

“Rene Saldaña: the Embodiment of the Contemporary Global Southern Writer.”

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Born in McAllen, Texas, the son of Mexican immigrants, Rene Saldaña started his literary career as a youth literature writer in 2001 with *The Jumping Tree*, chosen by *Booklist* as one of its Ten Top Youth First Novels. He then went on with *Finding our Way* in 2003, *The Whole Sky Full of Stars* in 2007, and has just published *A Good Long Way* last November. Saldaña has travelled a great deal all over the South during his youth. A graduate of Bob Jones University in South Carolina, and Clemson University in South Carolina, he obtained his Ph. D. in Creative Writing from Georgia State University, where he taught in the Department of English before going back to Texas to live and teach in the College of Education at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

Saldaña’s stories, aimed at teenagers, mostly focus on the experience of young boys coming of age in the South. While most stories take place in South Texas, it is interesting to notice that Saldaña constantly emphasizes the close and sometimes conflicting emotional relationship of his characters with three other geographically and culturally defined groups of the American continent: first those *del otro lado*, Mexicans living on the other side of the border; then those living in the North of the United-States, where everything is so different; and finally the population of the rest of the enlarged United-States’s South. These complicated geographical and cultural patterns seem to be drawing a new map around the notion of social belonging which I would like to explore in this presentation. My objective is to demonstrate, through Saldaña’s writing, the existence and relevancy of the notion of a global South in the beginning of this 21th century. I tend to think that Saldaña, through stories intertwining English and Spanish —both languages being described as having different uses and purposes—seems to be drawing with kids’ pencils the map of the contemporary South, a South no more in Black and White, no more ruled by a dominant Anglo-Saxon culture and language, a South which is no

more only geographically delimited by the former borders of the Confederacy, or its history of slavery.

While the academy still tends to see everything related to the relationship between the US and Mexico or other Spanish-speaking countries as “Chicano literature from the West,” Saldaña forces us to reconsider such a simplistic vision and to take into account the recent waves of Hispanic immigration in the South-East, becoming a more and more visible “minority” in the region. My study of Saldaña derives from my current PhD dissertation research that focuses on the expression of the notion of global South in the literary voices of Latino-American writers living in the United-States.

In order to show how Saldaña’s work could be included in such a global perspective, I will first analyze his use and sometimes corruption of traditional Southern *topos*, such as foodways, religion, family bonding, and heat. I will then explain how and why the author plays with languages and cultures, through his extensive use of Spanish and through the way he tackles the racial situation in the region, to demonstrate how Saldaña works on the question of the identity of the inhabitants of the South, and thus remaps the South along fresh and relevant lines, sometimes porous, and sometimes more rigid.

Interestingly, one can find all the traditional elements of Southern Literature in Saldaña’s works: an emphasis on the fierceness of religion, the communal aspect of food, the scorching climate, the entanglements of family, the notion of otherness and the complexity of race, cultural conflicts, and the legendary “sense of place,” are palpable in almost every single page of his fiction. Concerning religion, it’s hard to find a single story of *The Jumping Tree* or of *Finding our Way* in which religion has not a role to play, or at least is not mentioned as a background. In the first story, entitled “Shakety Shakes,” the main protagonist Chuy is crossing the city with one of his friends and happens to walk in front of “Peñitas Baptist Church,” a place which Chuy describes in the following words, assimilating Northerners to “gringos:”

It was God’s house, and I liked it there. Gringos from up North would come to Peñitas Baptist during the summers to conduct vacation Bible school. [...] They had air-conditioning, something we couldn’t afford at home.¹

¹ JT, 7.

In the next story, “My Father, the Man,” the reader discovers that the main character’s father was saved from alcoholism through his sudden decision to attend Misericordia Baptist Church.² In *The Whole Sky Full of Stars*, Alby’s father keeps attempting to raise his children according to the Bible, explaining that “it’s right there in the Bible: raise a boy in the right way, and he’ll grow up to be the apple of your eye.”³

Foodways also have an important status in the stories, from homemade lemonade given as a reward after a physical work,⁴ to the necessity of using proper ingredients only available down South to cook. In the story “Shakety Shakes,” Rey recounts what was the first thing his friend Chuy, who had to follow his parents to the North of the United-States during a season of work,⁵ explained to him when coming back to Texas:

[Chuy] told about the Saturday-morning trips to the grocery stores where he didn’t ever see buckets of lard like we had at Foy’s supermarket in Mission. ‘Mama has to cook with oil,’ he said, ‘and her frijoles just don’t taste Mexican, like here.’⁶

Chuy notices that the taste of the frijoles cooked in lard is different up North from what it is in both Mexico and the South of the United-States, mainly because of the non availability of some ingredients.

The importance of climate and heat is also recurrent in the texts, and the plot of some stories even revolve around it, like in the story entitled “Old Edwin and the Burglar Bars,” in which the main character’s baby brother happens to get trapped inside the house during the scorching summer, with no air-conditioning, requiring the help and talent of the elder Edwin, a white man who, while he doesn’t speak a word of Spanish, is perfectly integrated in the local latino community through cross-cultural marriages in his family.⁷ It is also interesting to notice the way the narrator describes the house:

² *JT*, 15.

³ *WSFS*, 13.

⁴ “After we were done, ‘Amá said, ‘Rey, let’s go get some lemonade. We’ve worked very hard.” *JT*, 25.

⁵ “When money was tight, Chuy and his family—his mom and dad, brothers, sisters, grandparents, and cousins—would migrate up North to the trabajos, where they worked in the fields.” *JT*, 5.

⁶ *JT*, 6.

⁷ “Old Edwin was the patriarch of the only family in all of the barrio made up of whites and Mexicans. They kept pretty much to themselves until his daughter married one of the men in the neighborhood, and this made things easier for all. They were not white anymore, but had married into our culture, and took on some of our traditions, especially the barbecues, to which everyone in the barrio was invited. This was a big deal because these pachangas were in celebration of friendship and family.” *JT*, 30.

We had the only flat-roof, stucco house in Nuevo Peñitas. I was embarrassed by it because we were in America, and the roofs on houses in America pointed to the sky. Ours was like the houses in Mexico, flat like a field. As if it wasn't enough, it was painted on the pink side of peach.

One shouldn't forget that the flat-roofed houses, described by the young narrator as un-American, are also a staple of traditional southern architecture and culture—the reference to the pink color of the peach reinforcing the Southernness of the building.

The importance of family through stories mainly focusing on the coming of age of young teenagers and their relationship with the different members of their families, some living in the United-States, some in Mexico should also be pointed out. Family, its importance in everyday life, and the difficulty for each of its members to find its place is emphasized in almost every one of the thirty-one stories composing *The Jumping Tree* and *Finding our Way*. More interesting is the case of those who are living in Mexico, either by choice or by lack of means—their stories allow Saldaña to describe the dramatic differences existing between the two sides of the border:

My cousin Jorge, who was a full two years older, was visiting from Mier across the border. This didn't happen too often because we visited my family in Mexico two or three weekends out of the month, and my tío Jorge had to wait until my uncle could borrow some transportation. Jorge wouldn't start school for another two weeks, so he wanted to take a vacation in the States. Odd how just across the border, only some forty-five minutes away, people still walked to work, there was still a milkman, a water truck brought drinking water to each house, and fruit and vegetable vendors drove or walked up and down streets selling their wares.⁸

Interestingly, this description both stresses the porous nature of the border, which is crossed pretty freely by both sides of the family as long as it is for a short amount of time, and the border's culturally delineating nature, with the mention on the Mexican side of activities and practices considered as outdated in the United-States—with no negative connotation, though.

Another intriguing aspect is the fact that while the US South / Mexico border is described as having an ambiguous status, there is a clear and proper rejection of everything located “up-north,” even if no border-crossing is required. In the story entitled “Las Botas,” Rey's father decides to offer his son his first pair of boots. While at the store, Rey is utterly dissatisfied with the models offered by the salesman, and the following scene occurs:

⁸ *JT*, 66.

‘That’s really good leather,’ said the salesman to me. ‘They’re very popular boots up North.’ Now he talks to me, once my fate is sealed! And who cares about the dorks up North! I’m down South! *Who is this guy, I thought, a charter member of the Boot Nazis?*⁹

The argument used by the salesman to demonstrate why the young teenager should pick this particular model of boots produces a completely opposite reaction for what the salesman intends. It has to be noticed that while the mention of “good leather” produces no reaction in Rey, the argument that the boots are popular up North makes the teenager extremely angry, the latter refusing categorically to have anything to do with the fashion tastes of Northerners. Mentioning the North doesn’t produce the effect expected by the salesman; instead of getting more interested in the boots, Rey entirely rejects them and what they represent; the salesman becomes by the same token a “nazi.”

Another instance of this clear dichotomy between the North and the South takes place in a story entitled “The Alamo, Remembered,” in which Rey spends his vacation in a Baptist Summer Camp. For different reasons, including the issue of the language that should be spoken in the camp, Rey quickly enters in conflict with Brother Bob, a senior counselor who “[had been] recruited from somewhere up North.”¹⁰ The story ends up with Mr. Simms, the camp director, giving Brother Bob a speech about Southern identity:

Now,’ continued Mr. Simms, ‘Brother Bob, around here, things are different than up North. Yes, we are in America, as you said to Rey the other day, but we are bilingual and bicultural. You, sir, are in the minority here and should behave accordingly. I want you to apologize to Rey.’¹¹

Not only does Mr. Simms give reason to the young Rey, he also emphasizes the cultural difference of the South, defining the strictly white, anglo-saxon, Northerner Brother Bob as “in the minority.”

One could play for hours this game of hide-and-seek with characteristics of Southernness as they are traditionally described, noticing the references to traditional Southern activities and cultural practices (such as Nascar in *The Whole Sky Full of Stars*¹²) or cultural topos (with

⁹ *JT*, 122.

¹⁰ *JT*, 163.

¹¹ *JT*, 166.

¹² “‘I sent him the caps a couple of months ago, a box with return postage, and a note reminding him we’d met in the pits last year at the Texas Motor Speedway’ [...] *I don’t even like stupid NASCAR. What’s he thinking?*” *WSFS* 27.

the little girls described as “want[ing] to dress in evening gowns like Scarlett O’ Hara’s”¹³ for a party). In Saldaña’s works Southern flavor is obvious and perspires out of every single page, but I think the perspectives offered by his writing don’t stop at that and should be pushed further. Saldaña is the embodiment of what I see as the new wave of Southern authors coming from a latino background, opening by the same token new perspectives and new themes to both southern authors and southern critics—the latter being forced to find new critical and analytical tools to cope with the rapid evolution of the region. Among the originalities of Saldaña’s work, his linguistic blend of English and Spanish stands out as an unavoidable object of study.

Whether it is in *The Jumping Tree*, *Finding our Way*, or *The Whole Sky Full of Stars*, Saldaña uses Spanish extensively in his writing of dialogues. It has to be noticed that the use of Spanish goes further than a basic attempt to give a local color to the writing—for example, the author never resorts to quotation marks or italics when using Spanish words or expressions, blending the languages fluidly, as it is often the case for immigrant speakers of Spanglish. The only words written in italics are the mispronunciations of Spanish words by some Americans, as in *The Whole Sky Full of Stars*, when the name of one of the two main characters, Barry Esquivel (Es-ki-vel), is mispronounced and written phonetically as “*Eskweevale*.”¹⁴ Interestingly, when writing a long and/or complicated sentence spoken in Spanish by a character, Saldaña avoids writing the Spanish, preferring to use narrative discourse markers such as “he said in Spanish.” This might be an attempt to avoid puzzling too much the native English speaker with no knowledge of Spanish while at the same time emphasizing the different social and cultural use of the two languages. In Saldaña’s literary South, Spanish and English seem to be used for different purposes. As Beatrice Mendez Newman explains about the use of languages by children in her article about childhood universals in *The Jumping Tree*¹⁵,

Spanish is the language of their real lives while English is the language they speak in order to get along academically, economically, and politically. [...] Rey uses Spanish

¹³ *JT*, 148.

¹⁴ ““And the winner by technical knockout, the Rio Grande’s Valley’s own Barry “The Bear’ Esquivel,” he yelled, mispronouncing the last name, *Eskweevale*.” *WSFS*, 112.

¹⁵ Beatrice Mendez Newman, “Rene Saldana’s *The Jumping Tree*: Exploring Childhood Universals through a Hispanic Novel,” *Voices from the Middle* 13:3, Mar. 2006, 30-3.

phrases not because he doesn't know the English equivalent, but because his meaning can be conveyed only by the perfect cadences of the language of his life.¹⁶

Mendez Newman is right in opposing emotion to reason in her description of the uses of English and Spanish. In *The Whole Sky Full of Stars*, the main character Barry, who's thinking about becoming a professional wrestler, has a discussion with his father taking place in both Spanish and English:

Pop motioned for Barry to lean in, then said in Spanish: 'Mi'jo, you're not a boy anymore. No longer your mom's and my Little Man. It's all on your shoulders now.' Then he switched back to English: 'In the ring, a fighter's got to be focused on nothing else but the man in front of him.'¹⁷

Barry's father uses English for serious, professional business and resorts to Spanish for personal, emotional and familial discourse. Almost every dialogue between children and parents is punctuated of "mi'jo," "apa," and "ama." Through these bi-lingual characters, Saldaña points out the cultural evolution of the region, in which Spanish starts to be acknowledged as a part of the local culture—even though it is in most cases only used in private circles. This could be seen as Saldaña's answer to conservative criticism (such as Brother Bob's) which sees the immigrants as threatening a so-called anglo-saxon culture through their use of Spanish—Spanish is actually mostly used in private circles, and most second-generation immigrants speak perfect English.

Another interesting zone of tension can be found in the way Saldaña tackles the question of race-relationships in the region. In the story "My Father, the Man," the narrator Rey talks about a Black teacher he had once:

When I was in the third grade, several of my classmates made fun of our teacher, Mr. Jackson, the only black man I knew. 'Parece change,' one of them said. 'Sí,' another agreed, speaking in our language to keep it a secret. 'Even with that beard and mustache, he still looks like a monkey.' They all laughed and laughed."¹⁸

The comparison of the black Mr. Jackson with a monkey obviously reminds of the traditional racist scientific representations of black people as coming from monkeys, as

¹⁶ Mendez Newman, 31.

¹⁷ *WSFS*, 33.

¹⁸ *JT*, 16.

opposed to white people made by God. Interestingly, Rey doesn't follow the insulting behavior of his schoolmates, even after been punished by the teacher:

“I hated him! Not because he was black—I didn't even know to think like that—but because he'd put me to shame. So I had every reason to laugh at him now, too. To say, ‘Sí, el Negro parece change.’ But that was wrong.”

Saldaña offers us a complex vision of the status of race-relationships between Latinos and African-Americans, which far from being uniform, depends on the individuals involved. While the school kids easily mock the teacher on the basis of his skin, Rey refuses to do it, and ends up being bullied at recess for his refusal to follow the popular condemnation. Another interesting occurrence of the question of race-relationships takes place in a later story entitled “Texas, Our Texas!” in which Rey's teacher equates the situation and struggles of African-Americans and with those of Latinos during the Civil Rights movement. Rey discovers that he and the other children hadn't been told

that in many parts of Texas, many businesses didn't allow Mexicans or Spanish to even walk onto the premises, even after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, great speeches, and his March on Washington. She showed us a picture in the book of a restaurant with a sign on the door: ‘No dogs, Meskins, or niggers allowed in here.’ Something in my chest hurt. Like I wanted to cry.”¹⁹

Far from lowering the prominent role of African-Americans in the struggle for Civil Rights, or trying to strictly differentiate both categories of people, Saldaña's character rather attempts to link their experiences, presenting them as two peoples considered both as equal to dogs for White people in the region. In Saldaña's world, questions of race-relationships have no easy or immediate answer, the author preferring to make his readership think about the problem without giving a “truth.” It should, however, be noticed that these questions of multi-racial relationships stand in direct opposition to the usual bi-racial vision of the South, seen only in tones of black and white. This widening of the issues and situations in a South characterized by its rapid evolution and transformation can also be found in the way Saldaña writes about questions of identities and social integration.

In the same story as mentioned before, Rey notices the way his textbook doesn't mention the role of Latinos in Texas or in the South:

¹⁹ *JT*, 129.

We read out of *Texas History and You*, did the fill-in-the-blank assignments at the back of the chapters, and took the tests, which never mentioned the brown people in Texas, except the Mexicans who fought at the Alamo, or the illegal aliens invading ‘our’ country to get on welfare and to take jobs from ‘hardworking Americans.’²⁰

Latinos or, as Rey calls them, “brown people,” are never depicted as positive cultural figures, being only presented to children as either soldiers dead a long time ago, or threatening illegal immigrants. Not only are American citizens of Latino origin never given a positive role in medias or history books, they are also forced to demonstrate their citizenship. At some point of the school year, Rey discovers that a new project is being discussed at the House of Representatives. The new law would make compulsory for Mexican-Americans to carry a special federal ID when traveling between the United-States and Mexico. Rey reacts to the news by stating that:

With this card, we’d be legitimate. I wondered, would all Americans, including the whites, have to carry this same card? Or would it just be us? And what if I tore mine up like the hippies did their draft notices back in the sixties? Could I be put to jail? They said these would be federal documents.”²¹

Furthermore, they are also in some ways linguistically denied as American citizens, in the same way African-Americans are. In the story, Rey’s teacher invites a civil rights political activist from a student organization to give a talk about questions of citizenship and identity. At some point, the activist declares:

And why is it okay for white Americans to call themselves Americans, but we have to hyphenate, call ourselves Mexican-Americans, and our black brothers and sisters have to call themselves African-Americans like we’re not whole citizens? Like we’re second-class? Someone tell me that.”²²

Once more, African-American and Latino situations are brought together—once more, not in a way which would put on an exact same level the history and hardships of the two groups, but rather on a way which shows some similarities in the way the white majority physically and intellectually describes them as inferior, as “less” American than they are. One could say that Latino populations are *hyphenated*, constantly forced to balance their Mexican or South-American origins with their American identities—even though such a notion seems

²⁰ *JT*, 127.

²¹ *JT*, 126.

²² *JT*, 132.

nonsensical for Rey who has never considered himself something other than American and becomes conscious of how different having immigrant parents makes him when he discovers his father first came to the US as an illegal immigrant, a “wetback:”

Before we reached the town limits, he turned right and drove onto a bordo, a sort of levee. He pulled the truck over and pointed south. He said, ‘That’s Méjico right there. Can you believe it?’ Of course I could. I always knew it was really close, though I’d never seen it from here. ‘I had to cross illegally a few times to work, mi’jo.’ I looked at him, eyes wide. [...] I’d never heard him talk about this before [...] Now he was telling me he was a mojadito too. That he had to become a U.S. citizen. Since I was born in Texas and lived all my life in the U.S., I had always assumed that ‘Apá had always been a U.S. citizen too.’²³

Mexico is so close to the United-States that it seems to be the same country, at least for Rey, who wasn’t conscious of his family history, having always been accustomed to crossing the border freely as a US citizen. Rey and his parents clearly live a hyphenated existence in the way they are considered by the American government, in the way they cross borders to visit families, in the way they keep alive Mexican traditions even though they live in the United-States. Hyphenation appears as both a bridge between cultural traditions and geographical places, and a barrier embodied by the hardships of border-crossing and the difficulties for one to become socially and psychologically whole. In his works of fiction, Saldaña seems to be drawing a complicated and moving map of childhood and identity in the South, a South which seems to stretch from Mexico to Georgia and North-Carolina, encompassing by the same token Texas.

Even if most stories take place in Texas, some of them take place in other parts of the South. For example, the story “My Self Myself” in *Finding our Way*, takes place in Georgia, and the road-trip taking place in *The Whole Sky Full of Stars* take the characters as far as South-Carolina, different places Saldaña knows through his personal experience. As demonstrated earlier, it would be difficult to ignore the clear southern flavor of the multitude of texts and voices offered by the author. In Saldaña’s enlarged South, one can (almost) freely travel anywhere, but when one has to go “up north,” it is always because he had no other choice or does it out of necessity, never for pleasure. The contemporary southern experience, far from

²³ JT, 49-50.

being limited to traditional characteristics and limits of the old South, replaces debates about a biracial region by a discussion around the notion of a multiracial south, totally transformed by the recent waves of Latino immigration since the 1970s. The contemporary southern experience is no more encompassed in the strict limits of the former Confederate states, the South appearing as no more primarily defined by the outcome of the Civil War, but more as a region defined by its rapid cultural, demographic, and linguistic changes. The contemporary southern experience, and the contemporary literature of the south globalized in Saldana’s work through the depiction of the life of a multitude of different children, is no more defined by exclusive terms and characteristics, or obeying a strict code, tending rather to include cultural and linguistic influences. In an idealized South race-relationships, immigrations, and cultural specificities are issues of the past—But I am speaking here about a new south that tends to be ignored by scholars and critics altogether, a region and a literature which should not only be studied according to traditional, outdated, and too-stable categories and characteristics. As some scholars have started to point out, since the beginning of the 21th century, the contemporary south and its culture has to be studied in a more open and global perspective, especially if one wants to account for the work of new, less famous or not-yet-well-known writers exploring what the South really is, and not what it used to be. As Saldaña declared in an interview in 2008:

I’m revamping my definition of culture. Originally, I thought of culture as based strictly on one’s ethnicity, language, and origin. Now, it’s more expansive. I include social upbringing or distinct family history, which has nothing to do with one’s ethnic history. [...] Yes, my culture plays a key role in my writing. I cannot write from any perspective not my own, at least if I want to do it honestly and respectfully.²⁴

While it is the role of the writer to offer his or her own perspective on the South he or she has experienced or still experiences, it is our role as scholars and literary critics to acknowledge the value and relevancy of their literary works, and to work hand in hand with these authors to unveil a new literary, political, and cultural map of our region.

²⁴ David Gill and Rene Saldana, “Master Storyteller: an Interview with Rene Saldaña,” *Teacher Librarian* 35:3, Feb. 2008, 58.

