

Discussion Questions for *Crossing Borders: Personal Essays*

Crossing Borders: Personal Essays, by Sergio Troncoso

Arte Público Press, September 2011, 201 pp., ISBN-10: 1558857109, ISBN-13: 978-1-55885-710-0 (paperback), \$16.95.

<http://sergiotroncoso.com/borders/questions/index.htm>

1. In “**Crossing Borders**,” the author says, “we create pure beginnings to simplify things, maybe to build our self-esteem, but in reality we are interrelated, mestizo, in more ways than we can imagine.” Do you know of an instance when someone created a pure beginning for his heritage or history, only to find out that the truth was more complicated than that imagined beginning? Why do you think we do this?
2. In “**Literature and Migration**,” how is the author making a distinction between morality and intelligence? Why do you think Troncoso learned this lesson going from Ysleta to Harvard and Yale?
3. Describe and analyze this borderland the author says he inhabits, “trying to write to be understood by those who matter to me, yet also trying to push my mind with ideas beyond the everyday.” What are the difficulties of writing simply, yet also writing about complex, philosophical topics? Why should this matter? What do you think the author wants to accomplish?
4. In “**Fresh Challah**,” the author describes his abuelita as having not just a contrary character, but also a righteous one. Explain the difference. How is self-reflection and humility important in being righteous? How does self-criticism help you to empathize with others?
5. In interviews, Troncoso has said he wrote “**Letter to my Young Sons**” after hearing his wife’s stories about how many women in her support group had been abandoned by their spouses or boyfriends during these women’s struggles against breast cancer. What kind of example, as a husband and father, is the author giving us in this essay? Does he succeed? What stereotypes is he challenging?
6. Describe and explain the “quotidian fantasy” that is shattered after the author’s wife is diagnosed with breast cancer. Have you ever had a crisis in which your quotidian fantasy is undermined? How close must you be to a crisis for this fantasy to be shattered? Why do you think we need this fantasy to function in the world?
7. What are the challenges the author and his wife faced in telling their young children about her breast cancer? How should we talk to a child to explain a disease and its treatment? Why?
8. During the care the author’s wife received at the hospital, Troncoso writes that they struggled against the attitude of demanding “one right answer.” Why? What kind of answers should patients and their families expect from doctors? How can patients and their families check their

own emotions and desires when demanding answers? What responsibilities do doctors have when communicating their results to patients?

9. How do you think a patient's (or her family's) reaction to a health crisis affects her ability to overcome that crisis? Do you agree with the author that "if the patient gives up, in some manner her body also gives up on her"? Why or why not?

10. Why do you think the author writes about his life in a counterfactual manner in "A Day Without Ideas"?

11. Why do you think the United States has difficulty rationally discussing and addressing the issue of undocumented workers? What kind of acceptance of undocumented immigrants is the author advocating in "Latinos Find an America on the Border of Acceptance"? Do you agree?

12. Why do you think the author writes "The Father Is in the Details" like a daily journal, in the present tense, with sentence fragments, chockfull of minor and major details? What kind of reality is he describing? As a reader, how do you feel when you are embedded in this reality?

13. How do you think writing about a character trait you are trying to change in yourself will help you change it? The author writes: "These words have helped me in a way. I put myself there, on the page, this impatient self, and attempt to step beyond it. What I want is to change my character forever. I want to be a good father."

14. In "Terror and Humanity," the author argues that idea-things (i.e. abstractions via categorizations) allow us to more easily be inhumane, to perpetrate evil acts. Why? Do you agree? Cite examples to support your argument.

15. "My mind is a body that's a mind," says the author in "Trapped." How is this at once an attempt to write through the senses (à la Robert Olin Butler), but also a criticism of this style of writing? How is the author trapped? How can he separate what he experiences through his senses and what he thinks with his mind?

16. Analyze the struggles the author faced as a board member of a writers' center in "Apostate of my Literary Family." Should someone facing such challenges stay in an organization to change it for the better, or does he compromise too much of himself by doing so? What did the author learn from this experience?

17. "This Wicked Patch of Dust" begins with a trivial argument, but metamorphoses into something more important: what is this conflict between father and son about? Different generations and different values? The pain of a family's history and what was never said? Adulthood and mortality? What does it mean for 'a father and son to break away from each other'? Have you ever experienced a similar family conflict?

18. Do you think the critics of illegal immigration in the United States are hypocrites who conveniently overlook the many ways in which this country encourages undocumented workers and exploits them, as the author argues in "Chico Lingo Days"?

19. According to Troncoso in “[Finding our Voice: From Literacy to Literature](#),” what family practices will help Latinos succeed in the world? Do you agree? Why or why not? What family practices might hinder Latinos?

20. In “[Why Should Latinos Write Their Own Stories?](#)” the author argues that Latinos should write stories to define themselves, but also to challenge themselves. Think about what these dual reasons imply: believing in yourself and bolstering your confidence through self-definition; yet also questioning that definition, and so changing it for the better. Why do you think the author has set up this tension between these two reasons for Latinos writing their stories?

Contact:

Sergio Troncoso
SergioTroncoso(AT)gmail(DOT)com
www.SergioTroncoso.com