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"Locate Your Body in the World and Pay Attention":
An Interview with the Poet Rigoberto González

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INTRODUCTION

Born in Bakersfield, California, but raised in Michoacán, Mexico (from ages 2 to 10), Rigoberto González is a prolific Chicano poet and author whose works are taught across the country in university poetry and creative writing courses, as well as high schools; courses in teacher preparation programs; and workshops held in correctional facilities. He is the author of thirteen books of poetry and prose, and the editor of Camino del Sol: Fifteen Years of Latina and Latino Writing. His most recent volume of poetry is titled Unpeopled Eden (Four Way Books, 2013). González earned a bachelor’s from the University of California, Riverside and graduate degrees from the University of California, Davis and Arizona State University. He is the recipient of the Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, a grant from the New York Foundation for the Arts, and winner of the American Book Award [2007], The Poetry Center Book Award [2008], The Shelley Memorial Award of The Poetry Society of America [2011], and the Barnes & Noble Writers for Writers Award [2013]. Moreover, González is the founder and one of the organizers of the writers’ collective (Chicano/Latino poets and writers) named “Con Tinta,” which is committed to affirming a positive and proactive presence in American literature. For ten years, he was a Latino book reviewer and columnist for The El Paso Times and currently writes for the Los Angeles Review of Books. He is also a contributing editor for Poets & Writers Magazine, and member of the executive board of directors of the National Book Critics Circle. Finally, he is Associate Professor of English at Rutgers-Newark, the State University of New Jersey.

In the following interview, Rigoberto González shares his vision of Chicano poetry in the Americas and his contributions for the advancement of U.S. literature that includes a pluralism of voices and perspectives. He shares information about his current projects as an activist-writer with a wide range across literary genres that are interconnected to poetry, as well as his vision for Latina/o poetry in this century. His most recent volume of poetry, Unpeopled Eden, documents the lives of migrants, immigrants and border crossers in the form of memorials and prayers for our diverse literary heritage. This interview was conducted via e-mail messages and telephone conversations, from late Summer 2013 through early Fall 2013.

Rodrigo Joseph Rodríguez (RJR): Your poems cast a clear, meticulous lens into the migration of humans and even the monarch butterflies, as described in the poems “Penny Men” and “The Flight South of the Monarch Butterfly,” respectively. Tell me about the poems you’ve written that interpret the hemispheric Americas as a whole, connecting us with many migrants, border crossers and people leaving, and even coming, home.

Rigoberto González (RG): Migration is the universal story, and movement is the migrant’s soul: not a departure or even arrival, though those two points are also part of the journey. As a son and grandson of migrants, I feel completely at home allowing my imagination to inhabit that wondrous and dynamic state of existence. But this state of being also brings sadness and loss and grief. I wanted to revisit those themes that muscled my first book, So Often the Pitcher Goes to Water until It Breaks, but as an older, more seasoned and experienced writer. In my fourth book, Unpeopled Eden, I draw lines between the many ways our fathers leave us: they die, they abandon us, they move away to work, they go to war. If and when they return, they come back changed because their stories speak of new experiences. If they don’t return at all, their absence has already changed the place they left vacant. And in both cases, they change us, their communities. I believe this is the lifeblood of the Americas—a continent in constant shift, just like the Earth’s plates. The rumbling beneath awes us, terrifies us, reminds us of our ephemeral nature. I suppose that’s why death is an important protagonist in my poems—not as a finite endpoint but as a transition.

RJR: The collective “Con Tinta” supports emerging and established Chicana/o and Latina/o poets who are
committed to the creative process and their diverse communities. In a sense, you are modeling the stewardship of poetry to reach the masses and honor those who have selflessly committed themselves to our letters. What led you to this vision and practice as ambassador of poetry?

RG: I was fortunate enough to connect with like-minded activist-writers (Kathleen Alcalá, Brenda Cárdenas, Lisa Chávez, Lorraine López, Daniel A. Olivas and Richard Yañez) who also saw a need to bridge various generations of writers at different stages of their careers. Con Tinta began as an experiment, an effort to cluster the growing number of Latino writers who were attending the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Annual Conference. Very early on we realized that such new resources—like AWP, but also the Internet—had not served our veteran writers as well as they had benefitted us, so we wanted to celebrate people like raúlrsalinas [sic], Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Tato Laviera and Sandra María Estevez as mentors and voices that were still being heard, and to introduce them to the younger generation of writers who needed to understand that they had a rich literary legacy and community role models within reach. We are now entering our eighth year. We call this gathering a pachanga because of the intimate and generous spirit that's created when people come closer together. Now more than ever, these moments are necessary because our literature, culture and people are being belittled and demeaned by an anti-immigrant climate with discriminatory policies. We are too many to feel isolated or alienated. We need to cluster and become even stronger.

RJR: In the essay, “A Poet for President” (2008), Pat Mora declares, “We raise our voices to be of use. The work of the poet is for the people.” As such, your most recent poetry volume, Unpeopled Eden, takes readers back in time to January 29, 1948, when a plane carrying immigrant workers crashed west of Coalinga, California. Of the 32 people on board, only four (pilot, co-pilot, flight attendant, guard) were acknowledged by journalists in newspapers across the country, while the 28 others who were deportees—many legal workers of the federal Bracero guest-worker program—are nameless and buried in a communal site with the inscription: “28 Mexican Citizens Who Died In An Airplane Accident Near Coalinga California On Jan. 28, 1948 R.I.P.” However, you name them and carve them in your title poem 65 years later.

RG: I have been haunted by this event ever since I first heard the Woody Guthrie song, “Deportee (Plane Wreck in Los Gatos),” when I was a young man, long before I even began to dream I would be a writer. In a way, the poem that eventually got written was about thirty years in the making. I made many attempts to write through the outrage and sadness, but failed, until I began to imagine the spaces these workers passed through on their final days on Earth: the fields, the detention center, the bus, the airplane itself. It was important to name them, because they had been robbed of their identities all these years and had been defined by tragedy. I pay homage to the part of the journey all twenty eight took together, recognizing that it’s only a small service to the twenty eight individual stories that were silenced in one cruel instance. Our dignity is in our names, which announce our ethnicity, our language, our cultural landscape and our homeland. It was about time these twenty eight people finally came home.

RJR: Gloria Anzaldúa reminded us to be wary of “ethnic legitimacy tests” and understood the struggles that artists, poets and thinkers face in Mexican America and the greater United States. How do you maintain your diverse identities and membership across the communities that embrace you, especially in an age that challenges definitions of Chicana/o, Latina/o, sexuality, race, socio-economics and ethnicity?

RG: One time I heard Pat Mora say that identity was situational—depending on the context, the language spoken, the knowledge of terminology, the temperature in the room—what mattered was not what others called you, but what you taught others in the opportunity of exchange. A label doesn’t mean much to me if it doesn’t teach something about my politics or my actions. I like the words “queer,” “gay” and “Chicano” because they have the potential to trouble or unsettle. By putting them together, I announce to those around me that I have multiple loyalties, alliances and communities. I’m always dismayed when I hear young writers say they reject labels like Latino or feminist—such rejection is a naive stance, a demonstration of ignorance about the strength and power of words. And they call themselves writers? I never feel diluted or devalued by my multiple associations; on the contrary, I feel more abled, I feel as if I have successfully overcome that lack of self-esteem I was told to have because I was gay or Mexican or working
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class. I believe there was a time when people had to make tough choices about what they called themselves or with whom to associate. In the era of globalization, of complex identities and multifaceted solidarities, the only choice is speaking up or remaining silent. Each piece of writing is an exchange, a speaking up. What will you teach others with your voice?

RJR: *Unpeopled Eden* opens with the poem, “The Soldier of Mictlán,” and revisits Mictlán, the region of the dead often associated with Mexica/Aztec mythology. This poem begins with a traditional storytelling technique that haunts, taunts and terrorizes those associated with war and those who are dispossessed, harmed and violated by men’s wars:

> Once upon a time there was a soldier who marched to Mictlán in his soldier boots and every step was a soldier step and every breath was a soldier word. Do you know what this soldier said?

RG: That poem carries a particular badge of honor—it is my single banned or censored poem. It was commissioned by a public library that wanted to inspire its patrons with a poem that would greet all who entered through the front entrance of the library. This was shortly after 9/11/2001 and the country was on the verge of a revenge war, so the troubled times guided me to the sentiments you outlined in your commentary. I submitted the piece and it was duly rejected because of its “anti-war” message, which might offend library-goers. I found it difficult to believe that people who read were pro-war. Nonetheless, the poem never went up on display. Readers who open the book will be greeted at the door by this poem because it opens the book. I hope that they understand what I had wanted to do all along: not divide people into anti- or pro-war, but to ask all sides to meet in the center and recognize each other’s humanity and exercise empathy.

RJR: In the chapter “Outcast” from *Autobiography of My Hungers* (2013), you explain, “As a homesick immigrant, I longed to mix in with my people whenever I returned to Mexico.” How has this influenced your writing and voice as a Chicano poet?

RG: I long for the Mexico of my youth. I grew up in Michoacán and returned to visit many times. The sensory imagery continues to inspire me. My nostalgia was more apparent in my first book of poetry, which I also call a “love letter to my homeland,” and in my first memoir, *Butterfly Boy*, in which I’m taking a bus trip into Mexico with my father. I’m going back yet again in *Unpeopled Eden*—through the stories of its people, my father—and in my current prose projects, one a novel about Mexicans in New York City, the second another memoir in which I revisit some of the small towns of Michoacán, like Tzintzuntzán and Quiroga and Nahuatzen. The longer I’m away from Mexico the more it calls to me, a persistent muse, a stubborn texture in my ink.

Is it strange to say that the older I become the more Mexican I become? Recently I’ve been listening obsessively to the music my grandparents used to play. And I’m excited about how those lyrics, those sounds, are going to trigger memories that will shape a poem or a story. As an example: listening to *Las Jilguerillas* reminded me that my grandmother used to comb her short hair with a plastic nine-sided shampoo brush. I used that phrase as a title and it eventually grew into a poem. I gather the objects of my Mexican memories around me more than ever, especially now that my grandparents and my parents are dead. It’s my way of not forgetting them.

RJR: The brown, gay body in your poems does not hide in a holy sheet or behind imposed veils, but steps forward onto the stage or altar and the front room of the master’s house in various forms of desire and pain. Your writing of the gay male body and lesbian female body reminds readers about growing up, facing machismo, speaking up against violence, adopting a sense of home and origin, and finding one’s calling as a poet and thinker.

RG: It’s important to break away from shame, guilt and fear. Otherwise, we will not survive. It distresses me that queer youth are still being bullied, driven to suicide, targeted on the streets, or battered inside their own homes. To this day, I still struggle with depression, and the feelings of neglect and abandonment—unfortunately, those things never fully go away. But I’m also here to testify that it’s possible to thrive despite what continues to haunt us. As a young man, I didn’t have access to the lives or literatures that validated my experience, that told me I wasn’t the only one suffering. This absence was painful and traumatic.
As a writer, having traveled through the terrible roads of adolescence, of abusive relationships in early adulthood, I have a responsibility to bear witness, to place within reach those moments that, left unspoken or unwritten, will help those of us who don’t want to deny that these experiences and emotions are valid or real. That’s another kind of hurt. In my book of essays, Red-Inked Retablos, I challenge other queer Latino writers to put it in writing—whatever that “it” is. The more we assert our visibility, the less likely we will be erased, marginalized, silenced or dismissed.

RJR: In the poem “Casa,” the speaker vacillates about the actual responsibilities and demands placed upon one’s house and home, and declares:

I am not your mother, I will not be moved
by the grief or gratitude of men
who weep like orphans at my door.
I am not a church. I do not answer prayers but I never turn them down.

Don’t look at me that way, I’m not to blame. I granted nothing to the immigrant or exile that I didn’t give a border crosser or a native born. I am not a prize or a wish come true.

What are we to infer about all the senses of home and origin that we carry with us?

RG: That particular poem came during an important moment of our times—the housing market crash. Witnessing how thousands of people lost their houses was extremely sad. But this was an experience I didn’t know—I’ve never had that kind of home, a physical building on which to hang my memories. As much as I long for or miss my country, I know I haven’t lost it. I’ve lost many members of my family, to death, and they’re still with me. I suppose that I felt sorry for those who didn’t understand that to place such value on a thing that could shatter their entire stability was foolish. People committed suicide when they lost their homes—that’s how much they had allowed an inanimate object to define them. My poem is not a critique or an indictment on those poor souls (or anyone else who suffered such loss), it is more of a reminder about the ephemeral nature of home. Migrants and border crossers know this. But knowledge doesn’t make it any easier; you have to reach for a more superior plane—imagination, where we carry memory, creativity and opportunity. My grandmother used to say, “Cada cabeza es un mundo.” Every head is its own world. Eventually, I realized that she meant everyone is their own individual doing their own thing and looking at the others through a unique lens, but when I was young, I used to think: Wow! I have a whole population of people inside me, entire communities, cities, continents! I can go anywhere and never feel alone and never get lost—I am the home.

RJR: Your commitment to poetry is evident in your work: The volumes of poetry you’ve published confirm poetry as your first calling with an emphasis in style and form. You’ve mastered many other genres such as the novel for adults and young adults alike, as well as autobiographical and children’s literature. In addition, all of your writing communicates the sensibilities of a poet with keen insights into varied voices working on agricultural farms across America, witnessing the absences of people’s histories and literatures in books, finding one’s sexuality, and affirming one’s selfhood. What leads you to these genres with poetry at the helm?

RG: As a young man, I began to understand the powers of literature. I witnessed its workings as it helped me learn about the world and escape into it. At the same time, literature expanded the window I wanted to climb through and always a discovery was imminent, as easily reached as the turning of a page. I suspected that being a reader was the beginning of something greater than what I thought, or [what] my family thought, and [what] was going to be my destiny. And once I did begin to imagine a writer in me, I knew that I would proceed without limits, or demarcations, or borders. Just like I grew up reading everything and anything, I would write everything and anything. And so I did. The only way to know how much I had to learn was to fail and write terrible poems and stories—each one of those was a step toward the better ones. Eventually, when I began to come across publishing opportunities, I was ready to contribute to a variety of markets that served a range of audiences.

My most recent endeavors are the young adult novels and literary criticism. A publisher approached me about
writing for young adults and I hesitated at first—I had read plenty, but I knew they would be tough and I was caught up in some other projects. But after doing some research and recognizing what a void there was for queer Latino youth, I couldn't resist any longer. Writing these books (the third one, Mariposa U., comes out in spring 2014) is one of my proudest achievements, because it connected me to the young and bright readers around the country who reminded me of that kid (me) who first looked to books to shape a different view of the world than what he was currently seeing.

The second genre I wrote out of frustration because of the lack of poetry criticism. (I began reviewing books for the same reasons—so many Latino books, not enough reviews about them.) In any case, it was maddening. As a reader of Latino poetry, I was seeing some amazing shifts in tone and form and discipline that I hadn't encountered before. Young poets are stepping up. But no one was writing about them. So, again, I took it upon myself (I'm like the Henny Penny of Latino letters). I wrote essays on Eduardo C. Corral's *Slow Lightning*, and on J. Michael Martínez's *Heredities*. I'm currently working on a lecture, which will be delivered at the U.S. Library of Congress in April 2014, titled “Latino Poetry: Pivotal Voices, Era of Transition,” a study on whom I consider some of the most exciting and risk-taking Latino poets today: Carmen Giménez Smith, Cynthia Cruz, Laurie Ann Guerrero, David Tomás Martínez, Joseph Delgado, Jacob Sáenz, and of course, Eduardo C. Corral and J. Michael Martínez. I'm putting these essays in a book I hope will be done by the end of 2014. Poetry, my first love, is always at the helm—it suffers such neglect at times.

**RJR:** The chapters in *Autobiography of My Hungers* read like prose poems with lyricism and are often incantations of lives lived. For instance, you share in the vignette, “allegory,” all that a child observes from ground level and include subsequent chapters in the form of small stones, or *piedritas* (pebbles), as nuggets of life and thought:

Like many Mexican children, I cleaned the *piedritas* out of the uncooked beans before they went into the pot—my meal-prep duty to help my overwhelmed mother as she spun around in the kitchen [. . .]

When I flicked each piedrita on the Formica table, it tapped a rhythm the entire way until it leaped off the edge, delighted, it seemed, by its luck, its freedom, and its soloist song.

Is this description of yours one of having spun a “soloist song” into poems?

**RG:** That's a very flattering observation, thank you. It's interesting because as a teacher, I'm always struck by this student concern for “finding a voice,” as if it's something fabricated or so original it will sound like nothing else before it. Quite a grand expectation. I explain to my students that a voice is shaped by the influences we allow to guide us, very much like our bodies are shaped by the genes we inherited, by our ancestral line. But in the case of voice, there is agency and choice, though I believe that culture, language and instruction contribute greatly to those choices. Breath will always come from the lungs that push it out into the world, but that strength to push comes from those who showed us how. Each of us will only sound like ourselves, but we sing to the music of our mentors, muses, family and community. You want to find your voice? First find yourself—locate your body in the world and pay attention to your surroundings, your memory, your history. No one else but you can sing your “soloist song” the way you can in that moment, no one else can take your place in the world of expression and creativity.

**RJR:** Thank you for sharing your perspectives about poetics and identities. We are enriched by your literary contributions.

**RG:** Thank you very much for this interview, Joseph, it was a pleasure. I hope that my work, my words, can fulfill my role as a literary mentor to young people out there who want to make that glorious leap from reader to writer.

**ENDNOTES**

1. Con Tinta was founded in 2005 and is a collective of Chicana/o and Latina/o activist writers.
2. Las Jilguerillas is a duet led by Imelda and Amparo Higuera, both sisters, who were farm workers in Cana da de Ramirez, Michoacán, before becoming musicians. Their music is strongly influenced by an agrarian life and indigenous cultures, and sung in the form
of Mexican corridos [ballads] and ballet folklórico. They recorded thousands of songs, which are played widely in homes and fields across the U.S., Mexico and Latin America. Imelda, the eldest, died in 2004.

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