



The Consciousness of Transit: An Interview with Alexis Gómez Rosa
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THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF TRANSIT

An Interview with Alexis Gómez Rosa

by Sintia Molina

MOLINA: What is poetry?

ROSA: To attempt a definition of poetry is to seek to box in what by its very nature transcends limitations. Poetry is like a mirror of water whose depths unveil the hidden expression of the self. The self which scatters us about in fragments primed to articulate primeval language: the word in its founding Arcadia. I know many definitions, but I believe they all fall short of the mark in their languid insufficiency.

MOLINA: How do you define your poetry?

ROSA: My poetry is the search for an equilibrium between the being that defines me and that other being that denies me and garbles my brain. That's why it is a dialogue in a labyrinth. It wavers between the mirror that victimizes and the mirage that celebrates me. That's how poetry descends upon me, since, to a certain extent, I feel that life is a shudder-producing excision.

MOLINA: You mean that there is an individual or collective "other" in your poetry?

ROSA: My poetry is the voice of the absent one, returning as the chorus engendered by its echo. My poems are the masks of a blood exchange that adulterates me and erases me. I frequently don't know who I am.

MOLINA: The masks of the other?

ROSA: Yes, of the one gone astray. That voice of the other which I can neither submit nor refer to as my own. It is the voice of the one who dedicates to me its tumors and scars. Let us say it is the voice of the vital, faceless borrowing, where others are quoted, voices that stitch and unstitch the vertigo of a history that turns us into protagonists of either ruination or decorum.

MOLINA: Is it "an other" without limitations?

ROSA: No. It is a poetry that seeks to supply the sum of all things in the minimal operation.

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MOLINA: Critics maintain that you no longer write politically-engaged poetry, and that has allowed you to develop your aesthetics, resulting in better poetry. What are your thoughts on that?

ROSA: My poetry emerged at a time of political engagement. Although I was of the left, albeit without fanaticism, I understood very early on that the paths to human redemption are numerous. The post-Trujillo Santo Domingo, the Santo Domingo that followed the revolt of 1965, awakened us to democratic life. Its streets were criss-crossed by every trend in political and philosophical thought; through them we interpreted the world and its contradictions. The reality made possible a “fair of ideas,” as Federico Henríquez y Grateaux called it. My poetry, like that of others of my generation, was testimony to that traumatic experience. I do not reject that “choleric lyrical poetry,” as the Puerto Rican poets of the Guajana group christened the poetic production of the 1960s and 1970s. I claim the dignity of “Writing” for it. Despite the blindness of the era, when I was twenty-two, my book *Oficio de post-muerte* [Post-mortem declaration] bears the sensibility and the creativity that branches me out. As my studies progressed, I delved into other areas which bestowed other dimensions onto my poetry. That early poetry was the expression of a historical moment.

MOLINA: Is your poetry engaged nowadays?

ROSA: Of course. It is a poetry engaged with the creative act, with the word—open and closed, ancient, vitalistic and libertarian; with the lips and the tongue that moisten it and speak it. Engaged with my time and with all its fortunes and misfortunes, with the artistic manifestations fostered by the moment. There is no rejection of engagement. However, the writer’s most vital engagement (how many have said so?) is to write well.

MOLINA: Is there a difference between speech and language in your poetry?

ROSA: I am a man of the academy. I have a university formation that allows me to thread together bits of a discourse nourished by classical tradition with the phrasing of popular speech. Thus springs a poetic language with the freshness of blue jeans.

MOLINA: What role do dominicanisms, *indigenismos*, afro-dominicanisms play in your poetry?

ROSA: You are addressing elements that are important and basic to me. I have my secret dictionary. I have created, following my obsessions, my themes, a lexicon that makes diaphanous the sensibility that emerges from my reading of what the island is. The island, the sum of three racial instances: Indian, European, and black. I have introduced our mulatto essence into my poetry because Santo Domingo is a mulatto community and I am its expression. My poetry seeks to be the expression of that legend of colors.

MOLINA: In your poetry the senses—specifically the eye—reject, admonish, despise, attempt to assuage conflict, determine realities, express pain, in short. What is it that gives pain to the poet? Why does he express it through the means of the blind eye?

ROSA: Originally I saw with the eyes of a blindman. I looked within. Afterwards, that eye surfaces and is imbued with everydayness, with ceaseless questions of the collective eye of the era. The mournful and heartrending events of the 1960s and 1970s. Hence my poetry contains a dose of the testimonial, of the referent the world gives me. I realize that reading is my daily displacement. I disperse my routine beyond simple comings and goings because the eye takes me to other frontiers in which my innocence is lost and illusion is anathematized. It is the result of an experience of fast, permutating, sordid (geo)graphies.

MOLINA: But the eye despises and rejects, which is why I return to the question: what gives pain to the poet?

ROSA: In reality, that disequilibrium is the consequence of the degrading facets of contemplated reality. I do not traverse, through the eye, a landscape across which I stride freely. It is a landscape where the eye stumbles and is startled, suffering the disarticulation of horror, the senselessness and arbitrariness of totalitarianism.

MOLINA: Is it a landscape that causes pain?

ROSA: Yes, it is a landscape that causes pain. It is the landscape of torment. And now that you say that, I remember “Paisaje cortado” [Sliced Landscape], a poem from *Contra la pluma la espuma* [Against the pen, spume]. It is a text without title, curiously. However, one lives in it the tragedy of the utterance in the darkness of a deep wound: a landscape of lines where “the shoeless air cracked, rancid in its rainbow.”

MOLINA: Are you attempting, then, to reconstruct the landscape with your eye?

ROSA: No, there is no reconstruction of the landscape. Reading is not so much the rottenness, unsettledness, or tearing-apart of the reality observed, but of the eye itself, already a viscous encampment condemned by galloping myopia.

MOLINA: Is reality reconstructed?

ROSA: Yes. But the page reveals the reconstruction *a posteriori*. I want to reconstruct what the eye does not allow me to appreciate in the state of perfection that I seek through the poem as a unique and self-sufficient reality.

MOLINA: Why is the eye torn, why does the poet’s tongue grow, why are his feet broken?

ROSA: The eye is lost and wears itself out in its role of seer, it is consumed, it loses its foothold, seeing itself as incorrigible. The eye grows, fails in its vedettism, and its wink slides on the coquettishness I assign to it. Because I am accomplishing a transit without any confidence in the steps to be taken. This step does not correspond to the traced path, then the tongue intervenes, questioning, cursing and qualifying. There is no path, only displacements. When I take the step, I find abysses, walls.

MOLINA: Is this abyss that keeps you from advancing comparable to that faced by immigrants to this city?

ROSA: You know, I had not posed myself that question, but now that you bring it up, no. One of the jobs I have undertaken in this city has been in matters of immigration. The history of the majority of immigrants is that of arriving at a space without a precise horizon and an abundance of abysses. My reasons are other—reasons that do not lead, unfortunately, to a restaurant or a department store.

MOLINA: Would you classify your poetry as poetry of immigration or exile?

ROSA: I don't think so since I read in retrospect and I've never liked labels. It is poetry that attempts to reconstruct a diffuse life. My poetry, sustained and nourished by a vital fire that reveals me as king in the past. That is why my poetry attempts to reproduce a diffuse life beneath the arcades of an idyllic Santo Domingo, a Santo Domingo that propelled me into the abyss, into living away from mine, and into a diligent creative enterprise.

MOLINA: What did *New York en tránsito de pie quebrado* [New York in transit of short verse] mean to you?

ROSA: It is a book I like very much because it awakens in me a hidden autistic feeling behind the sumptuous tide contained by those pages. It is the rounding off of incompleteness. *New York en tránsito de pie quebrado* opens a cycle, that of doors opening to the countryside (parodying Octavio Paz), peopled by blinking traffic signs that can lead to a terrible collision. From its title, open and stubbornly polysemic, its pages progress through the successive negation of each one of its parts. Free verse, haikus, prose poems, epigrams, and concrete poetry, it is an unfolding of the self and its voices setting up a dialogue of geographies. It is the song of New York from the parameters of literature. I conjugate everyday reality from the perspective of someone who sees himself in a new space in relation with other nationals, with a common history, full of ups and downs and shadows.

MOLINA: Is it reality that it immolates?

ROSA: No. In me it generates new experiences. But from a literary and linguistic point of view, my current work could not be explained without *New York en tránsito de pie*

quebrado. It has opened avenues for my poetry that had remained closed before. I think it is the other face of the New York that never stops.

MOLINA: Is it New York in transit?

ROSA: Yes, it is transit as a quest that has led me to a new expressive space.

MOLINA: Do you mean a new attitude?

ROSA: Yes, about language and about the word, and against the straight jacket and the stiffening of an orthodoxy of the laws and statutes.

MOLINA: What is the function of the irony on which you rely in the configuration of *New York en tránsito de pie quebrado*?

ROSA: It is the other door that had allowed me to breathe and displace myself. It is my recourse against the difficult art of surviving and against the silence in which others generalize you.

MOLINA: Irony also has a didactic function—why?

ROSA: Before my father died, I lived at war with him. After his death, I feel I am reproducing him in every act. That war against him was the result of the perfectionism that he brought to everything. And it has been his most valuable legacy. Everything I propose to do, I strive to do well, from playing to dancing to writing poetry. Perhaps the sense of warning is the product of the irresponsibility with which “the other” or “the others” do things, for example, the poets of my generation or the country’s major poets. I also think that our history is made of scraps, on the go. I am driven to disavow such criteria, working with time, not against it. I think it is one of the evils we have coined, one analyzed by sociologists as a Dominican Trait. I had not discerned that quality, but now that you mention it, I think you’re right.

MOLINA: In your poem “Error en tiro” [Error in shooting] you signal a rift with traditional forms and declare your freedom. Can you comment on that?

ROSA: That poem, written along the lines of Domingo Moreno Jiménez, is a sort of *Ars poetica* that links to an old idea of Héctor Incháustegui Cabral of Dominicanizing our literary art to the same degree we internationalize ourselves, of Dominicanizing ourselves while we internationalize ourselves. That axiom guides and engages me. It is a challenge to me. I always write as if it were the first time because I know the price poetry exacts. Knowing myself defenseless draws me towards poetry, drawing out all weapons. Poetry is vast, and many are the voices that have erected monuments. Out of respect to that tradition, I offer my testimony of admiration, erecting my own house where that voice finds comfort.

MOLINA: Why is there so much eroticism in the verses of that house?

ROSA: Because I am an erotic animal. I have tried to create an erotics of writing that supposes a delirious surrender, an expression that demands nakedness.

MOLINA: Without ties?

ROSA: In freedom. Working with the paraphernalia I glean from proverbs and maxims, from the language of the street, from my readings and my obsessions. I use all the forms and resources within reach to build my house, the reflection of my taste. That is why, speaking thematically, nothing is pure in my literary production (almost nothing); everything is subordinated to a cultural junction that unties the knots of the univocal and monochromatic.

MOLINA: What is the role of women in that house, in that universe?

ROSA: Woman has always been yesterday.

MOLINA: Yesterday? Why not today?

ROSA: She has always been yesterday. Let me tell you an anecdote. My ex-wife always demanded poems for her and the girls. I could never render them; I never knew how to please her. After I found it impossible to return to her, I was able to create the poetry that made them present. There's no doubt about it, excessive proximity clouds things.

MOLINA: How do you explain, "Woman has always been yesterday"?

ROSA: It only explains the reason for my writing.

MOLINA: What is your opinion of feminist literature, of poetry especially? Is there a feminist literature in the Dominican Republic?

ROSA: In the Republic, feminism was an epidemic of measles that left lacerations. I don't think it has been adequately interpreted. The poetry written by those women poets will count for nothing. It constitutes an immense volume of poetry, the expression of resentment, whining. Venting, resentment, and whining are not literary values. It has not been assumed with the consciousness and clairvoyancy that characterized North American women writers. They have yet a lot of ground to cover and little of the spirit of Blanca Varela, Carmen Ollé, Mariela Drefus, Ana Rosetti, Coral Brascho, among others. They have taken the epidermic aspects of feminism, the resolve not to "punch a card" for any man. Hence the frivolity, the levity, the absence of study, and the festive character that animates them.

MOLINA: Bad poetry?

ROSA: Yes. Since I don't know the good one.

MOLINA: Isn't there any good feminist poetry in the Republic?

ROSA: No.

MOLINA: Are there differences between feminist literature written on the island and that produced here?

ROSA: I believe that Dominican literature, orphaned of any feminine expression, must be rejoicing today. For the first time Dominican women integrate themselves into the country's literary history with a vigorous production. Up to now we had had isolated voices: Salomé Ureña, Abigail Mejía, Aída Cartagena, Carmen Natalia, Hilma Contreras. After Trujillo's death we see Jeanette Miller and Soledad Álvarez emerge. The others are writers in training who fill me with optimism: Martha Rivera (out of sequence), and most recently, Marianela Medrano.

MOLINA: Do you believe in the possibility of an avant garde in Dominican literature?

ROSA: I believe that Dominican literature is living through an interesting moment, one worthy of study. The community has accomplished much. But there isn't a body of literature we can call a vanguard, as there is in music. In the field of music, we are the vanguard. Well, what I have said applies to New York. In the Republic the situation is different, except for the talent and vigor displayed by Pedro Vergés, Enriquillo Sánchez, Andrés L. Mateo, José Mármol, and others.

MOLINA: Any new projects?

ROSA: Yes, I am working on a book of stories and a novel I have titled *Cassius Clay, además, guarda un par de pasiones, mi viejo Telefunquen* [Cassius Clay, in addition, guards a couple of passions, my old Telefunquen]. I am revising it for submission to a hypothetical editor. Likewise, progress on another novel, *Al filo de un ojo derramado* [On the rim of a spilled eye], is quite advanced. It is the story of a gaze (male) that cannot be perceived from the room across the street, where a similar gaze (female), feeling violated, invaded in her privacy, reacts by pouring itself out with the spectacularity of a violent poison. A dialogue of eyes, of mistrust. Monologues of forgotten aphasiacs who end up discovering each other, each one writing the other's novel, while they are divided by a street in winter. The text could be seen as a disquisition on the solitude and the restlessness brought about the absence of love. In poetry, I am working on a collection of poems with a general theme which I titled originally *Noche de cueros y otras tapicerías* [Night of naked skins and other upholsteries] (the title of one of the parts of the book), and which I have rechristened *Self Service*

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Poems [*Poemas de auto-servicio*, now available in a Spanish version]. Although the themes are varied, love and the noctambulous bodies of that same city—Santo Domingo/New York—weigh heavily on the book.

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