

Edwin Torres
The PoPedology Of An Ambient Language
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Review by Rodrigo Toscano

Think of this scenario. A young, ambitious poet from a small or medium American city sets his/her sights on coming to NYC to “make it” as a poet. The sacrifices will be great, financially, socially, and psychologically. Said poet goes for it. Years go by—3, 5, 10 years, and we watch the poet’s writing get more “polished,” more compressed, more nuanced, intricate as a Swiss watch. We sense the city’s time-space compression has performed its scape through them; these poems are indeed formidable exports. And yet, a hollowness rises out of them, a flat slate of un-peopled (un-besmirched) perfection stares at us.

In this scenario / possibility / expected or unexpected outcome, the *urbs* has rendered this person’s ability to become *permeable* to his/her cultural surroundings to near null. These poems, in fact, could have been written “back home” (and some think they have), and conversely (ironically, diachronically), the poets who stayed “back home” have *widened* their view of the rough-and-tumble of their social surround. What’s going on here? What happened to the vast cross-cultural migratory patterns of language, the public attitudes, the social masking that confronts us everyday on the subway, or the terrible de-masking of an over-impacted Brooklyn hospital? Zounds! Here’s indeed no alterity (for all the cackle of ‘alterity’ in poetic locker rooms), here’s indeed no wild untethering of ‘difference’ (for all the talk of para-ethical “communities”). It’s as if a prayer book is consulted every morning: thou shalt not learn Spanish; thou shalt not paste a spate of second generation Russienglish in thy poem; if thou art straight, thou shalt metaphorize according to thy divine directioning; if thou art queer, thou shalt metonymize according to thy divine directioning; thou shalt pronounce the English tongue the way thy Father and Mother hath taught ye; thou shalt inhabit thy body as thy body inhabits thee; thou shalt not confuse thyself with not-thyself, thou shalt endure with grace and dignity and above all else, polish, all cultural-political collisioning against thy rump; thou shalt manufacture a critical language to *enjoy* thy non-collisioned rump.

What else can the *urbs* do?

It can rain down on you permeability, it can build in you more response-time reflexes than you can handle, it can pogo right past you, laughing (or weeping), it can collapse before your very eyes and pop up against a giant gleaming shard of global sugar. It can Edwin Torres you. It can intimate to you your most private utopianism on a giant billboard—to your embarrassment. Your embarrassment can be chopped up, sautéed, and served up hot—just for you. The *urbs* can hinge two opposite direction one-way turnstiles on the same axle and usher you in and out—at the same time. No returns. No regrets.

Nearing his 50th year—among us, “The Kid”—remains the kid. Edwin Torres’ newest book is a wickedly well-stocked compendium of NYC home-quarried experimentalism. Though a large portion Torres’ oeuvre can now be described as “univocal” (non subject-

sliding, intimate, me-to-you mode diction, as in his upcoming book “In The Function Of External Circumstances”), most of it is ventriloquistic in the extreme. In this new collection, a sizable array of 20th century avant garde currents get *trip hopped*. Dada, Constructivism, Surrealism, Lettrism, Beat, Nuyorican, (post-classical) Black Arts Movement, (post-classical) Language School writing, are not spoken in a naïve, regressive “neo” mode, but rather, their combined utopic girding is momentarily revived by way of maximalizing the proximity of each to each: Dada bass rides Constructivist beats on spacey Nuyorican scratching, etc. Result: flash coloration! This is the dynamic palette that Torres’ requires to spell out a complex urban reality. That is to say, it is not *eliminationist* at the level of demographic politics (see trust fund hipsterism for opposite), it is *co-convivialist*.

Torres grew up in a post-Robert Moses “meat axed” Bronx environment (via the Expressway). As largely working-class (and often very radical) Jewish neighborhoods were ousted and scattered, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and African Americans from all over the city and beyond moved into very tight spaces [note: out of those old neighborhoods came poets, artists, historians, and activists like Jerome and Diane Rothenberg, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Jack Hirschman, Grace Paley, Stanley Aronowitz, Marshall Berman, and many others]. Encountering Torres’ PoPedology is akin to coming onto a corral reef chattering away the day (“ambient”). But it isn’t an a la carte carnivalism that’s at work here; there’s loads of criticality to this urban-committed poetry. I’ve asked myself for years, how does Torres’ code these larger movements within formal literary constraints?

And so opening up the book, and looking for a clue to this quandary I find...

**Control of Page
Leads to Control of Brain**

**Tomorrow’s Leaders
Are Today’s Sheets of Paper**

Now, one could easily let loose a neo-absurdist chuckle over this passage, but on closer inspection...are these pop-up couplets a sly response to the “interesting reading, BUT...I’d like to see it on the page”? And is the seeming gravitas to that nudge, a residual New Criticist way to patrol genre boundaries, a way to manage the fear of poetic lineage miscegenation? This is not to say that poets who are intricate weavers of texts (something Torres excels at, something that many of us strive to do) are ‘residualists’ in intention – no, but that the *value* of the mighty page *peremptorily abstracted* from the larger/wider practice (i.e., of the gambit of reading to live and diverse audiences) automatically miniaturizes cultural praxis into a mere shade of its potential self. (“interesting neighborhood you got here, but do you all *own* your places?”)

Edwin Torres has been a one person Poetics Theater for over 20 years. At once paradoxical, hilarious, unpredictable, and always boundary hopping, this new book is your anti-putz guide to the city.