

## ON THE MARGINS OF JOHN PHILLIP SANTOS'S EMPIRE OF FIRE

*Francisco Aragón*

John Phillip Santos pinpoints early on in his new book what's been one of the driving forces behind his work: "I can't remember when I wasn't obsessed with finding the missing chronicles of my ancestors."

Here's a passage in *The Farthest Home is In an Empire of Fire* which, I think, embodies the strongest strand in this work. He's recounting a trip to the Basque country while on a documentary shoot about Pedro Arrupe, Father General of the Jesuits. He and his crew are lunching in a village tavern in Loyola:

When the proprietor offered us servings of his wife's still-warm rice pudding, I took my first bite and felt transported back to South Texas. The dessert was just as I had known growing up, made by my mother, who learned the recipe from her mother. It was simple and not too sweet, thick and creamy with evaporated milk, and spiced with sharp cinnamon, cardamom, and a pinch of cayenne.

I hadn't wondered about my family's Spanish origins in a long while. It was these long-forgotten spices that brought an immediate spark of recognition, a feeling of kinship more affecting than any document or history could provide. Suddenly, on this unexpected remembrance, I wondered again if our *nacimiento* in Iberia could ever be found again.

Stretches of the book like the one above—where there is *balance* and *interplay* between the sensual (first paragraph) and the more abstract (second paragraph)—are where this elegiac memoir most engaged this reader. For it was in these autobiographical passages that the book illuminates Santos' journey, above all, as a writer. It's also true that unlike his National Book Award finalist tome of 1999, which sought to uncover his father's Mexican roots, *Empire* turns its gaze to his mother's side of the family, whose origins are Spanish.

Although Santos affirms that gathering his "ancestors' tales" has been an "elemental force" in his life, he also names another one: women, particularly those who shared his interest in interior pursuits: "From my earliest desires, I longed for the embrace of another seeker, the embodied passions, consolation, and companionship of another soul on the mysterious and unpredictable path of a quickening apocalypse, our long-sought-for revelation to each other and ourselves...a conspirator with whom I might trespass

through ecstasy to the holy of holies in heaven, from where we could look back upon all that humans had wrought.” The language offered here feels like a different register than the one in the previous passage: indeed, one of the strengths (and challenges) of *Empire* is the number of voices and tones he deploys to tell this story. One reviewer refers to Santos’ use of “Spanish, Tex-Mex caló, and Spanglish” throughout the book. Particularly interesting are those sentences and paragraphs that elegantly, unapologetically weave English and Spanish, including passages that imagine distant scenes in the past:

Capitán Luis de Carvajál y de la Cueva....reported seeing great herds of bison and antelope, fat javelina and menacing gatos de montaña, and even endured brutal winters of icy wind and snow in a mini ice age that began late in the sixteenth century.

This linguistic dexterity was a highlight. But I digress. The woman who perhaps most impacted his literary trajectory was someone he never personally met: Laura (Riding) Jackson. While an undergraduate at the University of Notre Dame, he initiated and maintained a correspondence with her, trying to persuade her to accept an invitation to read in South Bend. According to Santos, “she achieved literary fame in the early twentieth century” for a poetry he described as “sonorous and strange, full of galvanic and edgy abstract psychological X-rays of the mind and heart.” But she was also equally known for abandoning her poetry in the 1930s. Santos admits to a fascination with writers like Chaucer, Aquinas and Rimbaud “who eventually denounced their own work.” In Jackson’s case, it was Poetry itself she repudiated. Santos tells of being most enthralled by the work she managed to publish after leaving poetry, most notably *The Telling*, “a sequence of philosophical aphorisms about truth, language, and autobiography, published in 1974.” Significantly, winding up his reflection on her he concludes:

Our dialogue, thirty years ago, for better or worse, left me much more circumspect about writing and reading poetry, and awakened my curiosity about the mysterious, poetic powers hidden within autobiography.

What *Empire* offers, then, is a collage-like picture of a writer’s education. The pieces of this collage almost function like detours. Put another way, the volume reveals itself like a portrait of postponement. For even while he may be thinking about his family history, his day jobs run the gamut, and what an interesting one. Among the most notable is his stint as a documentary filmmaker for CBS. But once again, the charm and pleasure for this reader

are when he presents crucial scenes. Here he is sitting in a Manhattan restaurant meeting CBS' Vice President for news to hopefully nail down a job in documentary film:

The estimado señor joined us a half-hour late, short and punctilious, silver-haired, dressed in a frank blue suit, striped tie, and a white shirt that looked as if it had been ironed with enough starch to last eternity. He was full of fascinating tics: chin shifts, forehead lifts, and a periodic blink that looked as if something I said had totally flummoxed him. As he talked or listened, he would pull out a small leather cuff with index cards from his breast pocket and write a note, replacing it quickly.

After some awkward questions like 'How far is San Antonio from the border?' and 'When did your family come to the States?' conversation finally turned to his beloved Notre Dame, my alma mater, and the promise of the football team for the current season—until I confessed that I had never attended a game during my undergraduate years, and still didn't much keep up with the team's fortune.

Santos is a master, in my view, of understated humor and scenes like this one exemplify it. Others include a moment he visits a Bolivian curandero on the upper east side of Manhattan, named Don Eduardito, to try and discern what his next move might be as he tires of his job at CBS and feels his family's untold story increasingly tugging at him.

It's during these moments of self-doubt and earnest discernment that Santos introduces a new strand in his story: an ancestor from the future he designates Cenote Siete. Up until then, the most significant family relation, as far as this family quest was concerned, was Santos' Uncle Lico, the family geneologist—an endearing portrait of him unfolds throughout, until his death. But the introduction of C7, as he is also known, almost invites comparisons to magical realism and what one might conventionally *believe*. And there is a particular bordering-on-fantastical language—in italics—in these chapters. Here is a sampling of C7's voice:

*We were of the inevitable children of an impossible history, indestructible inheritors of an ancient enigma we carried with us in a talavera tabernacle over the vast grey barrens into las tierras nuevas, el verdadero mundo Nuevo. Crossing the golden sand plains of the land we first dubbed Galiciana, stubbled with purple ceniza, we found rivers that glistened like via de estrellas. Once our enigmas took root in the new lands, en Coahuila, en Tejas, en el valle del Río Bravo, we would never see Madre España again.*

Here, again, we see that seamless shuttling between English y español which, I would argue, is the one aesthetic thread that Santos weaves into

every register he employs throughout the book.

In the end, *Empire* is more about a journey than any specific revelation or destination. Particularly poignant are those moments where Santos, in some form, is relating with his mother's ancestors' place of origin. One of the most memorable encuentros is when Santos attempts to explain to a librarian in Seville, "whose cooperation he needs, what his research is all about:

"Are you a historian, Señor Santos? This is a historical archive."

"I'm looking for some of the documents relating to my Spanish ancestors in the far north of Nueva España. I'm Chicano, Mexican American, from Texas."

"Chi-ca-no?" She asked warily, writing on a notepad.

"Some spell it with an X."

"C-h-i-x-a-n-o?"

"X-i-c-a-n-o," I replied.

"Que curioso."

"I'm looking for the story of how my ancestors came out of Spain, and how they went to the tierras mas norteñas de Nueva España."

"Is this for a historical work?"

"Yes, and cultural...y quizas un poco de ciencia-ficción, como en Don Quixote," I said, grinning.

Directora Ruiz looked up at me over her eyeglasses, apparently only mildly amused."

It's all there: the EnglishSpanish weave; a synopsis of his project; an allusion to Cenote Siete, his ancestor from the future ("un poco de ciencia-ficción"); and the understated humor—by adding "como en Don Quixote, I said, grinning."

The reference to Cervantes' work is no accident. The length of Santos' title—*The Furthest Home is In an Empire of Fire* (9 words)—recalls, in a way, Cervantes' *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* (8 words). Santos's book is divided into twelve chapters. But more interesting and relevant here are the titles of what I'll call *Empire's* "sub-chapters" which, in style, echo the titles in Cervantes' *Quixote*. Here are fifteen of them which, in themselves, hint at the emblematic collage-like quality of Santos' book:

"Augurs and signs, and how I came to write this tale anew"

"Wherein the Lopez and Velas appear, in medias res, of the long Iberian saga"

"In which I return to the forgotten house of nada"

"Of the Senderos that interconnect magnetic fields in the domains of La Zona"

"How it was that Leonides's earthly sojourn in Cotulla grew longer"

“In which Leonides makes his last journey in the old tierras bárbaras”  
 “On the last of the duendes in Texas”  
 “How Grandmother kept her ghosts with her”  
 “How the world slowly found its way to San Antonio”  
 “In which the old family drifts farther apart”  
 “When the alps came to Bejar”  
 “Out of the ruins, a long-lost cousin appears”  
 “A mestizo in New York City”  
 “A new world pilgrim in the museos de Madrid”  
 “Uncovering Indiano roots”

And here, as sampling, are five of Cervantes’ chapter titles in his idiosyncratic work:

“Wherein are inserted the despairing verses of the dead shepherd, together with other incidents not looked for”  
 “Of what happened to our knight when he left the inn”  
 “In which is ended the story of the shepherdess Marcela, with other incidents”  
 “Of how the great Sancho Panza took possession of his island, and of how he made a beginning in governing”  
 “Treating of the adventure which gave Don Quixote more unhappiness than all hitherto befallen him”

But lest one think, for a moment, that Santos is taking himself too seriously by suggesting to direct a comparison between his and Cervantes’ book, this notion is undercut early, on page eighteen, where Quixote is invoked for the first time:

Mother’s only Spanish affect is a lifelong fascination with Don Quixote, the last remnant of *Españolidad* in the Lopez-Vela line. In fact, it wasn’t an affinity for Cervantes’ great literary creation, but for a Lladró porcelain figurine of Don Quixote painted in muted lavender and cream pastels, captured in his fully bedraggled nobility. This was the only artifact in our house that spoke in any way to our Spanish provenance.

For the page and a half that follows, Santos recounts a humorous odyssey of sorts, in which he tries to replace the figurine of Quixote, whose head had been “lopped off during a family gathering” by one of his brothers who was “wielding a shotgun for a family photograph” and which “jostled the display case where the old knight had kept his sentry of honor since Grandmother’s death.” His effort to appease his mother takes him to Berlin, where he finds “a praying Quixote...looking like Peter O’Toole with anorexia.” But he learns that “Mother wasn’t interested in that one.” This hunt for

an elusive Quixote prompts Santos to wonder why “the Lladró porcelain figurine of the Hidalgo de La Mancha, once so popular, sought after for so long,” now seems so scarce. The fact that the figurine was the *only* representative of Spain in his mother’s home, and the fact that Santos, at first, is having difficulty in locating a replacement seems to stand in for the challenge that lies ahead: how to find the pieces of this family puzzle that no one in his family has shown any interest whatsoever in really finding (with the exception of Uncle Lico). And yet, the events that shortly unfold seem to provide the impetus that propel all of *Empire*:

“In the days that followed, it began to seem as if Quixote was haunting me. On several occasions, I saw different people in the street, complete strangers, each bearing a print of Picasso’s squiggly black-line painting of Don Quixote with Sancho Panza and a windmill in the background.” Near the end of this passage, Santos asks himself: “Don Quixote, are you talking to me?” And finally: “Speak now, distant grandfather knight.”

It would be inaccurate to suggest, however, that *The Farthest Home Is in an Empire of Fire* deals solely with Santos and Spain. There is also, in the latter third of the book, a trip to the Holy Land which offers a backdrop to Santos’ further reflections on not only his own family’s origins, but the origins of us all. And there is a provocative discussion on the latest DNA technology. At one point, Santos asks: “What is an American?” He responds: “Our DNA will testify to the fact that Americans have always been mestizo, going back to the celebrated forefathers of the republic. Jefferson secretly kept his own mestizo children as slaves.”

And yet the book closes in Asturias, a northern region in Spain. We learn that Colonel José de Escandón y Helguera, the so-called “Father of South Texas,” hailed from Asturias and was the Spaniard who founded, Santo writes, “twenty-three new towns in the remote territories he newly christened Nuevo Santander, including the towns of Mier, Camargo, and Revilla—all of which had been homes to my ancestors.” He finally makes it to this lush green region in the north and finds himself walking a road in the rain trying to make it to a local archive in a small town. He is given a lift from “a lanky old man” with “a long unshaven, and haggard face.” After visiting the archive, he samples a local Asturian dish in a local tavern for lunch and then begins his trek back to the train station. But he hears the voice of a friend: “Listen there caballero, aren’t you even going to say hello? Don’t you remember me from this morning?” And Santo writes:

It was Señor Escandón, and he insisted on taking me back to the train station.”  
Earlier that morning Santos had learned that his name was Francisco Escandón.  
When asked if he might be related to the Spanish explorer who founded Nuevo

Santander in South Texas, Escandón responds: “Claro que sí! He was a great-great-great-great tío or something.

When Santos and his new friend take leave of one another he learns that they share the same shoe size and so Santo insists on giving the old Asturiano the boots he'd been visibly admiring earlier that morning. Santos concludes his book:

After some convincing, I put on his muddy lace-ups that were mostly falling apart from their soles, and as the train came into the station he waved goodbye, standing next to his car in the light rain, in his pointy Tony Lama boots.

An old Escandón was finally going to walk in the boots of a child of the New World, while a latter-day Tejano was wandering farther into the madre tierra in the shoes of ancestors.

Again: not so much the destination, but the journey that brought us here.