind of scrambles, you know, their form and their style where they're trying different things. And I really think that that goes back to that influence of home that's there in the nonfiction and certainly that's built the foundation for my poetry.

But again as a writer working in different genres, I don't think I could have done it if I had stayed in the Southwest my whole life and just kept writing poem after poem after poem. I really needed to step back and try different approaches and angles to it and that naturally led to prose poems and short, short fictions, and some of the things that I've done in "Turtle Pictures", you know, with mixed genre.

Ralph Black:

Well, let me ask you a kind of related question which has to do with influence and not just influence of landscape, but for you and your life as a writer and as a reader. I'm wondering what sorts of things, when did writing happen to you? When did you, you know, was there a moment where you woke up and thought, oh I should write this down?

Ray Gonzalez:

My grandmother always told me stories, which is a very common answer for a lot of writers.

Ralph Black:

Sure.

Ray Gonzalez:

But again, back to "Underground Heart", it's almost like in the culture and in the clash of cultures on the border, even if the cultures were very rich in the tradition of storytelling or the arts or language, quite often political realities or economic realities was they would suppress the imagination or the artistic side.

So these stories I kept hidden for, you know, for a long time, I've also spoken to students about this, I read a lot of comic books and I started imitating comic books early on. And I would write these little stories and hide them under the bed because again nobody was to, you know, you weren't supposed to show that you were trying to write something, you're supposed to be out playing baseball or whatever.

Well, I get to high school and I'm on my student newspaper and I started writing new stories and I was the sports editor and that's really the first time where, you know, I knew that I wanted to write, but again it was journalism. And I didn't do well in English courses, knew absolutely nothing about poetry, didn't want to know anything about poetry.

So then I get to, you know, to the University of Texas in El Paso and, again, in a way a connection to Brockport, Robert Burlingame, who was the mentor, he's been the mentor of several writers that went to school here and who taught here and who also studied in El Paso. He opened my eyes to poetry in the early 70s and changed my life by just being a wonderful teacher. And there's an essay I believe about him in "Memory Fever" and so it's taken many, many years to almost, again, back to the essays that in many ways tell the whole story, many, many years to kind of like pull those little notebooks under the bed and say that it's okay to be creative and use your imagination.

But again, that's taken a long time and I think it's also a reason why I enjoy teaching and done all these other things in the literary community and now I've been teaching at a university is to, you know, to show writers, students that it's a long road, that you can't do it overnight. That I don't think there's such a thing as inspiration which sounds very strange, you really have to work at it day in and day out and, you know, my own teachers, you know, taught me that over a long period of time.

Ralph Black:

So many of the poems in "Hawk Temple" are either dedicated to or take their momentum from other artists, Diego Rivera, Van Gogh, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, as writers, it seems like the work in this book particularly is really in conversation with a range of other artists, is that a place where your work has come from for a long time?

Ray Gonzalez:

I think a number of the poems in "The Hawk Temple" were written in the middle of those four years of doing "The Underground Heart", it's like I can't get away from the "The Underground Heart", I keep going back to that book, and really found myself writing a lot of poems to other people, writers that meant a lot to me or other artists. Part of it I think was in response to all the research I was doing, I did go to Mexico a couple of times even those essays didn't wind up in the book.

And really it was almost like taking a break from the nonfiction to work on these poems that in trying to approach, you know, the Southwest from a different point of view, I found that many of the- you know, the artists, the writers, the information, the cultural history, everything was appearing in the poems quite a bit. So in a way those two books kind of go hand in hand, an example of trying different things at different times. And I had written poems in the past in other books, you know, dedicated to other writers, but I think really the impact of kind of moving away from the poetry and doing a lot of prose, almost like the poetry in a way like a magnet called for many more other, other people to come into the poems that maybe I had not, you know, allowed to in the past.

Anne Panning:

Well it's interesting because in the essay book, you, we were talking about music before today, in the essay book, you know, you have, it's not over heavy in the book, but there's the Allman Brothers, there's music that helps, you know, shape the book, and The Doors, and actually a lot of writers too, that book, I'd say they do go well together in that way, now that you explain how you wrote them kind of in tandem. Because you, there's a lot of writers speaking that you quote from, or you'll even start an essay with Gary Schneider talking about a place and so on. And you know what's really interesting is when I was reading, rereading "Underground Heart", there are a couple times when we see what I think is the same visit to the same monument like the, I don't know if it's Carlsbad Cavern or Abo National Monument, sort of rendered in essay and then rendered in poetry and I was really studying how, you know, what the two forms offered, I don't know if it was the same visit or not.

But do you remember that part or that specific visit?

It seemed like you rendered -

Ray Gonzalez:

There were two different visits and, again, back of my friends that always, you know, read all the stuff in detail and they almost, like, they explain my work to me when I haven't even some of these things. We talk a lot about this and it ties in with what you asked about working in different forms, many of the places I visited in doing "The Underground Heart" appear in my poetry, but it's almost like as a poet I know that there's always a place that I reserve for myself as a writer, a special place that, not to be selfish, but a special place that in poetry, I necessarily can't share with someone else, a very private moment. Where, yes, in "Underground Heart", those museums or that Abo National Monument hold ancient Indian ruins. I bring them, I present them to a larger world through nonfiction, but it's almost I preserve them in a more personal, intimate place for myself through poetry. And again, not that poetry automatically calls for a selfish approach, but again, a more private, intimate approach.

And I didn't realize this until recently when again, you know, people were showing me different things that appeared in each of the books. And not necessarily, I'm not necessarily saying that in nonfiction, I can articulate something that I can't in poetry. But again, many of the same topics kind of work themselves out in a very different way in poetry than they do through nonfiction. Some of the longer essays in "Underground Heart", The Pancho Villa and then the last one, there might be three or

four sections that I try to write as poems during this time even though I was working on the essay, that they just didn't work and so I removed them, reworked them and they came out as essays. I said earlier, "Memory Fever", a lot of the short, short essays about childhood started out as failed poems and then I got the idea to work them into prose.

So again, the domination of the landscape, the conflict between cultures on the border, the history of conquest of the region, they all play themselves out, but I think there is still something special about poetry and maybe it's also why I like working in different genres. Maybe there's a different satisfaction that I get, you know, in nonfiction that maybe I can't find in poetry and vice versa. And I also, again, another reason I, you know, I always encourage my students, try different genres, if you're a poet, do some prose and before you know it, if you're in a rut with your poetry, the prose teaches you something and you go back to your poems and you've broken out in a different direction or vice versa. And again, it's almost back to form, it's almost like at that point in time, it's not so much the theme or the subject matter, but what you're doing with it through form and language. And I think that's what happens, you know, working in both poetry and prose.

Ralph Black:

You were talking about surrealism and just surrealism of the border region connected to landscape, but the, when I was reading through, you know, this book and other books of poems, it seems to me that there's an interest in surrealism and whether maybe the surrealism of Garcia Lorca and that that kind of inheritance, the Lorca poems and there are two Lorca poems in here, right?

Ray Gonzalez:

At least one about the [multiple speakers].

And his book, "Poet in New York", has been very influential, probably his most, you know, surreal book. Again, totally different than, you know, "The Gypsy Ballads" or some other, and almost like he had to get away from his popularity and his fame, you know, you know, as a poet in Spain and then go to New York and all the things that he discovered there. And when I've read a lot about him in teaching that book, I started discovering things about some of the surrealist painters, you know, Max Ernst and of course Salvador Dali who had a, you know, up and down relationship with Garcia Lorca.

And then back to the Southwest, I discovered that during World War II, surrealists like Andre Breton and Max Ernst travelled throughout the Southwest, Max Ernst lived in Arizona for several years under Breton. And there's a newer poem that I was working on, visited several of the pueblos in New Mexico, many of the surrealists fled World War II to escape the Nazis and many books have been written about them settling in New York, but a handful of them lived in the Southwest. Again, a whole another area in researching "The Underground Heart" that could easily take me in a whole different direction to do a different book, but, you know, that's down the road.

Again, I think the landscape attracts people like that, and both Breton and Ernst in their writings, and especially Ernst in his paintings, you can see paintings of that time, the influence of the landscape, of the Arizona landscape.

Anne Panning:

Well talking about your, the surreal and maybe I think there's even something that's been called magical realism, I don't know how you take that label, but in the fiction, you know, in " The Ghost of John Wayne" , a lot of them are ghost stories, right? Or they're ghost stories or they involve dreams or suddenly at the end something magical happens. Is that also related to this issue for you?

Ray Gonzalez:

I think so and I think a good part of it, and actually several of the stories in " The Ghost of John Wayne" back to family and that book, even though it came out around the time of " Underground Heart" , those stories are much, much older and I worked on those for a very, very long time, several years. Several of them are directly connected to family stories that my grandmother and my mother used to tell me and so over a period of time I worked some of those into that book of short stories.

One thing about memory, and back to nonfiction, the thing about using your imagination, growing up in a culture that has, you know, quite an oral tradition, you know, whether family stories are told in Spanish or English or bilingually, however you want to, you know, you want to say it, I could never forget some of those stories and many of those stories had to do back to " Underground Heart". Again, the survivors, ancestors, the conquests, the ghosts, the hauntings, almost like the tragic reality of two cultures and one overcoming the other. But the one that is conquered and overcome never really goes away, where a good portion of the stories you would hear passed on had a lot to do with other worlds or other voices or, and not in a bad way or in a frightening way, but spirits and ghosts that would come back and almost kind of like, again, you know, retell or redefine, you know, family history and triumph and tragedy and so forth. And I think that's really influenced some of the stories in "The Ghost of John Wayne" and certainly the short, short fictions in a couple of other, you know, collections that I've done.

And again, it's fun to write in that form, but you just can't make up some weird story just for the sake of being strange, you know, I mean, what are you doing with it? You know, how do you get it to work successfully? And sure, not everything's going to be believable and as a fiction writer, yes, maybe you have a certain kind of freedom that maybe a poet and a nonfiction writer might not have, but, so just, surrealist just be surrealist or what are you doing with it?

Anne Panning:

Well I think it, I think the stories work because they're sort of raw and gritty, you know, from the outset, they're, some of them are violent, some of them are sad, full of poverty or, you know, fear, especially the border stories, you know, fear about what's, am I going to be mistaken for doing something wrong? So that, you know, that kind of sets it up and then, so the twist or the spin or whatever you do in the end, especially the really short ones works because it doesn't, we don't have any sense of a fairytale, you know, going into these, they're very grounded. But the spins also work because they're, they kind of match, I don't know, they kind of match the characters and what they're up against and what they're striving for, you know. You were talking about redemption earlier, there's some kind of redemption going on in those.

Ray Gonzalez:

It's also I think a way, especially in a lot of the short, short ones where, again, storytelling and passing things on, but also taking several, I don't know, family myths or maybe obsessions like religion, growing up in a very strict Mexican American version of Catholicism where it isn't just dogma and the Pope and tradition, it's ritual and mystery and of a lot of unexplained things almost like the, you know, the crossing and the fusion of native religions, you know, from the Aztecs and the people that conquered them.

That's the kind of Catholicism that I was raised with, you know, through my grandmother. And so a large theme and in a number of the stories, especially the short, short fictions, is the reworking of the whole Catholic, Christian myth and rosaries and sayings and prayer and ritual and sin and all that.

But again, the challenge to the writer is, you know, not just a simple, you know, good versus evil or, you know, had a bad thought and so, you know, I've sinned and I have to go confess, you know, the stereotype of the strict Catholic upbringing, but trying to do something different with it, you know, in fiction.

Ralph Black:

I keep thinking of this word that maybe you heard from Scott Slovic when you were working with Scott, eco-tone, I don't know if you know the word, a word from ecology and biology which is sort of that marginal space on the border where two distinct ecosystems come together. Rangeland and forest, and it tends to be that, in biology anyway, it's the place where there is a great fruition of life, lots of different species, more species than live, you know, in either respective ecosystem would tend to live there, plus other species that live only on that marginal space.

Ray Gonzalez:

Yes.

Ralph Black:

And the way that you're talking about a lot of your work, fusion and rituals and sort of this amalgamation of various kinds of traditions, Mexican culture, American, you know, Anglo culture, the poems and in the poetry and the prose about Cortes and the burning of the aviaries, I mean, all these things come together and I wonder if that's something that you're aware of as you're writing, or actually, what I'm talking about specifically, and I'll talk about the specific work, is the snake poems in "The Heat of Arrival", where in so many of the poems there's a moment where a figure in the poems is, seems to be connecting, there's this kind of moment of contact or something between, and the contact often has to do with violence, it often has to do with being bitten by a poisonous snake, interestingly enough. You know, putting your finger in the mouth of the rattler or the poem about your father eating, I think, or grandfather eating a snake, not very happily, can, I mean that's a lot, but can you talk about that?

Ray Gonzalez:

Well, I think a couple of things what you said earlier about eco-tone and, you know, I guess two different, you know, ecological systems coming together, they create a third system and I think that's the border.

And again, a couple of writer friends of mine have never left the area and they're wonderful writers. And we argue a lot about this, do you have to leave home in order to discover that third system that might give you a totally different way about writing about the same place? Especially as a writer if you're not willing to let go of that place in your writing, so it creates that third, you know, that third place to write about, that third place, you know, where you work with the language whether it's nonfiction or fiction or poetry.

And so I think that's where a lot of the surrealism, you know, comes from. And then, in a way it kind of all weaves back, you know, together where something unusual as those snake poems and then back to the nonfiction and "Memory Fever", there's a whole essay about, called Rattlesnake Dreams.

And it explains the fact, and I think all of those poems except maybe one or two poems were all written after I wrote the essay. It took years and years of thinking about it and trying to write about it and finally it came out in "Memory Fever" where I had this recurring dream of rattlesnakes.

And I had this recurring dream probably starting in the late 70s, early 80s when I moved away from El Paso for the first time and moved up to Denver and lived there for about 12 years. And so I tried to come to terms with it and you mentioned being bitten by a snake, well. I was never bitten as a kid even though I would wander around the desert and would see a lot of snakes, I lost my fear of them even though I knew that rattlesnakes were poisonous.

But in that recurring dream and finally being able to write about it, it took that fear away where in the poems I think a number of them probably reach the conclusion that it's not an animal to be feared, even though of course, you know, people always misunderstand, you know, reptiles and creatures like that.

Finally one day I wrote the essay many years ago and it went into the first book of nonfiction. After I wrote the essay and recounted an experience of killing some snakes in the backyard, when my mother, when they came into our backyard as a boy and my mother was very afraid of them. Once I was able to write about that, those poems started to come out and they came out over a period of years.

And again, you know, back to the imagination and how far a poet can take that, a lot of things in those poems never actually happened, but it was almost an extension of what I had written in that essay and the fact that it took killing those snakes to, not to show a certain power over them, but to kind of like overcome my fear about certain things about my home and where I grew up.

But again, back to the writing process, it took having, you know, writing the essay and thinking about it over a period of years, having those recurring dreams about snakes, bringing in some factual things on my grandfather who did work the railroads in Arizona in the 1920s, and then some of the later things that happened in some of those snake poems. Finally one day years ago, decades ago, I stopped having those dreams and I don't remember when, when the last poem came out, it had to be maybe in the late 80s and then, you know, this book was published in the mid-90s.

But again, you know, confronting several things, you know, through language and form and working with the text, it's like you have to do that not only to take on the larger view of history in "Underground Heart", but also something very personal as a little boy being told by his mother, go kill these snakes before they crawl into the house. It's kind of a long explanation, but that's how all of that process came together and I think, you know, the source for those poems, you know, I think is that third place that you were talking about, that eco-tone, that third place, where you combine family history and something very personal and maybe, I don't know, looking up some several things about snakes to put into the poems, you know, trying to deal with a strange recurring dream that I would have maybe once or twice a year for many years until I finally stop having it, and those poems describe many of those dreams.

Anne Panning:

Is poetry your home, do you think, is that?

Ray Gonzalez:

Yeah.

Anne Panning:

Kind of all of this that we've been talking about, is that your sacred, sacred place?

Ray Gonzalez:

I was always wrote those strange little stories as a boy and, again, imitating comic books and then to music after imitating comic books and then the Beatles came along, 63, 64, imitating song lyrics off the radio, and trying to, you know, write many rhyming songs and poems. Did that for many years and then, even though I did not do well in high school with my English courses and literature courses, kind of put a distance there between myself and poetry. I really wanted to be a journalist and so I did that for a number of years, but again, it took a wonderful teacher and a fellow poet to kind of open my eyes to poetry.

So, you know, I can never get away from that, but again, and been trying to write a couple of essays even though there's I think one in "Memory Fever" and certainly part of the framework of "Underground Heart", this whole idea of home and what does it mean to go back to this hidden landscape, and maybe do something with it as a writer where it's no longer hidden from myself or maybe from my family or other people there.

But also, what does it mean to leave your home for good even, if you write about it for the rest of your life, you're not there. It changes and you change, but again, as the writer, maybe it gives you more, you know, more options.

Anne Panning:

Well what has living in a place like Minnesota, which really couldn't be much different than the Southwest, what has that done to you as a writer? How has that impacted your writing about the Southwest, if at all?

Ray Gonzalez:

Well, I think the Midwest in general, and you can probably say this about most places in the country, there's a real identity about what it means to be a Midwesterner and writers certainly deal with that identity as much as I've tried to deal, you know, with the Southwest and the literary community that, you know, that we talked about earlier, I mean it's certainly very active even though I was involved in the literary community in Denver and other places where I've lived.

It's almost like, you know, as a writer, as an editor, as a literary organizer, or somebody who's done anthologies, you move away from the more isolated, solitary atmosphere of the desert Southwest and you, and you're in Minneapolis or Chicago, it's like as a writer, you're out there in the public and your living it, not just as a university professor, but you see everything that maybe you wanted to achieve as a writer kind of like play itself out in public through readings, festivals, journals, you know, all the other things that I do.

So in a way, being in Minnesota kind of has shown me, you know, different sides of being a writer. Maybe the privacy that's needed to go to the Southwest and write a book like "Underground Heart". And then maybe the more public side to do the poetry journal that I do there at the University of Minnesota, put together the poetry festival, it's almost like the complete circle of being a writer, you know, comes to, you know, comes to fruition there.

Anne Panning:

Well there's so much we'd like to talk about, but I'm actually going to ask you to, if you could find something you'd like to read to end out this, that would be great.

Ray Gonzalez:

Okay, alright.

We talked about memory earlier with the nonfictions so, I will conclude with this.

My earliest memory, I am flying through the air held up as a one-year-old in my grandmother's right hand. Her arm straight up as she lies in her bed, trying to make me quit crying. She made me fly every night, my eyes staring at the votive candles flickering on the nightstand as if I knew something about the flames. This joyful play at night meaning I would see things from above before I would set my tiny feet on the ground for the first time. Giggling and flying, my grandmother holding me up by one strong hand telling me the boy who flies will sleep better once he leaves the earth.

Anne Panning:

Thank you.

Ralph Black:

Thanks very much.