INTERVIEW OF RAUL GONZALEZ, BY ROBERT TRUJILLO

This is a lightly edited transcript of the audio recorded by Robert Trujillo via Skype. –LQW, for Latin@s in Kid Lit.

Raul Gonzalez: Yeah, so I grew up there, in El Paso, but I really did grow up in both cities—in Ciudad Juarez and El Paso. My father, his family was from El Paso, first, second generation Mexicanos, living in Ysleta. But you go to Ysleta and the roads aren't paved, there are roosters and chickens running around. It's really like Mexico, but on the United States side. And then, my dad, when he was a young man, he was like twenty years old, he went over to the Mercado Cuauhtémoc, which is in Juarez, Mexico, and that's where he fell in love with my mom, snuck her over the border, got married. And as a boy, I spent a lot of time at the mercado, which you might've been to.

Robert Trujillo: Yeah, I think so.

RG: It's a marketplace, a beautiful market, and I spent most of my time running around from one puesto to the next, because my aunts and uncles all sold different things at different puestos--serapes, sombreros. My primo and my tío Chato sold dulces mexicanos—you know, all sorts of things. My abuelita, she sold this soap, which when I became a teenager I totally got interested in it. From what I heard, it attracted the opposite sex. It was called El Jabon de los Siete Machos.

RT: Oh, Los Siete Machos! It's an aphrodisiac.

RG: It did not work.

RT: Okay, so besides *Lowriders in Space*, how many other books have you illustrated?

RG: So *Lowriders in Space* is the very first book I illustrated.

RT: Oh, congratulations! That's great.

RG: Thank you, thank you. So, I've been preparing myself my entire life. I'm 38 now. I've been preparing myself my entire life. It was like my dreams, my ambition, since I was a young boy to be a comic book artist.

RT: Oh awesome!

RG: So since the age of fourteen, I've just been working on comic books and all sorts of other things. But then I got sidetracked. I moved to Boston and I became a fine artist. I started making work that suddenly was exhibiting in galleries and museums. And then I was lucky, the stars sometimes align in just the right way, and I was introduced to Cathy Camper. She had this great idea—*Lowriders in Space*—sent me the script and I immediately knew how I wanted to illustrate it, and I sent her, within the hour, thirty minutes to an hour, I sent her sketches of characters in Bic pen.

RT: So when you sent her the ideas, was the script already written so there would be different animals, or did you come in with that part?

RG: No, that was the cool thing about it. Cathy had already described the animals somewhat, like she said Elirio is a mosquito. He does all the detailing with his beak. Lupe is an impala. And Flapjack was an octopus. That was it. So I was like, okay. Elirio was a mosquito. I started thinking about him and I gave him a Cantínflas mustache and I drew a Zoot suit on him as an homage to Zoot suits and one of my favorite Mexican actors, James Edward Olmos. You can't be a young Latino and not have loved that dude from an early age. And then Flapjack. Well, when I was a boy, I loved Mexican TV and Chavo del Ocho was one of the shows that was always on. So I gave him a Chavo hat and I gave his bucket the chapulín colorado corazón. And then Lupe—nobody really knows what an impala looks like. You know what an impala is?

RT: Yeah, it's rare to see a picture.

RG: So I based her on two people that I love. One was my wife Elaine, who as a young girl in El Paso, her father was a mechanic and fixed cars, took them apart, so she was always in the shop helping him out and her arms show it. She has really muscular arms. And then my abuelita Catalina, she has hair just like yours. She has a combination of my abuelito's thick black Indian hair and my abuelita's like, afro root hair, you know.

RT: Yeah, yeah. That's my middle name too, Catalino.

RG: Oh yeah? Crazy! So yeah, that's who I based Lupe Impala's hair, on my abuelita Catalina's hair.

RT: Talk about the tools. Normally you do gallery stuff, but what are the tools you normally use when you're making comics? Is it always ballpoint pen?

RG: You know, I've drawn a lot of comics in the past. These were all self-motivated that I would then staple together and then make zines with.

RT: Oh awesome, I love zines.

RG: But for those early comic books, I used the traditional materials that comic book artists would use, so sable brushes, India ink, technical pens—that type of stuff, you know, the stuff that reproduces really well when you're making copies of it. But for this book, I just felt that it was important to not use those traditional tools—mainly because one, the book is about dreamers, right? It's about this group of friends who really don't have a cent to their name, but they have big dreams and they have big ambitions. Well, I go back to my own childhood, to my own family and not having a cent to our name--me not having a cent to my name==but having big dreams and then using the tools that I had available to teach myself how to draw. Those tools just happened to be ballpoint pens, That's how I learned to draw comic book characters. So I thought, well, this book is

about dreamers, so I'm going to use materials that a young boy or girl could look at and say, you know what? I know what these materials are and I'm going to give it a shot myself. And not just that, you back go to like, Latino art history, Latino culture and you have a lot of wonderful art that's actually created with ballpoint pens.

RT: On the napkins, man.

RG: On the pañuelos, right? You have the wonderful prison art, you have the pañuelo art and then (11:48) looking at Lowrider Magazine, you see fan art that is done beautifully.

RT: With pencils and ballpoint pens?

RG: Yeah. I love stuff that isn't perfect, you know. For instance, I'm not a machine. I'm not a robot. And so there's inconsistencies to my artwork and I relish in that type of stuff. If the lowrider doesn't have the same designs from one page to the next, it doesn't really matter. It was my lowrider for that particular page that was important. So those were mainly the ideas I had for the approach to the artwork. And I another thing I like to do when I'm creating artwork, I like the work to appear to have an age that goes beyond the moment that I made it in. So I want the characters to look older than they really are, like they've been around for longer than the publication date. And so a lot of my paintings, I stress the paper, I age it. For this, we did the same thing by aging the paper with a stained look.

RT: Yeah, I was going to say, it looks like it's been around, almost like the coffee stain, like somebody put their café on top of it.

RG: Yeah, man, and then to keep it with the whole Latino thing, I stained it with Nescafé Suave.

RT: Aw, there you go. That's perfect. Okay, so when you're looking at the script, like she gives you the first page on the first chapter, what's your process like, as far as how you lay it out? Like do you start with little thumbnails, like this is what I think I want to do, or do you do little pencil sketches first? How do you do it?

RG: Yeah, so that's one of the fun things about being a comic book artist, right? You have a script. But as a comic book artist, your job is also very similar to what a film director's would be. You have a script but then it's your job as the person who's visualizing everything to figure out the pacing of the story. So, I tend to start with these little sketchbooks here. Then I slowly—not even too slowly—but I just begin to lay out the entire script with these very loose sketches. And then once that happens, then comes the process of sharing it with Cathy, sharing it with Ginee and Taylor and Neil, and then seeing what works, seeing if we need more pages, if we need to take things out. And little by little, you begin to mold the graphic novel, so that it ends up being what it is.

RT: Okay.

RG: It takes a lot of thumbnail drawing, sketches, loose sketches, before we get to the final art stage.

RT: When you're drawing in those sketches, do you have a go-to set of books, or things that you look at, or a go-to set of songs? Like what do you do to get in the mood, ready to put my pen down and draw something?

RG: At first, when I'm solving the puzzle, I wish I could listen to music and I wish I could have other things around me, but it's the most difficult part, because I'm juggling Cathy's script, so there are words bouncing around in my head. And if I have anything else coming in, it really does interfere with that creative process, so the early stages of the book are very monk-like. I'm basically all quiet.

RT: Like, "don't talk to me."

RG: Don't talk to me--I have to figure this out. I have to totally figure this out, so yeah, it's really quiet and then I just start to draw. But I always, you can see behind me, I have libraries--this is one library in my house. There's like a library in every single room.

RT: Awesome.

RG: But I have go-to things that I'm always looking at, like what would Kirby have done? How would Master Osamu Tezuka have figured this out? So I'm always figuring things out, looking at art, or watching films and anything. It doesn't even have to relate to the story or to the look of the book. But since I was a boy, I've been digesting just visual words, you know. When I was drawing it, you follow the script, you know. Cathy's script, what I loved about it--it left it open for me to do so many things. Like a car lot, I have to design cars--I have to design people wandering around. I was able to go in and fill each page with all sorts of things, characters, background designs and then with the Bic pens, do a lot of patterning and mark-making. I want to just create a very visually lush graphic novel.

RT: It feels very wholesome, very like nourishing. A lot of times I have trouble looking at some comics because it looks too clean to me, too Photoshopped, too polished. It feels like a set script, like okay, I'm going to put the guy here--he's going to be punching this person here, a skyline there. Although a lot of the things I saw were unexpected, it felt kind of very homey when I was looking at it. Ah, that looks very cool, it's warm, very inviting.

RG: Oh, thanks! Definitely. I wanted this book to be the anti-Marvel or -DC way of doing things, where you have this formula to how to create a book. That's not to say that there aren't some talented artists working for Marvel. Definitely. I wanted this to be the opposite of that, you know. That's one of the things that made the book possible, was simply the fact that Chronicle Books—Ginee, and Taylor and Neil—they didn't want to make that kind of book. The reason they were attracted to this book was, one, for Cathy's script, and we're going to try something completely different. I remember ten years ago, I

was showing my work to this guy named James Sturm. And he looked at my work and said, you know, all these little lines, all these patterns you like to make, they're going to get lost in the printing process. But what makes comic books so exciting as an art form today is that printing has come such a long way and now you can make a comic book of any material you want to make it with, with lines as small as you want to make them. And it's gonna show up on that paper. So the medium has expanded to accommodate all kinds of approaches. I think that's exciting. I think we should continue to push the envelope with how we make things and try to experiment a little. It's more fun.

RT: I love that. Me particularly, I like black India ink with traditional drawings. I even like the ones I've drawn with a Centique, or whatever. To me, it's like listening to a rapper. If you sound like everyone else that's out there right now—I need to hear some specific slang to your city, some specific twang to who you are. So when I see a comic artist like Cam Kennedy, he used to do some stuff for Star Wars. He used to do it with watercolor. Often times, you don't see people doing that and so I like to see those really oddball details where you look at it and say, how did they do that?

RG: I don't know if you remember The Wolverine Meltdown Series by Kent Williams. Or Arkham Asylum by Dave McKean. Those books, when I first saw them, when I saw them as a kid, I was like, holy shit, I didn't know you could do this.

RT: When I looked at yours, I was like, wow, this guy got paid to do that? Cause it was drawn like yeah, that's cool.

RG: Yeah, exactly, exactly. Part of the fun for me is trying to find my own approach. And like, you're absolutely right—finding your own slang, your own dialect to express yourself. I know this work is true to who I am as a person, you know. It's Cathy's script, I always say that it's also very autobiographical book for me. I've never been to space, but each of the lines that I made reflects my upbringing and my culture.

RT: If you go see somebody who has a really clean paint job, the part where you're talking about the stardust, the way it was sprinkled on the car. It reminds me of the paint jobs for real, like when you get up that close, there's like a little sign that says, look but don't touch. So when you were getting ready to do the lowriders, did you already know exactly how you were going to do this car? Did you look at some reference and find out, this is the kind of model that I'm going to use? I've been working on a story that's about lowriders as well, but it's like a '59 Impala that I chose. Because everyone uses a '63 and a '64, so I wanted to use a different year. So how did you go about finding the reference?

RG: That was one of the more intimidating things for me, because before I started this project, I had never drawn cars before. I'd drawn them as a boy, but when you draw them as a boy, you draw like ten wheels and a thousand missiles attached to them. That was the extent of my experience with it. And I remember when suddenly Chronicle purchased the publishing rights to it, I thought, oh crap, I'm going to have to actually draw this book. And so of course I had looked at a lot of lowriders as a boy, but I decided right then and there, that that would be just too intimidating to try to get everything just right, those

amazing paint jobs. I couldn't do it with a Bic pen. So I said, you know, lowriders are a form of self-expression, right? And everyone who creates a lowrider is putting themselves and their personalities into the designs of their cars, and so I'm going to do the exact same thing. This lowrider that I make is going to be my own, as clunky as it may be, it's going to be the thing that I drive around in, that I'm going to be proud of. So I bought myself a die-cast Impala. I think it was a '63. And I used that as my reference. And then everything else, I didn't look at *Lowrider Magazine* from that point forward, because I wasn't going to try to compete with those guys. So I got that red Impala that Die-Cast Models sent me and I started to design the car. I put some rocket parts on it, planets on it.

RT: I love that too. The rocket parts, cause it reminds me of them taking airplane parts to do the hydraulics.

RG: Yeah, and I put a lot of little personal touches, like I put wisdom teeth on the antenna. And I put a mythical character that I created and I use a lot in my art, a "burrocorn," which is a combination of a burro and a cob of corn. It's an homage to los hijos del maiz. And my own family's lineage is like beast of burden, working out in the fields for generations. That's basically the thought I put into it.

RT: So there's this whole thing where people are talking about diversity of books. It's been an ongoing topic for decades, but with that new campaign, there's like a huge push of people talking about it. How have you seen it from your viewpoint? Do you think it's a positive thing, or have you not really paid that much attention to it? What do you think about it?

RG: Well, I paid attention to it because our book was slated for release as this campaign was on its way. We Need Diverse Books started right about the same time as the publication date of *Lowriders in Space,* and I totally agree--we do need more diverse books. As a matter of fact, when I came to Boston, what inspired me to start making art for galleries and museums is that I remember the Boston Museum of Art opened up their new American wing. I started to stroll through it and I would look at all the artwork around and I'd see paintings of all the founding fathers and some Norman Rockwell paintings, and artwork created basically by a lot of white artists. I thought to myself, you know what? This is not the American way, because it is missing so many of the types of wonderful cultures that truly make up what America is. I didn't see any work by Latino artists, Afghani-American artists, Chinese-American artists—nothing like that—Indian-American artists. So it's not truly an American wing if those people aren't involved. So I thought, I want to start making work that fills in the gaps of what is missing in this museum. And the same thing is true of the books we introduce to our children. They are often read stories that do not showcase them in any way whatsoever. And so I feel that when that happens, our children start to doubt themselves. I remember as a young boy growing up myself, thinking about what it meant to be a Mexican living in the United States and watching television, and watching shows like Beverly Hills. I never watched them because I couldn't understand them, or Melrose Place. Not seeing myself reflected in that and seeing myself cast only as a drug dealer, or a criada or a jardinero or some

subservient person. It makes you think: is that who I am? And yes, we need more diverse books because we have to share with our students that they are capable of doing everything, and that they are truly a part of this larger community that is this United States of America. So I think it's important.

RT: How old is your little one?

RG: He's four-and-a-half.

RT: Ah, so what kind of books are you sharing with him? What kinds of books is he excited about?

RG: You know, it's funny. I feel it must be his mother's influence. Her father is an engineer and my wife is very science-oriented, so he really loves the DK Publishing Books. When we go to the bookstore, he skips all of the picture books and goes straight for the DK Publishing, which I like those.

RT: Instructional ones, or like the models, or like the cross-sectional drawings?

RG: Yeah, they show pictures like that, of parts of the planet or science. He's always having us read him those books. He likes books that do things, like pop-up books.

RT: Those are always a hit, the ones that have a furry tail or something that you can touch.

RG: But he does love books by Peter Sis, I believe that's how you pronounce his way. Peter Sis—S-I-S. He's such an amazing artist. He did *Madlenka* and the new book out about Antoine Saint De Exupery. And yeah, he likes all sorts of books, yeah.

RT: Take folks back to when you were a kid and you were drawing and you were in your classroom, the artist, quote-unquote, where everybody's like, ask that kid to draw it. When was the first time when someone asked you to draw something, recognized that you could draw?

RG: Yeah, that's always been my way, you know. I went to about eleven different schools before I graduated from high school.

RT: Oh wow, that's a lot, bro!

RG: A lot of schools, man! My parents were always switching me to other schools, for some reason. They were crazy that way. My two younger brothers never did, but I was kind of like the experiment. I remember that it was my way of breaking the ice, right? So I would go to one class and I'd say, okay, I've got to make friends here. So I would start to draw Garfield or Odie or Calvin. And I could draw them from memory, so then suddenly kids would be asking me to draw it for them. Then in high school, when I finally ended up going to Coronado for my last two years of schooling, I would draw

“drink and drown” flyers for the guys who were organizing parties in Juarez. In El Paso, you could go over the border and do “drink and drown” for five bucks, so I’d draw the flyers. And then I learned at a really young age that art could get a reaction out of people. I remember as a young boy my mom asked me to draw Jesus, a drawing of Jesucristo. So I got out my Bic pens and started to draw Jesus, right?

RT: No pressure!

RG: I had all of these thorns coming out of his head and all bloody and beaten up. And I was like, “Aquí mami está mi dibujo de Jesucristo.” And she was like, holy crap, what the f...? She got so mad at me, but this is how I always see him.

RT: That’s how they show in the church. They’re always bleeding.

RG: I got a really crazy reaction out of this. And as a boy, one of the schools I went to was a born-again Christian school, and Miss Caranza and Miss Montevalles, I was always drawing and they started calling my parents up to tell them that the drawings I was making were very satanic. So they were worried about me.

RT: Oh, man. You were getting a reaction with these!

RG: It made me start understanding at a young age that drawings had a power to them, you know. There was magic in drawing.

RT: So if there are people who are reading the interview, and they’re looking to either forward their career or get better in their skills, or find some insight, what are any things you would tell them that you know now, as a professional illustrator, that you didn’t know before?

RG: I would say to any young artist that’s coming up. Follow your intuition and follow the things that you are incredibly interested in. Know who your heroes are early on, like if you love comic books, don’t just say, I like Spiderman, don’t just say, I love the Incredible Hulk, but I love the way Sal Buscema draws him, versus Herb Trimpe or the way Dale Keown draws him. So know who the people that are creating these things are. That’s so important, because then you could follow a line, a lineage of artists through time. Jack Kirby was influenced by... I don’t even know. Choose your heroes early on and you’ll be able to follow a lineage and start learning about all these different artists and all these shoulders that we stand on. And then, when you’re in your twenties and you’re out of school, don’t define yourself as any single type of artist. Don’t just say, I only work with charcoal. Or I only work with ink. Say, I can do anything and everything, because it will lead you on so many different adventures. I am a muralist; I exhibit in galleries, in museums. I’ve drawn flyers, rock and roll posters, I’ve given lectures, classroom visits, illustrated books. So say that you’re able to do anything, because then when that opportunity comes, you might not have known how to do it at the time, but

because of your passion, you'll figure out the way to get it done. And by the time you're done with it, you'll be so much stronger because of it.
RT: Words of wisdom. Thank you for taking time out of your day. I know you've got to get back to work.