Chip Dameron's Rio Grande Valley: Center of a Narrowing Universe

by

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Poets are thus liberating gods.
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Born in Dallas, Texas, to a Texan father and a Yankee mother, Chip Dameron came down to the Rio Grande Valley in 1985 and taught English, first at Texas Southmost College and then at the University of Texas at Brownsville for almost three decades before retiring in 2014. He has published ten collections of poetry set around the world, from China to Turkey, portraying the peculiar landscapes, cultural mores, and social developments. A familiar face for years in the cultural scene of the Valley, the "center of a narrowing universe,"[1] Dameron sets some of his most significant poems here. This essay focuses on these poems to show how he breaks through the narrow bounds of socially constructed nationality, race, and religion to reveal that he is a true humanist or, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a "world-spirit."[2]

The Rio Grande Valley is dotted with *resacas* or oxbow ponds lined with palm trees that are abuzz with bird songs, attracting hundreds of bird watchers throughout the year. Locals as well as tourists flock to these places with cameras in their hands or hanging from their necks to snap memorable pictures. An avid bird watcher, Dameron captures colorful scenes of such birds in his poems that are captivating like picture-postcards. In "During Spring Migration," for example, birds of myriad colors that migrate to the Valley are brought to life in vivid detail:

On this side of the road,
an oxbow pond harbors heron,
osprey, grebe. On that side,
invisible calls pop out from
a meadow of reeds. Around
the bend, among the scrub
and native trees, we count
warblers, kingbirds, buntings,
orioles. A cuckoo.[3]

And in "Viewpoints, Early Summer," we see birds frolicking and singing:

grackles cross from
trees to brush
and punctuate air
with their clacks
and chirrs, their
piercing circus whistles.[4]

But his poems are not just about the beauty of the natural world that gives us pleasure. They convey deeper philosophical insights. In "Poem in October," for instance, as the professor looks out his office window and sees "The molting grackles roam the campus lawn / on loan from their roosts and their skyways,"[5] he recalls the freedom of his childhood and wishes to discard his coat and tie and "absorb the cottonwood's leaves / against the clotted sky."[6] Here the birds are a symbol of freedom. Birds are free to roam the lawn. However, the professor's freedom is curtailed by life's exigencies. The middle-aged man cannot go back to his childhood and play the way he did when he was young. This meaning is extended by the verb "molting" that precedes "grackles." To "molt" means to shed old feathers for a new growth, indicating the transitory nature of life, bringing to mind Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous lines:

Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
Nought may endure but Mutability.[7]

Throughout human history, philosophers and poets around the world have dealt with this universal phenomenon of change, the great Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously saying that one can't step into the same river twice. This view is also found in Ovid's Metamorphoses, Omar Khayyam's rubáiyát, and Basho's haiku. Like other great poets, Dameron maintains that we must accept this change, this mutability, and recognize that life is transitory. This poem becomes a meditation on life and death: childhood, midlife, and the inevitable end that follows.

The theme of freedom and lack thereof appears prominently in several of Dameron's poems. He juxtaposes images of birds and humans, in the manner of haiku, to show the differences between nature and society. Like birds, humans are born free, but unlike birds, they are members of a society and, as such, are corralled within artificially created national boundaries, reminding the reader of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's view that man is born free but is in chains everywhere. Take, for example, "During Spring Migration." In this poem, as the bird watchers return to their cars after watching the numerous birds that have crossed the Gulf of Mexico, they spot

a border patrol van parked
athwart the road, a couple
of agents at work among three
Mexicans sitting in the dirt
who crossed the river again
this morning.[8]

These three Mexicans, of course, crossed the border illegally.

A similar theme occurs again in "Border Birding," where men and women cross the Rio Grande, like birds streaming across from the south, dodging river thieves and wading murky currents, only to

be apprehended by the border patrol officers, the "green cousins," who "clip their wings"[9] and "send them / back in cages."[10] The officers are "green cousins" because they are Mexican-Americans and wear green uniforms. Dameron's sympathy extends to the arrested Mexicans because poverty drives them out of their homes and forces them to cross the river, leaving behind the loved ones who do not make enough money farming or running stores, as he writes in "El Calaboz: Fences and Neighbors":

Those who cross the river along
this bank pledge their pesos
for a chance to work for wages,
earn a new hope for those behind,
tending ejidos and tiendas, waiting.[11]

The discerning poet's compassionate heart reaches out to the suffering humanity because, as psychologists claim, people with higher intelligence have more sympathy for others. Dameron, unlike the ordinary people who see with their eyes, sees with his heart. He realizes that no human being is immune to misfortune. We may be fortunate today, but misfortune is just around the corner, as he conveys so insightfully in "Dinner Hour":

Ribs on the grill, reefs of cloud
across the ribbon lake redden
. . . . . .
the buzz and bite no longer
just irritants, the dengue fever
aching bones and taking lives
south of the river, while here
in paradise we swat and wipe off
the blood and order death
to stay away a while longer.[12]

This is in tune with the Zen Buddhist belief that "all people, animals, and things, are intimately interconnected," as Robert Aitken explains. "We are a symbiotic universe, a symbiotic family of nations, a symbiotic country, state of that country, island, community, family, and even individual."[13]

Dameron is certainly not advocating open borders. His concern is not superficial, but philosophical. After the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico ceded Texas to the United States. Over 93% people in the Rio Grande Valley are of Mexican origin and related their "cousins" across the border in Mexico through heritage, language, culture, food, and music. They cannot be separated by fences. Border control can be done in other ways. Hence, he says critically in "El Calaboz: Fences and Neighbors":

Now the land absorbs
the hammering blows, impaled
and bifurcated, the steel bars
mocking Frost's mocking poem.[14]

Here Dameron alludes to Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall," where Frost derides the view that "Good fences make good neighbours."[15] Such walls or fences are futile attempts at dividing people, as Dameron writes:

Early morning, small birds cross
the river from mesquite to mesquite,
singing the day awake. A hawk
drops to the top rail and commands
silence across this failed dichotomy.[16]

The hawk in the above poem is used as a symbol. The hawk sees the failed dichotomy because it has great vision and brings us the message of freedom, freedom from our thoughts and beliefs that restrain our ability to gain a higher perspective and, thus, helps us thrive. This is Dameron's strongest condemnation of

the fence in the Rio Grande Valley that divides cousins from cousins. Regarding such divisions, the words of the sagacious New England transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson are most appropriate: "As long as our civilization is essentially one of property, of fences, or exclusiveness, it will be mocked by delusions. Our riches will leave us sick; there will be bitterness in our laughter, and our wine will burn our mouth. Only that good profits which we can taste with all doors open, and which serves all men."[17]

Those who are unfamiliar with the Rio Grande Valley mistakenly believe that all people of Mexican or Latin American origin in the area are illegal. Hence, they try to delegitimize the Hispanic population. This is what a professor did at an academic conference several years ago, vociferously—and ignorantly—maintaining his position when I argued to the contrary. Dameron deals with this issue in "Rambling Stories," where Larry from rural western North Carolina, who now owns a small café in downtown Brownsville, talks about the rural people's intolerance of "outsiders." They would like to "send a couple of the boys / to kick their butts."[18] In the border town, he—the man with a ninth grade education who has left behind a string of wives—is happily married to a Mexican woman and proud of the success of his children and step-children. This proves that ignorance breeds prejudice. The stranger always seems fearsome from afar. However, once we are acquainted with the stranger, it's a different matter.

The Valley, for Dameron, is a microcosm of the world, where people from far-flung places have converged. In "Afternoon Gifts," he encounters an ex-Marine at a coffee shop who will soon return to Afghanistan or Iraq with a lucrative contract. He has a Palestinian girlfriend, who was "born / in Kuwait, medically trained in Latvia, / aiming to immigrate to Canada."[19] The ex-Marine gives him a souvenir, a metal keychain,

a faceless form joined to the daggered
landscape of Israel, Arabic lettering

along one side, and gives it
as a momento to our chance exchange
at a Texas border coffee shop,
center of a narrowing universe.[20]

Dameron's family itself is an example of this "narrowing universe." He reveals it in his autobiographical poem "Heritage," which is also a meditation on life and death. A half-Yankee and half-Texan, Dameron says that his only son is

. . . part Italian,
part Tahitian, reading his first books,
. . . . . .
floating outside of history, heritage,
human error.[21]

And he wishes:

May he tether in time
to the trees and rocks of this world,
to the names and faces of his heroes,
great and small, and to the lives of those
whom he will come to love and lose
at last, one by one, as a bird's call
must finally vanish among the countless
atoms in the air.[22]

Dameron's "perspective evolves through a precise diction that uncovers deeper levels of experience."[23] He shows in his poems that people have always mixed and we all have various cultural backgrounds. This interweaving of cultures is multiculturalism. As he writes in "Heritage," Texans are a blend of "Amerindio-Mexi-Irish-Afro-Europeans."[24] These people create a culture without forgetting their varied heritage. They are simultaneously American and world citizens. Putting people

in boxes through artificially constructed races causes social division, which leads to social tensions like bigotry, acrimony, violence, and death as we saw in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 12, 2017. The Europeans began to call themselves a "white" race in the seventeenth century, during the Renaissance, to defend their imperialism and distance themselves from the Jews. They considered themselves descendants of the Greek philosophers, who they deemed rational compared to the Jewish thinkers who had given Christianity, a supernatural faith. This is nowhere more evident than in the words of Matthew Arnold, one of the leading Victorian poets:

> *Science has now made visible to everybody the great and pregnant elements of difference which lie in race, and in how signal a manner they make the genius and history of an Indo-European people vary from those of a Semitic people. Hellenism is of Indo-European growth, Hebraism is of Semitic growth; and we English, a nation of Indo-European stock, seem to belong naturally to the movement of Hellenism.*[25]

However, the vast majority of Europeans had accepted Christianity, a religion both philosophically and mythologically Eastern—God as a moral principle coming from the Indo-Aryan Vedas, the concept of monotheism coming from the Persian prophet Zarathustra, and the myth of the Garden of Eden coming from the Hebrews. Thus, Europe became multicultural by adopting Christianity. The United States upended the European view of race—which now exists only in the vocabulary of the so-called "white supremacists," who call themselves the children of Odin, the god in Germanic mythology—when it began to categorize "white" based on the Hebrew myth of the Garden of Eden. Thus, the division of people into different races has moved from region to religion. However, Stephen Greenblatt contends in his extensively researched, best-selling book The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve that the story of the Garden of Eden is just fiction, made up by the Hebrews to find an origin story for themselves after their freedom from Babylonian captivity. In modern times,

he writes, at least for the thinking people, "The naked man and woman in the garden with the strange trees and the talking snake have returned to the sphere of the imagination from which they originally emerged."[26] To base race on such a myth—according to which, people from Western Asia, North Africa, and Europe are categorized "white"—is simply ludicrous. It is a failed attempt at dividing people arbitrarily like the Europeans did during the Renaissance. People everywhere have a range of colors, as the Latin poet Propertius said so astutely: "A Belgian's color mars a Roman face."[27] Besides, in other parts of the world, people also call themselves "white." Take, for example, the following senryu from Japan:

Until when?
nineteen nineteen's
white dancers[28]

These "white" dancers are Japanese, not the "white" of European or American categorizations. Such examples can be provided from literatures around the world. Hence, Dameron's poems break through these narrow artificial boundaries of race because of his global perspective. According to him, we are all multicultural, which should not be construed as "disintegration of the national community, apartheid, Balkanization, tribalization."[29] Multiculturalism is not Balkanization. It is the recognition of the cultural or historical backgrounds of all people, because people do not live outside of history. Those who forget history, history forgets them. That is why it is important to recognize everybody's history, as Chip Dameron does, and realize that a person is not only a citizen of a country but also part of the global community. One must find one's lot with the rest of humanity. This is what Ralph Waldo Emerson means when he says:

Although knaves win in every political struggle, although society seems to be delivered over from the hands of one set of criminals into the hands of another set of criminals, as fast as the government is changed . . . yet,

general ends are somehow answered. We see, now, events forced on which seem to retard or retrograde the civility of ages. But the world-spirit is a good swimmer, and storms and waves cannot drown him.[30]

This is the message Chip Dameron tries to convey through his poems in the tradition of the ancient Greek philosophers. When Socrates was hauled to court and asked where he was from, he said "the world" though he was from Athens. Montaigne explains it thus: "He, whose imagination was fuller and more extensive, embraced the universe as his city, and distributed his knowledge, his company, and his affections to all mankind, unlike us who look only at what is underfoot."[31] That is the spirit that resonates in Dameron's poems, the "world-spirit," his Rio Grande Valley becoming the "center of a narrowing universe" beyond the artificial bounds of race, religion, and nationality.

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Endnotes

1 Chip Dameron, "Afternoon of Gifts," Waiting for an Etcher (Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2015), p. 19.

2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Essays (New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 336.

3 Chip Dameron, "During Spring Migration," Hook & Bloodline (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2000), p. 68.

4 Chip Dameron, "Viewpoints, Early Summer," Waiting for an Etcher (Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2015), p. 27.

5 Chip Dameron, "Poem in October," Waiting for an Etcher (Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2015), p. 24.

6 Ibid.

7 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Mutability," Selected Poems (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), p. 2.

8 Chip Dameron, "During Spring Migration," Hook & Bloodline (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2000), p. 68.

9 Chip Dameron, "Border Birding," Waiting for an Etcher (Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2015), p. 18.

10 Ibid.

11 Chip Dameron, "El Calaboz: Fences and Neighbors," Waiting for an Etcher (Beaumont: Lamar University press, 2015), p. 85.

12 Chip Dameron, "Dinner Hour," Waiting for an Etcher (Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2015), p. 16.

13 Robert Aitken, A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen (Washington, D. C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1978), pp. 63-64.

14 Chip Dameron, "El Calaboz: Fences and Neighbors," Waiting for an Etcher (Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2015), p. 85.

15 Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," Poetry Foundation. Online. 22 May 2019.

16 Chip Dameron, "El Calaboz: Fences and Neighbors," Waiting for an Etcher (Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2015), p. 85.

17 Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Essays (New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 359.

18 Chip Dameron, "Rambling Stories," Waiting for an Etcher (Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2015), p. 25.

19 Chip Dameron, "Afternoon Gifts," Waiting for an Etcher (Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2015), p. 19.

20 Ibid.

21 Chip Dameron, "Heritage," Hook & Bloodline (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2000), p. 18.

22 Chip Dameron, "Heritage," Hook & Bloodline (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2000), p. 18.

23 Robert Bonazzi, "On Extended Wings: Three Collections Sustain a Publishing Tradition." The Texas Observer (April 28, 2000), p. 25.

24 Chip Dameron, "Heritage," Hook & Bloodline (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2000), p. 16.

25 Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). p. 95.

26 Stephen Greenblatt, The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve: The Story that Created Us (New York: Norton, 2018), p. 284.

27 Montaigne, The Complete Essays of Montaigne, Tr. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 355.

28 Robert Aitken, A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1978), p. 17.

29 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 118.

30 Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Essays (New York: Penguin, 1985), pp. 335-336.

31 Montaigne, The Complete Essays of Montaigne, Tr. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 116.