

«He gathered to himself through the years / Something of everything he knew»: Metaphor, Composites, and Multiplicity in the Poetry of Alberto Ríos

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El carácter fronterizo de la poesía de Alberto Ríos constituye un ejemplo del proceso liberador que puede conseguirse a través del mestizaje cultural, en este caso el representado por la comunidad hispana del sur estadounidense. Se ilustra el poder transgresor derivado de la unión de las diferencias sociales y culturales en la obra del autor, a la que se le aplica el modelo teórico de Gloria Anzaldúa en Borderlands / La frontera (1987). Los mecanismos estructurales y conceptuales que Ríos utiliza para reivindicar un contexto mestizo en el que se reciclan algunos de los elementos distintivos de la cultura azteca primigenia, como sería el uso de la máscara, sirven para defender una identidad fronteriza e híbrida compuesta de los elementos de ambos lados de tal frontera, tanto física como imaginada.

In *Capirotada: A Nogales Memoir* (1999), Alberto Ríos describes himself as someone who inherited and grew up with the idea of borders. Borders inform and help to shape Ríos's identity, and surface and resurface throughout his work. Interestingly, rather than imagine borders as fixed entities, Ríos's writing finds borders permeable, flexible, and finally surmountable or transgressible. In the literary landscape of Ríos's poems and stories, the volatility of whatever is being limned by a border, whether it is a geographic border, a border of the body, or an emotional or imaginative border, is no match for the forces that it is designed to contain. Repeatedly throughout Ríos's work we discover the idea that rather than promote differentiation, borders inspire composites. The areas, particularly those in the U.S. Southwest, that are marked by a border are now and have for centuries been areas in which composites, joinings, and permeabilities have held sway. The composites might be geographic, Southwest itself being a composite direction, or cuisine based, as evidenced by terms such as «Tex-Mex». Sometimes the composites manifest themselves in the body, and we identify what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) posits as «the new mestiza». The joining might be a temporal one; many magical realist texts, *Pedro Páramo* being a prime example, offer conceptions of time that meld past and present. This melding of past and present was also a component of Meso-American spiritual practice. And speaking of spirituality, the composite deities and spiritual guides of the Aztecs reveal that the impulse to create composites has a long tradition in the religious rites

of the region. This is the soil in which Alberto Ríos grows his poems. In this imaginatively fertile region all that is needed to form composites is the will to combine, and a means with which to enact the combination. In Aztec religious rites, one means employed to create a fusion or composite was donning a mask. In Ríos's poetry, metaphor serves as the mask of fusion.

In this essay, I will begin by offering a brief synopsis of Anzaldúa's (1987) conceptualization of *Borderlands / La Frontera* and the composite identity it inspires. Then, I will offer a brief exploration of Aztec mythology in order to trace how composites and the idea of transgressing borders has a long and established history, a history that very likely informs the theorization and composition of the present. In particular, I will introduce the idea of the mask and how the mask functioned in Aztec ritual. I will then offer readings of Ríos's poetry and consider how metaphor is the primary mask through which he writes his composites into being. Borders, taken in, molded, and refashioned, become a locale from which to deny stasis and inspire imaginative multiplicity.

A designated locale, a space of differentiation, an insistence on distinction and separation—a border is established in order to deny or contain the volatility and fluidity of experience. Borders are inspired by anxiety and entrenched by power in its more violent manifestations. Despite this function of demarcation, borders also serve as the beginning of connection. A conscious act of crossing the border, of transgressing, becomes necessitated by the insistence on maintaining borders. The moment a border is established—geographically, physically, emotionally, spiritually—the desire arises to redraw or erase it. Borders and their elimination are twins born in close proximity to each other.

In *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Anzaldúa describes the multiplicitous nature of borders. While she acknowledges the «Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border» as her primary focus, she acknowledges that the geographical border is inevitably productive of and influenced by «psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands». And despite the specific geographic focus of Anzaldúa's book, she acknowledges that, «the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy» (Anzaldúa, 1987: vii).

According to Anzaldúa, the «borderlands» produce a new self, a new identity, one that she classifies as «the new mestiza». A composite of races, cultures, and histories, the new mestiza is «cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems [...] under[going] a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war». As Anzaldúa (1987: 78) notes, «Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes [...] a cultural collision». In the genesis that Anzaldúa theorizes, a border identity is one that negotiates tension and surfaces and resurfaces in a dynamic process of becoming.

The U.S. Mexico border and the people, consciousness, and ideas it gives birth to are in some ways only a recent version of much older conceptions of borders and identities conceptualized in Meso-America for centuries. The mythology and religious ethos of the region (especially before Europeans arrived) grew out of the belief that

all phenomena of the world of nature are animated by a spiritual essence, the common possession of which renders insignificant our usual distinctions between human and animal and even the organic and inorganic [...] All life is part of one mysterious unity by virtue of its derivation from the spiritual source of life –the life force. (Markman and Markman, 1994: 5)

Beginning with the Olmecs, and continuing through the spiritual practice of the Aztecs, the spiritual essence was often characterized in painting and carving as «fantastic creatures of myth with faces and bodies made up of varying combinations of features drawn from the creatures of nature» (Markman and Markman, 1994: 6): the plumed serpent, the were-jaguar, these are deified creatures of myth born as composites.

In order to emphasize the interconnectivity, and to heighten one's conscious connection with it, Aztec ritual often employed masking. Rather than using the mask to obscure, negate or hide the individual wearing the mask, masking in Meso-America was associated with building connection.

Wherever and whenever the ritual mask is worn, it symbolizes not only particular gods, demons, animal companions or spiritual states but also a particular relationship between matter and spirit, the natural and the supernatural, the visible and the invisible. The mask, a lifeless, material thing, is animated by the wearer, and this is, of course, precisely the relationship between men and the gods –human beings are created from lifeless matter by the animating force of the divine, and their life can continue only as long as it is supported by that divine force. Thus, in a striking reversal of inner and outer, the wearer of the ritual mask almost literally becomes the god –he is, for the ritual moment, the animating force within the otherwise lifeless mask. (Markman and Markman, 1994: 41)

Entering into a borderland where the demarcations between spiritual and material could be re-rendered, or considered for their association rather than their differentiation, ritual masking enabled entrance into «a liminal realm» where the temporality of the material world was placed in contact with the timeless spiritual world. These masked rituals, then, fused the material and the spiritual, and combined what were often seen as two different realms of experience. Spiritual and material were one borderland, and the idea of time, during ritual masking also became a borderland as

through the agency of the mask that man entered the liminal zone of «no time and no place» where the essence of the world of the spirit could become manifest. In that liminal masquerade he played his part in the transformational drama through which the material world was infused with spirit, and life was enabled to continue. (Markman and Markman, 1994: 42)

Masking produces a composite between wearer and the being represented by the mask. It also produces a composite between material and spiritual, and present and past. The mask and the wearer both become occupants of border territories, and both become composite in the border spaces they occupy. Seemingly aware of the contemporary and historical fusion impulse within the borderlands, the poetry of Alberto Ríos offers characters that fuse composites into border identities. Rather than don a mask, the characters, speakers, and beings of this border world fuse into their composites through metaphor.

Beginning with the title, Ríos's poem «The Bird-man of Nogales» introduces a composite identity. This part «Bird», part «man» character in the poem offers not only a dual existence but also a multiple identity that is constantly shifting the borders of its composites. Moving between human, bird, animals, and landscape, the character refuses a static identity, and presents an existence that defies the usual demarcations of the body. As Ríos writes of the Bird-man,

He had gathered to himself through the years
Something of everything he knew

A little bit of what he touched, his eyes
In their sudden blink

Catching, if just a molecule, a moment
From the glint of a sharp piece of quartz.

(«The Bird-man of Nogales»: 7)

And so in the very nature of experience, through the sensory acts of looking and touching, the Bird-man is informed and changed by his landscape. Like the masked figures of Aztec ritual, the Bird-man connects with and becomes a part of those things around him, and they become a part of him.

As the poem opens, we discover the multiple composites that make up this figure:

The Bird-man wasn't a bird
So much—he was a beaver, too,

With some horse and a flock of crows
Where the pupils of his eyes should have been.

He was a trapper in those years,
A prospector if he found a good rock.

Sometimes he was a sheep just grazing,
Just out there, an off white

Part of a regular landscape
Except up close.

(«The Bird-man of Nogales»: 7)

Even the identifiable occupations that the Bird-man practices shift and change, and the animals he is associated with, «beaver», «horse», «crows», «sheep», all have their own association with the landscape that he mimics. Interestingly, the Bird-man, in his composite nature, also becomes part of the landscape. So, even as the creatures which inhabit the landscape inhabit him, he also becomes part of the land itself. As with Aztec belief, the life force is in everything, and the Bird-man connects with everything, animal or mineral as is indicated by the following lines:

He was some parts animal, some parts
Shiny, and some parts so thin

They had no echo, or shadow, or taste.

(«The Bird-man of Nogales»: 7)

As his body crosses the boundaries of delineation between species and between species and land, he begins to lose qualities of presence, «echoes», «shadows», «tastes», and gains others, as he is «shiny» and it is the shiny parts that eventually «lit his way».

In each of the descriptions above, Ríos presents the Bird-man in such a way that he begins to blur the boundary between description and metaphor. What would usually be considered metaphor becomes description, and suddenly metaphor, in relation to a borderland identity, composite, multiple, and volatile in its shifting parameters, becomes equivalent to, or composite with description. The distinction between metaphor and description becomes impossible to determine. The multiple nature of metaphor, the connection it makes between entities that are similar but not the same, begins to be challenged by the identity that Ríos presents here. The composite that makes a metaphor function is a composite that one discovers in a border identity. The connection made between similar entities becomes part of one entity. Metaphor becomes description with the composite character Ríos presents here. The impossible fusion is what is.

Beginning with a description of the Bird-man's pony tail (we discover composites everywhere here), Ríos then moves on to show how that part of the person, his hair, becomes distinct enough of a part to reframe the image of who the man is. Synecdoche in Ríos's poem then, does not only represent the whole, it completely shifts the possibility of what the whole is. Again, figurative language moves from the realm of the impossible (one can't really be changed into another being by one's hair) to the probable and ultimately inevitable.

Ragged, pulled together, but only a little,
Only as much as he could after the years.

It matted itself and made grease;
It had a low order shine and a solid look,

The hairs more etched on than actually there.
From behind, the Bird-man was another thing,

A beaver at the top,
A split river at the blue jeans of his legs.

(«The Bird-man of Nogales»: 8)

We see the man, his hair, the pony tail, shifting into the tail of a beaver, a beaver that stays close to the water of a river created by this man's blue jeans. As with the masks of ritual, the connections are found by discovering what is on the body. The mask on the body makes the mask alive, and the wearer is able to connect with the spirit of the creature represented on the mask by giving life to it. Here, the masks are metaphors and

synecdoches: hair becomes a beaver's tail, the blue jeans become a river, the Bird-man comes into contact with the realities of the world, and the realities of the world change him and he changes them.

The constantly evolving and composite nature of the figure continues to emerge right through to the end of the poem. As the last stanzas indicate, the evolution, and the connections, and transformations continue.

Then he would walk out, a little like a horse,
Until we couldn't see him.

Maybe he waved. Maybe
it was one of his large ears twitching.

He'd walk a line toward the hills, and go into them.
Into them, not over them.

(«The Bird-man of Nogales»: 9)

The border identity that Ríos offers in «The Bird-man of Nogales», a border identity that shifts and changes with the landscape, that connects with the life energies, whether animal or mineral, around it, emerges again and again in the poetry. It is not just people who evolve and form composites in this borderland. In the poem «Common Crows in a Winter Tree», the rain changes and evolves because a flock of birds is laughing at it. Dismayed at being mocked, and

To get away from the birds, the rain tries a mask:
It becomes snow, a show of wings, the flakes
Drunk moths in an aimless, cool wander.

Then it is ice, a trick again, rain

Turning into tiny fists without skin.
Hailstones, each a clutch of finger bones,
Brittle, as much dry as wet. Rain to snow

Then ice, then bone. Then more,
To skulls, and teeth, breaking against the earth
In a white fireworks of cruelty.

(«Common Crows in a Winter Tree»: 68)

The rain dons a mask, becoming snow, and then dons another mask, from the insect world to become «drunk moths». Adapting and changing yet again, the rain takes on human characteristics and becomes «bone» and «skulls» and «teeth». Weather phenomena, through a mask of metaphor, become insect and human and weather again. One form, one identity is not enough to contain the dynamics of shifting possibilities. Again, metaphor, the mask, and description, the body wearing the mask, begin to become indistinguishable. They become one in a sharing of composite energy.

In the poem «In my Hurry», a man passing a jacaranda tree suddenly discovers that:

How could I not have seen it? This tree was an arm,
And more than an arm, its muscle strung in everything

So that the tree, everything about it, the tree
Made itself of arm and leg, leg and neck, at angles,

At stops and starts and in bends, everything broken
Everything but the lavender, which was flower,

So much lavender coming from what was left what must be
A mouth, a thousand mouths, at once speaking

The lavender or the lilac, the blue, understood language.

(«In my Hurry»: 49)

The tree, through descriptive synecdoche has «an arm», a «leg and neck» and «muscle». The man rushing by is able to identify with this tree and the parts of his own body that he can see in the tree. This tree and its «thousand mouths, at once speaking» stop the man while he is on his way to a romantic assignation. The combinations of body, and tree, and lavender ask «the impossible» of the speaker, until he sees, finally, how that impossible tree, with body and color, call up a connection in him: «it was a tree in wild color calling to a tree in wild color» («In my Hurry»: 50). The tree is an expression of his body; his body is an expression of the tree. The tree, recognized through its composite nature, calls up the possibility of a composite nature in the speaker.

Similarly working with and through a surrounding organic world, the poem «My Chili» explores just what composite possibilities exist within a chili. The spice of chili becomes «first cousin to the ant bite» («My Chili»: 41) and the world of insects and their bites is drawn in. The chili is also the moment between «a finger-snap and a pin prick / But holding hands with both of them», and:

Chili taste: The feel of a counterfeit wound.
The sound of a whistle.

That sight of that other boy
When he was young and you were young

And she was young, and she was with him.

(«My Chili»: 42)

The «bite» of the chili makes the experience of eating it a walk through moments of memory, some of them painful, all of them possessing a kick. The past and the present are brought into fusion through the experience of eating this food that calls up so many experiences in the moment of eating it. Chili takes on a body, and as you eat

It has taken you by the mouth
With its single muscle

And hit you, but from the inside out—
You can see the moment, which looks like

A tongue extending the cheek out.
Chili: the inside of a fist

A fist's dream and a fist's intent.

(«My Chili»: 43)

This chili has the «muscle», and «fist», and «intent» of a fighter. It never stops hitting the one who is biting into it. The chili changes and multiplies in terms of composites and possibilities again right through to the end of the poem until, as Ríos writes,

When you bite the chili,
You are not biting chili.

With its own teeth, and its own tongue
For taste

The chili after all
is biting you.

(«My Chili»: 45)

The people, the plants, the animals, the landscapes that inhabit this border world of Ríos's poems become one with each other, wonderful composite identities that refuse stasis; and the world itself, which becomes a composite identity that shifts and changes, reveals a refusal of stasis, of demarcation between bodies, between bodies and their surroundings, and even between the poetic terms, the metaphors and descriptions with which we describe the relationships between all of these entities. They all refuse the stasis of demarcation: they transgress borders.

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