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- [Submissions](#)

Rain Gomez



Q & A: Roots, Community, Writing: A Chat with Rain Gomez

ASW: Thanks Rain, for chatting with me at the *Truck* today about your work as a poet. The poems excerpted in this issue from your book, *Smoked Mullet Cornbread Crawdad Memory*, explore family roots, the complexities of community, and self-identity among other themes. Would you provide us with an overview of this collection?

Wow, Amy, that's a big question! I will try! First, I want to say, yakoke, mési, mvto- thank-y'all for having me here at the *Truck*; it's awesome to be with so many friends and great writers in Southern homespaces. That said, where to start?

Well first with *Smoked Mullet Cornbread Crawdad Memory* (SMCCM) my first book, took eleven years to come into being, as a printed, wholly realized and conceptualized text. I was geographically away from my Gulf South homespace (exiled in the *North*) and in a series of relocation upon relocations. My lifeline was my parents and sister. However, as I moved, evolved, and my body longed evermore for the Gulf water and estuaries of my youth, I became evermore confronted with having to *explain* my cultural background, as much my being güera with green eyes, as a Woman of Color. When strange courses of events found me living (again) in Oklahoma, preparing to return (again) to graduate school, I was encouraged by other Indigenous writers to submit to the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas First Book Award for Poetry.

This meant wading through the last nine to ten years of my work for a solid idea of cohesion into what my poetry had become. The layers of memory, identity (family), where constant: water, food, Choctaw-Muskogean, Creole, and survival. To my surprise in 2009 I won, and edits, and edits, in 2012 my book hit the shelves in October. Complete with critical introduction Dr. Carolyn Dunn (Choctaw, Creek, Louisiana Creole, Tunica-Biloxi, Cherokee) —my cousin, and a glossary I slaved over compiling.

ASW: I am fascinated with your varied forms of poetics; yet the voice is the rudder of each poem. As a poet, how do you come to shape, or sculpt the prosody of your poems?

I would say I owe this to being a musician. I hate to sound like a trite Southerner, or a Blindian (Indian/Black) stereotype but it comes from generations and soils of music. Even in SMCCM as well as *Miscegenation Round Dance* (the new ms) music is so prevalent in the allusions to the structure of poetics. In SMCCM one of the first poems, and the one I always begin my readings with the caveat of “To understand my family this is what you need to know” is the poem “How’s I Got’s Religion: Sermon of Water.” The first line is: “Our house music was religious experience.” The poem travels from Jimmy Hendrix, to Stomp songs, to Powwow, to Clifton Chenier, to Ike and Tina.

I am a Blues and Southern Rock singer and musician. I have fronted bands and the inescapable historical connection of our American Indian and African American histories is evident in the musical miscegenation (I am using this word purposely here) of the structure of how what I call in another one of my poems “shuffle shake, go down Moses, call response rhythms” of our stomp songs, our zydeco, and our blues. This works out in the words and rhythms of my free verse, and the deliberate choices I make in poetic form: The Bop, The Pantoum, The Ghazel, and mixing certain forms to achieve the effect I desire: Roundlet, to Villanelle, to Stomp structure.

ASW: You weave in recipes in the SMCCM rich collection of poetry and transition between poem and recipe with the apparent ease and grace of a dancer. How did you come to fuse recipes with poems about heritage, indigenous people, and the world of a transnational, American South?

Culture rises up from land into peoples. It translates itself into language, into foodways, into music— We are formed by the lands we inhabit. I say I am made of bayou mixing, neither fresh nor sea salt—NDN, Creole, Celt— I am brack water. I am gumbo muck, crawfish and *sac-a-lait*. Ultimately the land itself holds all these memories for us. Try as the oppressor, the dominant colonizer culture might, they can’t erase us, or the land’s memories of what has occurred and our stories, our shared umbilical connection to homespaces. In Choctaw we have a saying for this, a whole theoretical concept for this: *yakni isht ikhana*: the land as memory keeper (essentially). Therefore, how can we not have a sense of who we are, our family, ourselves, if we do not know where we come from— The peoples, the land that formed us, the foods we eat, the hands that prepared it? It is what makes us who we are, and marks us as part of members of the communities that we belong to. Food is memory, it is sensory as deeply as smelling Gulf air, or cotton, or moss. It is also connected to sustainability of land. Moreover foodways have been a way which many people of color especially in the South retained cultural identity when language was loss, taken, and forbidden. It was hidden in the food culture. What Can I say I’m a Louisiana NDN-Creole. We appreciate our food, from Ceremonies to Lalas (House Dances) it is about food, family, prayer.

ASW: I have to ask: Do you have a favorite recipe in *Smoked Mullet*?

Buh! Lol! Ask me if I have a favorite child of my sister? Gah! Hold a gun to my head pick-- it’s a toss-up between the Creole Spice, cuz ya need that spice fo’most all’o the recipes of Dad’s (Papa Lyle), and the

Gumbo, cuz, uhm hello—GUMBO! My family makes the best dayum gumbo ya ever did lay your lip on! Oh wait, the stuffed Red Fish is worth pullin a bank job for...

ASW: I understand you are re-editing a second poetry book, *Miscegenation Round Dance: Poemes Historiques*. Would you share with us your focus of this collection? And, when will this new edition be available?

With *Miscegenation Round Dance: Poèmes Historiques* (MRPD) I was/am determined to combine research with familial memory. I was lucky enough that during my PhD program I took an advance poetry course on historical poetry with one of my icons and now mentors, Professor Honorée Fanonne Jeffers. In the course of this class I would research and write the title poem for my second book, along with four key pieces. It was during this class that I fully confronted the issues I was writing about as an Indian woman and as a Creole woman, these had to be linked to both my personal history as Indigenous (both Native and Creole) and as a woman of African descent, as well as the fact my personal histories of violence were forever linked to the violence against my ancestors.

I could not compartmentalize these things as a poet, as I did as an academic. In *Talking Back*, bell hooks notes: “We are rooted in language... Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language is to recover ourselves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action---are resistance.” I was struggling with memory, with words and with language itself, and the pain of reinscription. Professor Jeffers called me out on this struggle, in manner similar to hooks. It was the tough-love, I needed— it was also the steel I needed to get me through some of the toughest writing of my life. Research I could do, feeling, my connected pain and letting it leak on paper across not just my immediate memories but multiple generations, and letting myself have a right to it, has been another.

Miscegenation Round Dance is out for review with two presses. I hope to have an answer this year. About eleven pieces from the collection have been printed and can be found in *Tidal Basin Review*, *Future Earth*, *Good Medicin: Indin Humor* (Forth Coming), *The Mas Tequila Review*, *Toe Good Poetry*, other venues and reprinted right here on the *Truck*.

ASW: You are a prolific poet and scholar. What are some works we can look forward to from you in the near future?

I currently have an article in the Spring issue of *The Southern Literary Review*: “Hachotakni Zydeco’s Round’a Loop Current: Indigenous, African, & Caribbean Mestizaje in Louisiana Literatures” and a Chapter forthcoming in the collection *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond* (LSUP 2015): “Crossin’ the Log: Death, Regionality, and Race in Jeremy Love’s *Bayou*.”

I am working on my third poetry and prose collection: *RAW: Lwizyàn Mestizà Unsilences & other poetical oddities*

Two critical monographs: *Gumbo Banaha Stories: Louisiana Indigeneities and Decolonizing the Transnational South* (which will go out to university presses for review this summer)

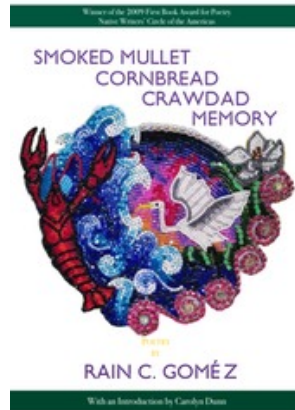
Still Carrying Mud to Make Land: Louisiana Territory, Indigenous Persistence, and the Global Mississippi. As well as two joint projects:

“Synching to the Rhythm of Stomp”: *Indigenous-Creole Homespaces, Performativity, and Diaspora* with Carolyn Dunn

Chronically RED: Indigenous Bodies Writing and Resisting Chronic Illness in the Age of Paracolonial Occupation. with Ire’ne Lara Silva,

ASW: Thanks Rain for hanging out in Truck Land with me. I have thoroughly enjoyed jawing with you about your poetry, writing process, and receiving an update regarding your new works that are on the horizon. I know that Mike, Yasser, myself, the rest of the Trucker crew look forward to reading and re-reading your works over and over here in Trucker Nation.

Yakoque, mési, mvto Amy! It has been rad!



Rain Prud'homme C. Gómez, PhD is an Assistant Professor in Humanities/English at St. Gregory's University in Oklahoma. She is the former Sutton Doctoral Fellow in Literary and Cultural from the University of Oklahoma and winner of the First Book Award, Poetry for *Smoked Mullet Cornbread Crawdad Memory*, (Mongrel Empire Press 2012), from Native Writers' Circle of the Americas. She is a *méstiza* of Choctaw-Biloxi, Louisiana Creole, and Mvskoke descent paternally and Nakoda-Cree metis and Celt maternally. She was raised along the Gulf of Mexico with salt, sassafras, and gumbo in her veins. Creative and Critical work has appeared in various publications including *Tidal Basin Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Ahani: Indigenous American Poetry*, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, *The Southern Literary Journal*, and *Louisiana Folklife*, and the forthcoming critical collection, *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond* (LSUP 2015). She is re-editing her second poetry collection, *Miscegenation Round Dance: Poèmes Historiques*, and preparing her dissertation, *Gumbo Banaha Stories: Louisiana Indigeneity and the Transnational South* as a monograph.

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Issue Two

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