

The Showman and the Shaman: The Poetry of Alberto

Ríos

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It was an embodiment of the small English word “or,” which means choice — “either, or.” Most of the world does not have that word. They don’t live that word. There, it was everywhere. And to close that out is the saddest thing I can think of.

—Alberto Ríos talking about the closing of the border in Nogales, Arizona
 (“Arizona’s”)

Alberto Ríos grew up on the border. It was here that he nurtured the third world of his characters, existing somewhere between the two worlds of Mexico and the United States, in what he has described as a “culture of capillaries” (Clark, “Alberto”). Here, on the border, the poet has carved out a world all his own in the annals of poetry. Ríos has been described as a poet cut from the same cloth of the other Latinos, those of *magico realismo* fame. Further, he has been noted as creating poems “in which binary oppositions [that of Mexican culture vs. US culture] and hierarchies [economic, social,

and racial] are challenged and undercut at almost every turn” (Deters 34). More interestingly though, Ríos has followed after Pablo Neruda, the famous Chilean poet who saw the beauty of the ordinary (Ramazani 987). Ríos ponders, and states that in “the small things, the things that constitute 98% of our life — isn’t this where the real action is?” (Ríos, “Interview”). Alberto Ríos expresses the fantastic and the beauty of small things. He is also political but his leanings are hard to decipher from his poems. He often writes from the perspective of a child, and often of himself, and through this lens of innocence we tend to see things to be a bit rosy, maybe rosier than they should be. Some critics have gone so far to say that his poetry is “lacking a certain edge” so that it (his poetry) “can be easily consumed by Anglo readers” (Melendez 212). Regardless, I believe that Ríos is all these things and more. Especially, he is a “showman” in how he presents fantastic language that tries to expose the ordinary as something more than it is; and at the same time he is like a shaman in that he molds his language to accommodate just about anyone, making it digestible for the masses, rolling off the tongue of any who wish to speak aloud his incantations. In this way, his verse acts like a kind of tonic that seems to have big ambitions with its medicinal, all-healing powers of prose. Is Ríos one or the other, a showman or shaman? He is both, and in this way he has set himself apart from his masters and contemporaries in Latino fiction to describe life on the border as something otherworldly, exactly how he sees it. And by showing us his perspective of life, we are able to think more about our own. In this paper, I will look at 11 different poems that display Ríos’s uniqueness as a poet and how he has contributed to humanity fantastic imagery and verse, like any good

showman would do for an audience, and to shed light on his exploration of human nature and our affinity with the cosmos, places any shaman, or sorcerer, would tread.

No other poem speaks as much about the border as does the bilingual “Border Lines,” or “Líneas Fronterizas” (Ríos, “Líneas”). The subtitle is “A weight carried by two / Weighs only half as much.” It is a short poem with only 15 lines in five stanzas. It starts, “The world on a map looks like the drawing of a cow / In a butcher’s shop, all those lines showing / Where to cut” (1-3). Ríos uses enjambment in the opening tercet to jolt the reader who is busy pondering why a world map would look like a cow, to then see that the border lines are marks dividing a carcass — showing where we shall bring out the blade. A more benign speaker in stanza two describes the cow as a “jigsaw puzzle” (4). Who is this speaker? Well, in the following couplet we must look at the map, the drawing, a certain way, much like we should look at the world, and at this poem. The quatrain that contains the meat of the poem simply informs us that the “world” (9, 10) is “Not of paper and ink but of people” (11). The poem ends with the speaker telling us to “turn the map until we see clearly” (13). The speaker then ends with, “The border is what joins us, / Not what separates us” (15). There could not be a more simple and explicit statement of the poet’s intent than this. We wonder how these smooth lines have ended up so uplifting, and so elegantly drawn after presenting the world as a cow about to get butchered. This is Ríos the magician, the shaman of poetry.

For Ríos, “lines” are significant, and the line is not just a border. It is not even a line. It is more like a zipper, which connects things. The border becomes a way to connect people. In poetry, beyond the borders, Ríos also has strong opinions about how

to make a line of verse. In his rule #9 about the “line” (Ríos, “Some Thoughts”), he states, “Play no tricks on the reader.... Readers [should] not have to ... [read] the next line in order to understand the line they are in.” But Ríos comes close to breaking his “rule” often enough. We see this in the first stanza of “Border Lines” above, with the “cow / In a butcher’s,” and it adds something poetic to his work. We wonder if Ríos, the showman, is trying to embellish his poetics too much. In rule #13, Ríos states that lines “are what distinguish poetry from all other art forms.... When they become ... part of something else, ... they stop being lines of poetry.” But this is not true of border lines, which in their true incarnation exist to divide and to distinguish between two cultures, two places. Still, it is easy to become confused with Ríos’s poetry, since lines and borders are major themes in his work. In Ríos’s “The Border: A Double Sonnet” (Ríos, “The Border”), we get 28 definitions of what the border means to this poet. “The border is a line that birds cannot see” (1), and it ends with “The border is a skunk with a white line down its / back” (50-51). In between, we see that borders, like lines, are significant but only in how they connect people. The best line is this: “The border is a moat but without a castle on / either side” (39-40). We wonder why “border” is even a word. Perhaps it would not be if there were not lines drawn between life and death, but there are. Otherwise, Ríos tells us that in death, as in life, a border is a line connecting everything and nothing all at once.

In “The Sheet Music of Place” (Ríos, “Poetry”) lines play an integral part of explaining Ríos’s life philosophy, shedding further light on his poetics. The poem is composed of two parts, each with five couplets and a final line. We see very long lines

in this poem, pushing the limits of what could be considered verse: “The river through its centuries has made a line on this place, / A child’s line, wanting to be straight but distracted at every move,” (1-2). There are elements of personification of the natural world. The river has turned into a line made by a child, but the line is conscious, alive. In the third stanza, we get lines of different sorts, those “made by ... mountains” (5) and by a “railroad track” (6). Again, this merging of nature with the world of humans defines Ríos’s poetry. It is shamanic. He wants us to see that we are not separate entities, that we can find ourselves, our reflections, everywhere we look. In this way, a border is like a mirror. Thus, a reflection of ourselves lies across the border, against a giant imaginary mirror to the heavens, balanced on a wall or suspended over the Rio Grande. The second line of the fourth stanza is the most revealing in that it gives us insight into Ríos’s own personal poetics: “All these lines work in sure if uneasy concert” (8). Here, we finally see that Ríos is not talking about lines, even though he says he is. He is not talking about borders, either, but he is speaking about the shaky nature of existence, of the complexities of life, and by extension how amazing it is that we are all alive and working together in such a chaotic world. Each of these lines is an entity. And the poem, their world. We see Ríos describing his own personal philosophy when it comes to framing his own contribution to contemporary poetry. His “lines work in sure if uneasy concert.” We must look at all elements of his poetry, his vast collection of free verse and sestinas. We must listen to him read his poems, listen to his characters sing off the page, hear their voices ring from Mexico, the farms, the seas, the border towns, all places, and notice how “All this landscape [is] a great and delicate paper” (11). The

world is a poem on a page. The second part of this poem contains the music of life, with the “drudging bass notes” of engines (15) alongside the “thrill, 64th notes” of birds (16). We hear Spanish, “*profundo* notations” (13), and are perplexed by the sentences at the end, which appear clunky at first compared to Ríos’s usual smooth verse: “Busy at their honeying, these respites of work, these moments loud / Too-resting the ear so as to hear composed this place into music—” (20/21). But saying these lines over and over again seem to wear them smooth, like a river would do to a rock. All of Ríos’s lines are like musical notes in “the great song of this world” (22). He has defined his place in poetics with this poem, and it is beyond the borders of any one place that Ríos hopes to be.

We see in his poem, “Day of the Refugios” (Ríos, “Day”), that borders are places where there are “The places in between places” (1). These places, the borders, have been described as “hostile” and “divisive” in nature; and, the border is noted as a place which “designates and emphasizes that everything and everyone belongs to either one side or the other” (Deters 28). In contrast, Ríos goes on to describe how there exists a “third” world at the border, and collectively they are like “little countries / Themselves, with their own holidays” (2-3). In the speaker’s family — and again, we assume the speaker to be Ríos himself since nearly all of his poetry seems autobiographical — there are many people with the same name, “Refugio,” and July 4th is “the *dia de los Refugios*” (18). In the eighth tercet, he fills the poem with names, “Like the fireworks: Refugio, / Margarito, Matilde, Alvaro, Consuelo, / Humberto, Olga, Celina, Gilberto” (24-27). They are “Names that take a moment to say, / Names you have to practice”

(25-26). The speaker of the poem, the poet as a child, believes that all of the fireworks are for these “Refugios” in his family. At least that’s how the United States, a place on the other side of the border from his family, celebrate them. We see how Ríos’s imagination has been nurtured by the border. These are places with meaning, each distinct. But somewhere in the middle is another world, a place in between two separate realities, existing only in the mind of the child, the future poet-shaman.

In “A Small Story about the Sky” (Ríos, “A Small”), Ríos showcases his versatility as a poet, his “Showman” skills on display, with short lines rather than the longer lines he incorporates in his narrative verse. This poem is again disarming like many others, even though the rhythm is choppy and not as free-flowing as is typical of a Ríos poem. We wonder, how does he do this? The poem’s 74 lines are divided into six stanzas. It is a poem not about the sky, as the title suggests, but about fire. And by invoking the spirits of the sky, of fire, of animals and insects, the speaker of this poem acts like a wizard concocting a potion. The abstract imagery as the poem continues is a departure from what we would expect from Ríos. In the second stanza, the fire burning in the sky becomes personified: the fire is “full of pride” (16) and “It intended to be more” (20). We wonder if Ríos is speaking about something deeper here, like the passion of people who cross the borders, the immigrants. He goes on:

But this time, it was a fire

At just the right time

And in just the right place—

If you think like a fire—

A place it could do something big. (25-29)

We think of dreams (the fire's intention) on a new day ("just the right time") and in a new place, America ("in just the right place"), and a new life ("it could do something big"). But this fire is malignant, "With ten thousand pincers" (31) that are "made of beetles and scorpions" (33). The sorcerer is at work. By stanza four, the sky is personified as a "slow rabbit" (47) trying to escape "the thin toothpicks of flames" (51). It does not escape and eventually turns "black / For several years after" (58-59). The speaker of this poem — and here we question who the speaker is since it is not of an autobiographical nature — tells us that the fire "wanted to come home" (70). What do we make of this poem? It could be interpreted as a story of border crossers. The fire meeting the sky, turning it black. Only for the fire to want to return and finally doing so with "A small piece of blue in its mouth" (74). The red (of the fire) and the white (of what's left of the sky) having already taken sides. We ask ourselves, do two places really exist? And if so, can we return to our place of origin unscathed?

Yet another of the magical pieces by this poet which departs from his usual prosaic style is "Nautical Astronomy" (Ríos, "Poetry"). It is absolutely enchanting. This poem is small and consists of only four couplets, but carries the weight of a longer, more epic poem — perhaps in competition for the most important poem in Ríos's canon. The poem is about this "third" world that lives somewhere between the borders of Ríos's imagination. It also helps elucidate Alberto Ríos's poetics, previously described in "The Sheet Music of Place." Here, we see that "Nautical astronomy is defined simply as: / *The science of locating oneself at sea*" (1-2). Before we can move onto the second

stanza (this is a couplet and forces the reader to focus, to think), we begin by imagining the possibilities of not just locating our position at sea but with finding our souls. And with being at sea, in a shifting landscape of waves, stillness, hidden depths, we see that our speaker is communicating not just about geographical coordinates, but about his or her mood. In stanza two, we see that “The map is wet, but usable. / In the vast water, the stars see themselves” (3-4). The map we get is not paper, but the water itself, the reflection of the stars off the water. The map is also in the sky, in the heavens, and it is ancient. The key to this poem is that “the stars see themselves” reflected off the water. Not only do we, the people living on earth, navigate using the heavens, the stars themselves look to us to find their way. Ríos is guiding us. Before we even get to the third stanza we are thinking of “kinship,” and our speaker tells us as much: “And in the sky, boats find their direction. / It is a kinship of depths and black-greens” (5-6). This poet is not speaking of the depths of the sea, but of the sky. Ríos is telling us that we are living in neither this world nor the one above, but in the middle, somewhere: “We do not sail on the seas—any of us. / All our lives we sail in between them” (7-8). Just like those living on either side of the border. There are no “castles” to protect because we are not actually living there. We are living in this other place: a place somewhere between the reflection of the stars on water and the sky; a place of our own imagination. And this existence can be as turbulent as any place where the sky and the sea meet, but we exist like lines that “work in sure if uneasy concert” (“The Sheet Music of Place,” line 8).

In “The Cities Inside Us” (Ríos, “Cities”), Ríos shows us another example that is not his typical autobiographical, free-flowing poem. Here, the speaker is a sorcerer who has swallowed up entire places and the people who inhabit them. No one in the speaker’s life has ever disappeared. Everyone lives inside him, forever. The poem begins, “We live in secret cities / And we travel unmapped roads” (1-2). This otherness is reminiscent of those places in between borders that we have already seen. There are 11 couplets with verse of varying meter and mostly unrhymed. We get repetition, with “We” starting a line five times, and “They” starting three others. But two of those are part of the same couplet and refer to words: “They are our words. / They come from very far inside our mouths” (5-6). Although the poem ends on a horrific image of a body part, “an arm” (20), reaching out “in place of the tongue” (22), this is Ríos’s magic in dramatizing his world of “otherness” that exists in all of us, a place between realities, and how it is not always easy to articulate, but if we look “inside” ourselves we will see it nonetheless. In this poem, we get an element of time, of a life lived and memories encapsulated as we age. Nothing ever goes away completely. “You and I, we are the secret citizens of the city” (7). And no one leaves: “They did not disappear” (14). Ríos says that these worlds that exist between the borders are real and inside of us, and if we can search them out and give voice to them without worrying what comes out, then there is hope.

Some of Alberto Ríos’s poems are of the fantastic variety, and they resemble the Magic Realism of fellow Latino writers. But the resemblance is complicated. O’Brien states that Ríos’s poems exhibit a “variegated richness of topography ... [and it] seems to emanate from the “magic realism” in which many current Latino writers are working.”

It is not *magico realismo*, but something else. Where does it come from? How can we define his poetry? The complexity could be a result of Ríos's use of "multiple personas" and "manifold metaphysical metaphors" that he so sleekly fuses into his verse (O'Brien 419). A great example of this, highlighting an apparent Ríos's salute to Magic Realism, is his poem, "A Man Then Suddenly Stops Moving" (Ramazani 991). The poem consists of 10 stanzas of tercets and quatrains with narrative verse, a simple structure typical of Ríos. Also, we get a similarly smooth start to the poem with quick, short lines:

The old Russian spits up a plum
fruit of the rasping sound
he has stored in his throat
all these lonely years (1-4)

There is nothing unusual here. We see the basic theme, the focus on an insignificant person, an "old Russian" (1). As the poem continues, though, the speaker uses fantastic imagery to describe the plum, comparing it to the color of his estranged wife's "buttocks / whose circulation was bad" (10-11). As the man "shoots the plum / to the ground like a child" (15-16), he sees that the plum has broken open, revealing his "younger self" (24). This poem actually resembles a story in Japan called, "Momotaro," the peach boy, who emerged from a peach that an old couple had found floating down a river (Anonymous). Although Ríos's poem appears to be derived from Magic Realism, it could be interpreted as any fairy tale no different from the myths that precede *magico realismo* by centuries. Ríos has simply incorporated the "magic" of such narratives into his verse. The showman is at work, fooling us again.

One of the more interesting poems in Ríos's canon is the strange poem, "That Thing" (Ríos, "Poetry"). The poem consists of 22 couplets with lines of varying meter. It is one of Ríos's darker poems. It begins, "No word rhymes with silence, or tries to. / No word wants to visit that furtive backyard garden" (1-2). The reader is left wondering what the speaker is referring to. There are a handful of words that do, in fact, rhyme with "silence." *Science, insolence, indolence, and violence*, just to name a few. We then wonder about the word not wanting "to visit that furtive backyard garden" (2). What does this mean? The poem gets stranger. The speaker says in stanza two and three, "Silence is the word that will not be spoken— / After all, who can pronounce it? Once spoken, // We will not hear it" (3-5). The poem is full of enjambment and is confusing to the reader, breaking rules that the poet himself laid out in his philosophy of the "line," where he has stated, as mentioned previously, that the reader need not be made to read the next line "in order to understand the line they are in" (Ríos, "Some Thoughts"). The poet continues to confound the reader with lines such as these:

The memory carefully unspoken in this house,

.

Your house. Silence is the place underneath language

An unto-itself, an army

.

Stronger than words, more patient,

Bigger than the dictionary. (6-10)

The reader questions the speaker's intention, and there are no words to describe these lines. We get imagery of "Silence's grim reaper" (15) in stanza eight, and this image of death is "expected to leave, quickly, cleanly, // No trace afterward" (17-18). The final two stanzas give an image of the reaper leaving "No black from the bottom of its shoes on the floor" (19). We, the reader, as the speaker states, "Mispronounce its [the grim reaper's] name, but happy not to know, // Ready not to ask. *Good-bye*, we say, and mean it" (21-22). Ríos has imposed a silence on the readers, left us all in a state of speechlessness. Presenting the theme of his poem to the reader in a way that is indescribable makes this ineffable poem so effective. Ríos leaves us all with "That Thing" called "silence."

In "Mi Abuelo" (Ramazani 990), Ríos showcases how completely in control he is regarding the fantastic in his verse. Here, he separates himself from any other Latino in *magico realismo* with a free verse poem having no distinct pattern. There are no intentional rhymes, it seems, and no stanzas. The lines vary in length but not for any reason except that the lines stop when they need to stop. The poem is a portrait of Ríos, the artist, as a young man, and in the memory of his grandfather. It begins, "Where my grandfather is is in the ground / where you can hear the future / like an Indian with his ear at the tracks" (1-3). Death becomes a prescient force. We wonder if Ríos is alluding to something deeper. The poem gets more fantastic. "A pipe leads down to him so that sometimes / he whispers what will happen to a man" (4-5). Now, death tells the living of the future. The image is haunting. We then get enjambment which serves no other purpose than to keep the poem in a continual, free-flowing

monotone rhythm, making the words sound like they are being chanted by a monk or priest, or by some other proclaiming contact with the divine. All of this in order to enchant the reader. We think: Ríos, the shaman, the sorcerer. Ríos, the poet, tries. He uses creative imagery to describe who is next to die, to “chew the ground” (8). Ríos’s *abuelo* then gives his visions of the future to all members of the household: “Mi abuelo is the man / who speaks through all the mouths in my house” (9-10). We hear the old man’s voice, written in italics, and it is comedic: “*I am a man / who has served ants with the attitude / of a waiter*” (19-20). Ríos goes on to describe how his grandfather, when alive, claimed to be “deaf and a man / cured him by mail” (26-27). But we are all brought back to earth when we realize that this is not any fantastic poem after all. Ríos says again what we all expected: “At best, mi abuelo is a liar” (30). Although his imagination got the best of him when reflecting on his grandfather, we know that “Mi abuelo is an ordinary man” (37), much like the speaker of this poem, likely a mature and shamanic Ríos speaking of the young boy Ríos, a boy caught searching for a world all his own, stuck between two that did not need division after all. And he sees the lie. He sees that the border is a lie, too. It is an invisible place, a shifting and hazy vision similar to the fading memory of the dead by the living. Death then becomes an act that merely divides the living and the dead. The borders, like our memories of the departed, struggle to exist in a world of their own making.

“Madre Sofía,” the final poem of Ríos’s impressive canon to be described here, was written in 1982. It is about his experience of being taken to a fortune teller by his mother when he was 10 years old. “My mother took me because she couldn’t / wait the

second ten years to know” (1-2). We do not know what the mother wanted to know. The prophetess they visit has a screw loose though. Rumors say she gave a “box-wrapped baby” (4) as a wedding gift. And look at how elegantly (and disturbingly) Ríos describes her head:

Loose jar-top, half turned
and not caught properly in the threads
her head sat mimicking its original intention
like the smile of a child hitting himself. (7-10)

In other words, she is not just crazy but she looks crazy, too. She has the “slit eyes of the devil” (14). This *bruja falsa* uses more flash to bewilder and confuse the innocents, like “diamond smoke” (16), “sparkles” (17) that a young Ríos inhales, and finally “the breasts as large as her / head, folded together, coming out of her dress” (26-27). It is all so fantastic. Ríos does not stop. He tells us her words were like “red ants” (38) coming from all parts of her body, and he describes the false sorceress to be “like a television healer, [a] young Oral Roberts” (44). All of this grandstanding and sad depravity is not lost on the kid. He knows what he sees. But he must defend himself from

those breasts swinging toward me
so that I reach with both my hands to my lap
protecting instinctively what it is
that needs protection when a baseball is thrown
and you’re not looking but someone yells,
the hand, then those breasts coming toward me

like the quarter-arms of the amputee Joaquín (46-52)

The image is moving and immediately we, the reader, are brought back to reality by “those breasts” and the danger they present. Ríos leaves us grounded with an image of the “hair around her left nipple, like a man” (57). To a young Ríos, the large hairy breasts are dangerous. But by describing them, he is able to exorcise their hold over his memory. The fortune teller then tells his mother her prophesy in the final line of the poem: “*The future will make you tall*” (62). She could not predict that a young Ríos would also remove the veil from *magico realismo*, too.

We see how the artist Ríos as a young man is not to be fooled by all the magic and supernatural elements around him. He navigates effortlessly in this world because it is a world of his own creation. This poet of an exacting nature executes his verse using a scientific approach. Ríos has strongly defined what lines mean to him, and because he has made these rules for *himself* he can break them when needed. We read his verse and take note of its simplicity. And we feel uplifted at the end. How does he do this? Ríos focuses on the truth which reveals the lie. He unmasks *magico realismo*. He is a showman and a shaman, a sorcerer of words.

In the poetry of Alberto Ríos, we see nature entwining our soul, catching us. “Refugio’s Hair” (Ríos, “Refugio’s”), not described here, is a perfect example. A young woman’s hair gets entangled in a tree, saving her and the baby in her arms from death. Often, nature acts in a violent way, with acts of horror, terror, misfortune, changing the course of our destiny. But nature is not a cruel force in Ríos’s poems. Instead, it is a benevolent actor on a stage, a showman who tries to sell us some snake-oil to cure our

ills, not for the benefit of himself, but for all of us. He thinks it works and it just might, because it has worked for him. Ríos's verse seems to seep into our souls so subtly. He is like Mercury, his prosaic poetry ever expanding and contracting, ebbing, dancing, and swiftly flowing, melting. His words seem to trespass into our private territory without us noticing, furtively crossing our borders and defenses. He makes us listen when he speaks. We wonder if this happens because "there are so few chances in the day for our hearts to open, and Ríos's poems are revelatory in a way that exhorts all readers' hearts to open" (Melendez 213). And in his poetry, we can see the heavens reflected in the sea, mirroring how ancient mariners found their way by looking skyward, with the stars looking back, too, gazing earthward to find their way. It is a kinship of omnipotence, I say. We and nature, in a dance of reciprocity enabling all dancers to co-evolve, to bind together and not divide. But Ríos also tells us that the dream is never far away, and although the snake oil salesman does a good shaman act now and then, we wonder how the life of his poetry can be so revelatory, so simple yet abundant. We wonder if it may actually be just the "third" world that exists in each of us — a world we created of our own volition, with the help of his poems, a buffer to the harsh realities of life. The reality is our bitter existence wants to name and divide everything based on some kind of story. But we continue to survive, just enough, in this "sure if uneasy concert" with the rest of the world. You and I should walk to the border and seek out this shaman, look for his images, listen to his words, then step into this "third" world. Should we listen to Alberto Ríos speak we might see the border disappear. The magic will be real.

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