Jerry Harp on Natalie Diaz; Maria Damon on David S. Wills Frederick Luis Aldama on Rudolfo A. Anaya; Kathryn Weld on Roger Lipsey

American Review

May/June 202

Volume 42 Number 4

Printed in USA \$4.00 Canada \$5.00 http://americanbookreview.org



In Fogus:

Serious Fiction

With Contributions by:

Stephen J. Burn,
Jurrit Daalder,
Daniel Green,
Yonina Hoffman,
Mary K. Holland,
Tom LeClair,
Beatrice Pire,
and
Toon Staes



INTERVENTIONS

Author, essayist, and curator of Latinx fictional spaces, Sergio Troncoso adds to, extends, and complicates a long tradition south of the US/ Mexico border creatives who've mixed fiction with philosophy, physics, biology, psychology, and journalism to wondrous alchemical effect. With Sergio, think Jorge Luis Borges, José Emilio Pacheco, José Donoso, and Julio Ramón Ribeyro — but always rooted in the particulars of the US Latinx borderland experience.

Born and raised on the East Side of El Paso, Texas, pursing the life of a writer might have seemed an impossible dream. It wasn't. A passion for transformative wordsmithing seemed to pass down from his *abuelo* — a journalist jailed dozens of times for calling out the Mexican government's corruption. Sergio cut his teeth as newspaper editor at Ysleta High, honed his craft on a Gannett Foundation scholarship at the Blair Summer School for Journalism, then studied Mexican history and politics at Harvard. He followed with MA and M.Phil degrees in international relations and philosophy from Yale.

From early fictional works such as *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories* (1999) and *The Nature of Truth* (2003) to more recent ones such as *From This Wicked Patch of Dust* (2011), *A Peculiar kind of Immigrant's Son* (2019), and *Nobody's Pilgrim* (2021) Sergio masterfully builds storyworlds chock full of a panoply of richly rendered folks of all walks who push at and deeply probe those quotidian and metaphysical conundrums that make up life. Sergio takes on journeys of self-discovery (and self-duplicity), cultural, political, and religious clashes, multigenerational reconciliations, and pasts that haunt presents.

Maker of words and worlds, Sergio also gravitates to the essay form - his own and the curating of others. I think here of those sixteen of his essays that make up Crossing Borders (2011) that move between autobiography (borderland life), religion, and metaphysics (our mortality), and so much more. I think, too, of his urgent and groundbreaking edited collection Our Lost Border: Essays on Life amid the Narco-Violence (2013). I think of his masterfully curated Nepantla Familias: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature on Families in between Worlds (2021) that brings together in one volume essays, poems, and short stories by Latinx luminaries to throw exquisite light on what it means to exist in between languages, cultures, geographies, and identities.

All this and more has led to Sergio's recognition with dozens of literary awards, including the Premio Aztlan Lit Prize, Southwest Book Award, and International Latino Book Award. He has been further recognized as an inductee into the Texas Institute of Letters (2012) and the Hispanic Scholarship Fund's Alumni Hall of Fame (2013). The Ysleta public library was named in his honor (2014). Today, he serves as President of the Texas Institute of Letters.

Recently, I had the great pleasure of conversing with and learning from the kind, generous, and deeply learned Sergio Troncoso.

Frederick Luis Aldama: Sergio, I am so honored to be here talking with and learning from you today. You've had quite a remarkable journey, from El Paso to Harvard then Yale and now the President of the Texas Institute of Letters. How might you see your work intervene intellectually, creatively, politically in the world?

Sergio Troncoso: I've always wanted to show the Mexican American writer as a thinker in the mode of Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Fyodor Dostoevsky; to be taken seriously as minds that combine philosophy and literature. For instance, the first story I wrote for *The Last Tortilla & Other Stories* (1999) follows a Chicano from Yale who calls his Mexican *abuelita* and argues about Heidegger's "being-toward-death." Readers at the time didn't understand why I combined serious philosophical discussion with issues of the border.

It's not just about the Mexican American writer as thinker. It's also as thinker about the working class and about poverty. That's how I grew up. I've spent a lot of time at places like Harvard and Yale. They assume poor people don't think. They assume poor people don't know, or don't have metaphysical thoughts and discussions: the meaning of life and who are we. We do. That's what I wanted to change. That's where I wanted to intervene and break open Mexican American literature — American literature.

FLA: It sounds like you could have easily become a philosopher?

ST: Juan Felipe Herrera once said I was the Chicano/a community's Wittgenstein. [Laughs.] I did write a dissertation prospectus on Aristotle. I also learned German. However, the deeper I got into philosophy, the further away I got away from

Set your life up so that what matters is your literary art.

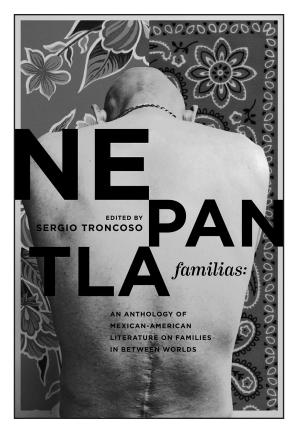
the community where I grew up in Ysleta — in El Paso, Texas. I wanted my work to become a bridge between the world of serious intellectual, philosophical, psychological inquiry and life on the border.

From *The Last Tortilla* to *A Peculiar Kind of Immigrant's Son* (2019), all my work is informed philosophically. Just as Kafka and Dostoevsky used literature to explore ideas, I'm doing something similar, but within the Chicano context.

FLA: You weave joys, pains, and sorrows into themes of self-discovery, ancestry, and intergenerational conflict. You make new our encounter with the borderlands by infusing a metaphysical dimension. When writing, who do you imagine as your ideal reader?

ST: One of the things Nietzsche said is that if you dig deep enough into yourself, you will get into the main psychological and philosophical issues and problems that everyone faces. You are your own best experiment. If you're digging honestly into yourself, you're also looking at the problems and issues that that make up the human condition. So I think my ideal reader begins with someone on the border who loves to read. But I also think of readers beyond the border, those who have left and those who have come back, because many do precisely that.

One question that I do ask myself constantly, however, is that when you see yourself as a vehicle for literary exploration, when will white audiences not from the border *see you* as relating to them? When will they see Chicano/a protagonists as stand-ins for every man or every woman? When will white readers give you a chance as a writer?



White readers get excited about a Chicano on the border in El Paso carrying chickens, but they fail to see how that story is also a deep psychological inquiry about perseverance and change in character's sense of self. These readers might assume that I'm only writing about the community and myself. That is true, but it's not the only truth I'm writing. I want readers to think. All readers. They assume that a Chicano writer is not going to understand German philosophy. This attitude stops people from encountering you deeply. You need that empathy from the reader to give you a chance as a writer. In fact, if I'm doing it right, I'm really writing in the same vein as somebody like a Sartre: to use yourself as a vehicle to get at questions that affect all of us.

FLA: You also work in the essay form.

ST: Inspired by Voltaire and many others, I love the personal essay as an exploration of yourself. It's a form that allows me to break away and also create myself. I can use the internal exploration (say a fight I had with my father) to get into issues of generational conflict. To attract readers, to give them that tactile sense, I start the essay "I had a fight with my father," so everybody can relate. Once hooked, I hope to bring the reader into philosophical and psychological discussions. For me it is an artifice to start personal then take it philosophical, going from simplicity to complexity. If that exploration is honest, it reaches everyone, even though it's really about my *self*. I write about what matters to me.

FLA: I'm reminded of the famous essayist, Montaigne, and his statement, "I am myself the matter of my work." Sergio, until recently with Cinco Puntos Press, you've chosen to publish much of your work with academic presses.

ST: I started with academic presses like the University of Arizona Press mostly because I didn't know any better. I was not an MFA guy connected to all the East Coast publishers, so I approached the press that had published other people who I liked. I should add, too, that I will not compromise my work for commercial success. I remember an interview with an editor from one of the Big 5. They asked me: "Sergio, why don't you write a novel about the sexcapades of a Chicano arriving in the Ivy League

Continued on next page

and the series of sex adventures he's going to have to find who he is?" Of course, that went nowhere. I'm a writer who loves philosophy and literature. I want to write it the way I see the world, whether that's commercial or not.

FLA: Let's turn our conversation to your recently published, *Nobody's Pilgrims* (forthcoming in 2021) — a novel about three teens; the undocumented Arnulfo, Chicano Turi from El Paso, and white, working-class Molly. What inspired you to write this dystopic adventure novel?

ST: My two sons (both in their early and mid-twenties) and the country at large are my inspirations. Our country is filled with violence toward immigrants and Latinos. Our country sometimes feels like it's collapsing. And I think young people offer the best hope to creating a new "we" in the future.

FLA: Nobody's Pilgrims is prescient.

ST: I finished the last draft a year before COVID-19 hit. The novel has a more vicious virus, Marburg B, that's transmissible through bodily fluids. It has an 80 percent kill rate. So this society is collapsing around them, and Marburg B has exacerbated that collapse. The teens face trial after trial traveling across the country to Connecticut while evil people chase the teens. These three teens are resilient in a rapidly changing world, and they rely on each other to survive.

FLA: Was there ever a moment, Sergio, when the narrative took a surprising turn for you?

ST: Oh, yes, all the time. I dream about my characters. When I'm deep into a novel, I begin dreaming about things that are happening to them. Some people think that as an author you're some sort of puppeteer controlling what the characters do. It's actually the opposite. When my characters come alive in your head, they're taking me where they want to go and where the story demands. I am more like a vehicle serving the story and serving the characters in the story.

FLA: Taking a step back from your work, how would you characterize it?

ST: I would say that I was born an outsider in this country — and even an outsider within my community. In El Paso, the poor people and the rich people and everything in between are all mexicano. The rich Mexicans made fun of us poor mexicanos; we literally had an outhouse in the backyard. When I went to Harvard then Yale, I was also an outsider. Living in New York City and Boston, I was always an outsider again. I never drank the blindly patriotic Kool-Aid, yet I was an American outsider.

So, if I were to characterize my own work and self, I would say that I was born an outsider, but at a certain point even when I could have been an insider, I continued to question my place and to challenge society, so I always stayed an outsider. I would say that I was an outsider not by choice first, but then I saw the value, the importance, of being an outsider, of never become comfortable with your place and even your self.

FLA: You're a fighter.

ST: You mess with me, I'm gonna mess with you. [Laughs.] I learned that in Ysleta as much as I learned that at Yale. You don't get respect by being a wallflower. You get respect by pushing back and pushing back in the right way, with intelligence and focus and hard work. These are the immigrant

values that my parents showed me, the pride and accountability they instilled in me, and I took all of that with me to the Ivy League and adapted these values far away from the border.

FLA: Do you write poetry?

ST: I've never written a poem in my life, but I love reading poetry. The next thing I read the most after fiction is poetry. I love studying people's lines and images and how an author plays with Spanish, English, and Spanglish. Poetry wakes me up to the possibilities of language and its aesthetics. I also love music, and I find that music and rhythm in poetry. I am always trying to create a certain "song" in my head when I write my novels, short stories, even my essays. Sometimes this "song" is a symphony in many parts.

FLA: In-betweenness informs your recently published volume, *Nepantla Familias* (2021).

ST: The title is in Nahuatl and Spanish, and the subtitle is in English: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature on Families in between Worlds. It is literally the borders that we're all crossing every day. Nepantla is living in between languages, between cultures, between geographies. It's being at Yale one day and then visiting my mother in the

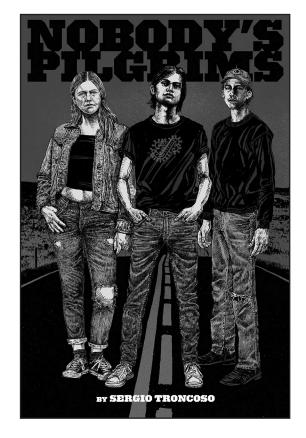
You get respect by pushing back and pushing back in the right way, with intelligence and focus and hard work.

adobe house we built in Ysleta the next day. It's constantly crossing economic, geographic, cultural, even class borders. It's embracing an expansive, malleable identity that often leaves you struggling to bring your disparate self together, but when you do, then that's the miracle of the Nepantla experience. A unique self that accepts and nurtures these crossings of many borders over the years.

With the volume, I wanted to really delve deep into this idea of Nepantla, of living in between psychological and cultural identities. So I sent out invitations to writers who I love, to show others, to show ourselves, the great literary talents we have in the Mexican American community, too often overlooked by mainstream publishing. My agenda was simple, but uncompromising: to publish great work on the page. This could be traditional or experimental work, but the work had to explore new ground and focus on Nepantla. I received excellent, original contributions.

FLA: You are President of Texas Institute of Letters. What's your vision for this institution?

ST: It's a great organization that's been around since 1936; it was formed by Texas luminaries like J. Frank Dobie, William Vann, and Carr Collins. For too many years, however, the TIL was traditionally too white and too male. Kip Stratton, Steve Davis, Carmen Tafolla and others on the board really changed the organization to reflect all of Texas, to be more inclusive. I am continuing the work they started. For the lifetime achievement award, we've now honored Pat Mora, Sandra Cisneros, Sarah Bird, Naomi Shihab Nye, John Rechy, and Benjamin Saenz. We've inducted writers like Cristina Rivera Garza, Allison Hedge Coke, Sasha Pimentel, Rosa Alcala, and Xavier Garza. We've also inducted more African American writers such as Bryan Washington, Michael Hurd, Celeste Bedford Walker, and Cary Clack. Of course, this work is never done, but I want the TIL to represent all of Texas, all communities, ethnicities, races,



and genders. The best writers, period. As President, I appoint all twelve judging committees for our annual awards, and I appoint the chairs of each committee, from best fiction book, best first fiction book, best poetry book, best short story, best young-adult book, best picture book, best short nonfiction, and so on. I make sure each committee reflects a diverse balance of gender, geography, ethnicity, and race. We are on a mission to have the TIL always represent all of Texas.

FLA: You mentioned earlier being an outsider to MFA programs. I think of the racism that Juan Felipe Herrera experienced as a Chicano at the Iowa Workshop. However, it seems like writing programs can be useful. You teach future gens of writers at Yale. What's your sense of writing programs — MFA or otherwise?

ST: There are great MFA programs like Iowa. We also have some great ones in Texas right now. When I was younger, if I had known what an MFA program was, I probably would have done an MFA. If younger Latino writers want to write, they can find great MFA programs like the bilingual program at UTEP. At the University of Houston you can even get an MFA in writing in Spanish. It's also important for MFA programs like Iowa, UT Austin, and USC to go after Latino talent — this is the talent that represents the future. If you stay too white — too *cerrado*, too closed — you're going to be losing to great programs who are opening their doors to this talent.

The risk of the MFA program is that you'll learn a cookie-cutter approach to writing, a somewhat homogenized approach. Or that you'll have mentors who don't have a clue about your community, the language of your community, its stories. So while not being in an MFA program might handicap early-stage Chicano authors in terms of not being introduced to New York publishers, being on your own and teaching yourself the craft of writing can preserve an authenticity in your voice that's never stamped out.

FLA: Any advice for future gen writers?

ST: If I have any advice for future writers, I would say to set your life up so that what matters is your literary art. This way you will never have to compromise your art and work. I've set up my life so that I can do exactly that. So if a commercial publisher wants to do it my way, wonderful. I can do that, and I've done that. And if a commercial publisher doesn't want to publish this more edgy

work, I walk, and I publish somewhere else. The strongest position to be in, always, in any negotiation, is to be able to walk away, if you're not happy with the terms.

FLA: Are there Latinx authors that you return to again and again?

ST: Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Rigoberto González, Vanessa Villarreal, Rosa Alcalá, and Lupe Mendez, among so many others — are all writers who open minds to what Latinx can be. They are pointing us in the direction of where we're going. We're traveling into experimentation, variety, and challenging the mainstream and Latinx norms.

FLA: The great US fiction today and tomorrow is being created in our communities.

ST: The incredible literary talents that are in

Nepantla Familias are testaments to this fact and a forceful reminder that we should not take second place to anybody. We not only have a huge, rich vein of American literature within the Latinx community; we should be front and center in American literature, because we have great writers in our communities. But also, American readers who are not Latinx must give us a chance, must pick up our books. It's about empathy, of course. And Latinx authors should always be reaching out to the next generation of readers within our communities, to write for them, to show their concerns in our stories, to give voice to the readers who too often have been excluded by mainstream publishing. So it's about having empathy and care and pride in the communities we came from.

FLA: What's next then for you, Sergio?

ST: I've already started sketching a sequel to

Nobody's Pilgrims. And, I'm writing a series of essays at the moment that I haven't really shown anybody. In the end, it's about never repeating what I have done. To keep myself alive as an artist, as a writer, I'm always trying something new. I never want to find myself too comfortable. I always want to push the envelope forward in how to construct a novel, or what topic to tackle, or how to create even a new form of storytelling. That's what I love to do.

FLA: Thank you, Sergio for gifting your knowledge and your experience with me.

ST: Mil Gracias!

Di Leo Continued from page 2 —

other competing ones such as social justice and democratic values. And when these children grow up to find out that their favorite author drew hurtful images of many of them, the market that hid these images from them will not be there to comfort them.

One place to view this hateful logic is in the GRINCH Act proposed by Representative John Joyce of Pennsylvania. An acronym for "Guarding Readers' Independence and Choice," the GRINCH Act proposes that government funding for agencies that censor books such as Dr. Seuss be cut off.

"I'm alarmed at the left's attempt to cancel historic book's characters," said Congressman Joyce.

"If you find that these books are offensive to your children, then the parents should be the ones who make that decision," he continued. "Government should not be making that [decision]."

Lost on Joyce was that the decision to not publish these books was a corporate decision, not a governmental one. Or was it? In the world of neoliberal America are not corporate decisions always already governmental ones? And vice versa?

"We have to understand," said Joyce, "that we cannot turn back and ban great historic people, great historic images that are part of our childhood."

What like Geisel's "Chinaman" and the characters from "the African island of Yerka"?

"There are import lessons in these books," said Joyce.

One of them apparently is how to present "hurtful and wrong" images of people to our children.

æ

Politicians like the congressman who proposed the GRINCH Act remind us that one of the oldest dimensions of political theory is the relationship between the government of state and the government of children.

The tendency in ancient theory was to view the needs of the state as taking priority over the family regarding the governance of children, whereas in the modern tradition, particularly in the Christian traditions say of Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant, the governance of family tends to take on a greater role relative to the needs of the state.

Michel Foucault though turned these traditions inside out when he observed that political theory made a radical shift in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Namely, it involved a shift from *societies of sovereignty* to *disciplinary*

societies.

Nevertheless, for Gilles Deleuze, the disciplinary societies identified by Foucault peaked in the beginning of the twentieth century and were replaced by *societies of control*.

And arguably, the society in which we now live still bears a striking resemblance to the control society that first took root nearly a century ago.

Moreover, and more importantly for our purposes, the control society of Deleuze is perhaps the most fertile ground in the political tradition from which to examine the government of children's books taken Out of Print.

æ

In Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1972), Deleuze, and his frequent collaborator, Félix Guattari, offer an account of the relationship between psychoanalysis and capitalism, which they call "schizoanalysis."

"The schizoanalytic argument is simple," claim Deleuze and Guattari,

desire is a machine, a synthesis of machines, a machinic arrangement — desiring machines. The order of desire is the order of *production*; all production is at once desiring-production and social production. We therefore reproach psychoanalysis for having stifled this order of production, for having shunted it into *representation*. Far from showing the boldness of psychoanalysis, this idea of unconscious representation marks from the outset its bankruptcy or its abnegation: an unconscious that no longer produces, but is content to *believe*. The unconscious believes in Oedipus, it believes in castration, in the law

So, what then becomes of Oedipus under schizoanalysis? Here Deleuze and Guattari are very clear:

Destroy, destroy. The task of schizoanalysis goes by way of destruction — a whole scouring of the unconscious, a complete curettage. Destroy Oedipus, the illusion of the ego, the puppet of the superego, guilt, the law, castration. It is not a matter of pious destructions, such as those performed by psychoanalysis under the benevolent eye of the analysis. For these are Hegel-

style destructions, ways of conserving. How is it that the celebrated neutrality, and what psychoanalysis calls — dares to call — the disappearance or the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, do not make us burst into laughter?

For Deleuze and Guattari,

we have been triangulated in Oedipus, and we will triangulate in it in turn. From the family to the couple, from the couple to the family. In actuality, the benevolent neutrality of the analyst is very limited: it ceased the instant one stops responding daddy-mommy. It ceases the instant one introduces a little desiring-machine — the tape recorder — into the analyst's office; it ceases as soon as a flow is made to circulate that does not let itself be stopped by Oedipus, the mark of the triangle.

Thus, the connection between psychoanalysis and capitalism for Deleuze and Guattari is not merely an ideological one. Rather,

it is infinitely closer, infinitely tighter; and that psychoanalysis depends directly on an economic mechanism (whence its relations with money) through which the decoded flows of desire, as taken up in the axiomatic of capitalism, must necessarily be reduced to a familial field where the application of the axiomatic is carried out: Oedipus as the last word of capitalist consumption sucking away at daddy-mommy, being blocked and triangulated on the couch; "So it's ..."

While the extent that Deleuze and Guattari are anti-Freud and anti-Oedipus is debatable, what is important for us here is that the government of children under psychoanalysis is rendered vapid from the position of control society. Why? Because control society views the family as an "interior," which is always already a relic from disciplinary societies.

Deleuze argues the disciplinary societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Foucault "brilliantly analyzed" were "vast spaces of enclosure." "The individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another," comments Deleuze of these enclosures, "each has

———— Di Leo continued on next page