

LANGUAGE WORKING TO UNCOVER THE SOCIAL AND THE CULTURAL:
THE EXAMPLE OF RODRIGO TOSCANO

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Alfred Arteaga affirms in his book, *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities*, that “Hybridity is a fundamental physical reality of chicanismo. And a consequence of essential hybridity is subjective ambiguity” (11). He specifically foregrounds this view at the level of body –mestizaje or miscegenation– place –Aztlán and the borderlands– and language –interlingual speech like “caló.” These interrelated factors act to form a recognizable group. Here I present a Chicano poet, Rodrigo Toscano, who does not reject any of these levels, but who also participates in a greatly enlarged hybridity, particularly based on a subjective ambiguity that comes through a new stylistic practice based on parataxis, and focusing his attention on promoting his progressive politics. His complex dynamic strategy acquires a new tone charged with questionings of authority, role of the self, and social justice, coloring language as the principal function of the poetic discourse. Thus, in general terms his poetry is much more closer to the experimental tendencies of contemporary American poetry in the late twentieth century than to the usual claims of Chicano cultural identity, like mythical references to Aztlán or metonymical qualities of the colonial and nationalist experience of the Chicanos in the United States of America.

In exploring issues related to the self and its identity, Toscano apprehends a biopolitics intentionally extended in an ego-less writing and in a dialectic concept of history, balanced by the social and the cultural. In fact, his own biography helps us to consider this self-taught poet combining his interest in socio-economic issues based on solidarity and articulate writing. He has followed the classical path of any American story “...a waiter, a trucker a waiter, a social worker, a constructor of greenhouses, a fast food worker, an electronics factory worker, a shop steward, a transcriber, a junior high tutor, a bookstore worker, a warehouse worker, a hotel parking lot read-Olson-all-night-till-you-puke attendant, a “temp,” a language instructor, a dishwasher, a union local vice president, an energy industry health & safety instructor, a filler-out of twenty applications this morning by sundown having smiled and swallowed down a hundred sick smiles *worker*, a loafer, a devastating-my-wages-by-degrees touring *poet*... (Toscano, “Interview”). In this passage

Toscano is suggestively outlining a basis for his diverse literary experience oriented “in entirely new ways, ways that the Chicano literary-critical canon doesn’t yet recognize very easily” (Toscano, “Interview”). Though he recognizes his insertion within the Chicano movement, “a massive and complex social phenomena,” his innovative position lies on his combinatorial principle of overcoming strict nationalisms and emphasizing experimental writing, “I mean, in order to convene all the paranational exilic realities in our time—all those interrelated struggles should be brought to the forefront of one’s dramatic poetic work, in unexpected ways, through new lexicons, syntaxes, and, above all, new “concerns.” And indeed, it’s those (‘proper’) “concerns” that are the most policed by official verse culture on both sides of the border. Let’s junk all parochialisms! (Toscano, “Interview”).

Thus Toscano promotes an avant-garde within the Chicano movement with antecedents in Alurista, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and those related to polyvocality, diffracted subjectivity, and not so much to a literature based on certain procedures, “many of them seeming to me to be too dependant on naturalisms of all kinds (eg. unified authorial subjectivities, circumscribed sets of iconographic signages, overly transparent schemes of referentiality, etc)” (Toscano, “Interview”). In addition, Toscano holds a particular predilection for newly remarking on his own personal history, closely determined by his father growing up in Logan Heights, the biggest Barrio in California, his grandmother working as a riveter during the II World War, and his Mexican mother as immigrant in the U.S. In his case the Latino category has been extended and somehow replaced by his role as social worker and union activist working for solidarity, actually researching “health and safety issues for the Labor Institute in Manhattan which represents PACE (Paper, Allied-Industrial, Energy Worker’s shop,” and criticizing “the place of ethnic identity that he sees condescended to and expropriated by literary institutions” (Meadows 5,11).

It is natural then that the first impression left by his books, *Partisans* (1999) and *Platform* (2003), is to see how political power, ideology and culture move forward to a control of identity, emotional resolution, and historical construction. However, I should mention that these aspects are conducted through Toscano’s use of parataxis to subvert the reader’s conventional approach to language, and varied literary, philosophical, and political references, through which the individual engages in a productive generating consciousness. From this perspective, Rodrigo Toscano’s immediate task is to understand the new

conditions under which he is carrying out his labor and cultural work. In this sense, his experimental/radical poetry should be seen as an individual aspiration for modifications of social justice, “As we struggle against corporate rule, and social reaction of all kinds, we’re still venturing to utter whatever is as complex as what we are becoming. Experimental literature, after all, is only as experimental as “we” want / need it to be, and, paradoxically, the converse is true too” (Toscano, “Interview”). His own self-definition as “social actor” is inevitably contingent with diversified operations at the level of grammar and syntax that break the chain of social/language conventions binding the subject to his struggle for existence. For example, *Partisans* is divided into 12 parts, five of them containing progressive verbal tenses that fall within the continuity of history and contemporary social issues. Isolated lines, sentences and concepts unveil the conjoined “agency of human labor and grammatical component,”¹ chiefly founded on deduction, “Been reading “world”/ through shards, reflexive/ famed ‘fragments’ ” (*Partisans* 9), on responding to some outside sign, “BE DOING/ ABOUT BEING” because “a stranger approaches/unpredictably/ begins to weave/ an evening/ of pasts, presents and futures/ of institutions/ along a sidewalk of history/ startles you/ to act” (*Partisans* 30), on a dialogic social exchange, through which “archivists of scarcity/ were amending/ mutuality/ Consciousness/ of mutuality” (*Partisans* 36), on claiming entirely the argument of friendship, “In the socialist sense/ a start/ ‘How’s it going?’ ” (*Partisans* 48), and on being enabled to distinguish “The effects of numerous rebellions/ at different levels/ compounding/ Shockwaves” (*Partisans* 52). Toscano therefore places himself in the awkward position of decontextualizing and leaving the reader incomplete fragments as a means to re-order experience and discourse.

When viewed in these terms, Toscano’s writing does not adhere to a single community but is absolutely dependent on more general historical and ideological circumstances, in which man is commodified. His obscure presentation of language is not based on riddles to be answered, but on the development of a poetics that multiply the destabilization of an economic and cultural system to systematize and short-circuit the

¹ Barrett Watten reviews Rodrigo Toscano’s mechanics of language on the back cover of *Partisans*, emphasizing that Toscano’s work is “an ethical disquisition... that revises much current doxa about the nature of linguistic agency.” For him, Toscano follows the same poetic line developed by Louis Zukofsky, and later by Kit Robinson and Alan Davies.

pressures of institutions and ideologies over the individual. The impossibility to find clear meanings may lead to a feeling of despair, though he has found a term, “wordwork” to reformulate his own dimension as a poet of daily experience, “A day/ regular wordworking day/ unlike any other/ startled comes/ startled goes” (*Partisans* 17), experiencing various worlds which act as “samplers of wordwork” (*Partisans* 8), or recognizing that “WORDWORKERS everyone” (*Partisans* 34). The line taken by Toscano, following Jacques Derrida and others, denies the existence of pure discursive forms, making the reader conscious of his habits of mind, of the provisional text. In this way, Toscano plays with a construct of language that reveals its own rhetorical machinery, this in Derridean terms is “the being-chain of a textual chain, the structure of substitution, the articulation of desire and language” (Derrida 163). From this perspective, it is true that the text presents only signifiers, but the Toscano’ poems also become a place with an ideological effect on the reader, since they recognize historical and social conventions and the necessity of deconstructing them, “why not/ partisans/ so *so* democratic/ postmodern muzzling” (*Partisans* 41). I mean that the reader’s role goes from obscurity to the necessity of action, “–the poem is obsessed with the nature of poetry as “labor”... –is always tempered by his quest for the “collective” revolutionary consciousness” (Stefans § 9). Obviously wordworking is entailed to an experimental language, though always with a perpetuating linking sense of the collective and individuality, “Imperfect abstractions/ up ahead/ to synthesize/ He, She, You, I, We, They” (*Partisans* 49). Why this is significant in the Derridean context mentioned above, is suggestively explained by Toscano himself a little further in that same poem, “Readers as agents/... Pre-real/ Post-real/ In and out of representation/ claimed spaces” (*Partisans* 49-50).

In perhaps the most interesting procedure, the author’s effort to reconcile the individual with both the social and the cultural becomes his own political program, whose clearest development is carried out in *Platform*. His political manifesto focuses simultaneously on general political issues and on specific political demands, which face the audience in his performances with questions like “Or, why *did* you come –to hear something you don’t know?” (*Platform* 19), or recognize his already determined elitist positioning by the reader, “I, “elitist!”/ “non-optimist!”/ since you style me so–” (*Platform* 45), or going further in his ironically entitled poem, “But Will Your Social Memory Cause

Constipation Later in the Day? or That Something Else in the Morning?” paraphrasing a speech by P  p   le Rouge on issues related to the postwar moments, the workers’ protests in Poznan, the Hungarian Uprising, the banks of the Suez Canal, the Communist Party, Women’s Movement, Multiculturalism, or Postmodernism (*Platform* 167-168). Thus social images related to specific individuals like the waiter in “Die Wahrheit ist Konkret” (*Platform* 184-186), the exploited immigrants picking tomatoes (*Platform* 175-180), or Brazilian President Lula (*Platform* 210-213) confirm his interest in presenting through fragmentary images and lines contextual flashes of assembled contradictions and miseries.

There is no better development of Toscano’s thought that we need to struggle against this perverse social condition than his “Minimalist and Maximalist Political Demands,” realizing that these demands should be “attentive to dynamics of the moment” (197). His political scrutiny begins with a clear opposition to the abuses of capitalism summarized in his repeated “No Justice? *No Peace!*” (197, 202). Then he proceeds with immediate issues reinvigorating his skepticism towards the New York cops, questioning the defense of civil liberties in the United States, and especially calling minorities for a modification of reality, “U.S. working class (especially Black, Latino) fight for it/ repeatedly” (199). Though here he specifically refers to the Amadou Diallo police shooting in this poem, he continually interpolates his own political dream as a social equivalent that takes the measure of an anarchist view, “literal abolishment of the State Apparatus” (201). In this sense, *Platform* is absolutely dependent on social circumstances taken from the Bronx, the TV, or the New York City Hall. With a variety in tone, form and language, Toscano successively shows himself inserted in a global political reality, such as mentioning his search for the Exxon Valdez oil spill damage on Internet (94), focusing on the Kyoto Accords (206) or the summits in Quebec and Genova, “(one masked) (anti-capitalist) (kicks in) (a window) (of one) (boutique)” (101), reducing the text through dispersed brief allusions to emit signals of obvious controversial situations in the world.

But we need briefly to turn to his Minimalist, “Re-Appropriation surplus *itself*” and Maximalist, “organizational/expansion of horizon of self-presentation” (207-208), political demands. We should realize that Toscano’s writing is his passion with a political content, namely dramatizing the isolation of the individual vindicating a utopian democracy of workers “radiating culturally outward” (209). For him, minimalist and maximalist demands

are based on an economic redistribution of surplus and a definitive extension of equal rights for the people. Furthermore, he points to the socialist ideals developed before 1929 and predicated upon a real workers democracy, marked out by a cultural dimension. Within the “Group 3” section in *Platform* we find some “Democratic Tasks Yet to Be Realized.” Among these I should mention explicit demands like “a hyper-individual activity,” “workers sabbaticals,” “universal health care,” “equal education,” “tax base distribution,” “Repeal Executive War Powers Act,” “adequate housing,” or “2000% increase for The Arts Funding” (142). After this, the section progresses through numerous pages composed mostly of single-word lines emphasizing the significance of their presence within a paratactic structure that alienates with a “Politically Arrayed Poetics” (144). Individual, social, and cultural issues are easily recognizable, highlighting a political program whose goal attempts to reach the total human condition.

It is not just what Toscano plainly refers to what obliges the reader to socially rethink his own situation, but how he says it: through a language that transmits a “constant activity” (Toscano, “Interview”). He plays with an experimental language full of sound games, paratactic organization, typographical devices, speculating with alternations of capital and lower case letters, arrangement of lines, combination of prose and poetry... In this sense, language is a challenge that undermines automatic referentiality though Toscano’s main interest rather lies in “a concept of language in which the sign is a site of political and social struggle between different classes, social groups, etc” following V. N. Voloshinov’s that all signs are ideological (Toscano & Gilbert). Though sometimes commentators on Toscano’s work like Alan Gilbert so foreground the political and social considerations of his writing in such a way that they obviate Toscano’s view that language and culture are also basic components of the economically caused Marxist superstructure. This explains his procedure of including alternative intellectual references which haunt his lines like Bertolt Brecht, Ron Silliman, Bob Grenier, Trotsky, post-language poets, trans-historizing them and putting them in a higher order frame of reference. His compromise is a re-formation of the capitalistic superstructure visibly articulated for the workers through NYPD, Taco Bell, Harvard School of *Latifundista* Spanish, AMOCO, or The Bill Gates High School Marching Band. Within this context his most recent book, *Platform*, seems to me especially useful, because a) it shows how the dialectic of social relations are governed

by an economic and cultural logic, and b) language becomes the performative scenario of that larger subject through its intimation with experimentalism and productive reflection of the outside world.

When Toscano is noticed that his English is more complex than his peers in the Post-language scene, he recognizes that this should be understood also as a political sign of his immigrant experience of English.² His tendency to experimental language, or the forms of presentation of experimental poetry, is clearly a means to resist cultural and political oppression. As an example of this, the classic Chicano concept of “border” –a dialectical proposition in his poetry– involves a political and cultural identification associated with experimental poetic form itself, “Every line (or sentence) of poetry having more than one word in it, presents a “border” problematic. The crossing, for example, from the “I” (subject) to a specific (socially-accented) verb, is at once a mutual ideological co-determination, as it is a perilous and unpredictable grazing up against, or perhaps it is an inspection-*one* of the *other*. And then, the on-towards the (quote) “resolving” object (direct social, or indirect social)-further complicates matters” (Toscano, “Georgetown”). Here language as crossing conveys social and ideologized actions corresponding to his daily life, and would constitute a rehearsal of his role as a working-poet, “this on-towards the object (direct social, or indirect) of this grammatical sentence (of power, or deliverance from power) <quote> ‘resolved’ <quote> ‘suspended’<quote> ‘transformed’ ” (Toscano, “Georgetown”). In these remarks Toscano is not just advocating a specific debate on his Chicanism but calling to see the co-existence of experimental precepts and communication, the individual and social projection of his language. Definitively reinforcing his ideological assumption that people are “both pre- and post-linguistically patrolled” and scrutinized through their bodies as “the ultimate border detection device. (Who is more likely (racially) to be the target of surveillance at a Mall, who is judged on body shape or size for a job” (Toscano, “Georgetown”). Then, in subverting the limits of grammar and syntax, Toscano also acquires an aggressive and radical tone in the broadest sense, since now such a border

² In his interview with Heriberto Yépez, Toscano mentions Juliana Spahr’s essay, “There Is No Way of Speaking English: The Polylingual Grammars of Gertrude Stein,” *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading, Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2001), pointing to Gertrude Stein’s immigrant experience as having been central to her special treatment of English, helps to explain his use of English in a decidedly different way, “an experience of being overwhelmed by a multitude of fluencies smashing up against a multitude of different languages –all at once” (Yépez)

is not a term somewhat elastic in its signification but epitomizes the harsh conditions encountered by most people in facing the political power daily.

My suggestion is that though Toscano's language is epistemologically alienated with a writing *en abyme*, his continuous questioning of the political and his own social situation, through the so many dispersed identifiable intellectual and historical references exemplifies an ethical and political discourse that fits the sense of history and literature that Fredric Jameson defends in *The Ideologies of Theory*. Jameson focuses on the treatment of literature as a mode of thought in which we can grasp the synchronic structure of the diachronic process, and history determined by the individual's situation. In this respect, literature allows us to perceive the diachronic aspect of reality through a discourse –as Jameson develops in *The Political Unconscious*– away from the “implacable determinism of an historic logic beyond the control of humanity” (393), presided by a notion of preserving meaning in history. Toscano's own preference for a defamiliarized language is not a sign of mastering either language or meaning but a contemporary mode of thought that reflects an existential awareness of his historical situation as a working-poet and social actor in the United States. It is no accident that he despises realist details and pleasurable reading. He prefers alerting the reader to the polemical nature of language going beyond the bourgeois taste for plausibility, “I write/ *lexically alert/ to controvert/ the pathetic/ syntactically de-obviate/ to re-translate/ the pathetic*” (*Platform* 44). Of course, this is not social science, but a language considered as a meta-phenomenon confronting ethics and providing the individual a political sense about his life and that tends towards a representation of totality. It is instructive to recall that juxtaposing his synchronic experience seen through demonstrations, strikes and labor movements, intertextualized with enlarged cultural references to Brecht, Régis Debray, Kenneth Galbraith, Francis Fukuyama, Georg Lukács, and Louis Althusser, reinforces poetry as a direct and cultural practice inserted within the larger contrastive structure of history, “It's specialized artistry and social practice... Poetry can produce abundance of newer meaning, it can be “ever searching,” but it is always “integrated” to that other (historic) sense of “total” ” (Toscano, “St. Marks”).

This late simultaneous belief in the artistic and social use of poetry is not new. Language poets were inclined to observe these same goals as mediation between the

tyranny of language as commodity within society and the experiments in form concerned with new human potentialities. In fact, conflicts over or resolutions of this matter are often ascribed to these poets' analyses of "subject-formation and of institutional power make their desire for freedom incoherent, leaving Language poetry at a familiar theoretical impasse that it has noted but to which it has not adequately responded."³ However, Toscano is frequently ascribed to the Post-language tendency. Indeed, Mark Wallace, one of the main theorists for this movement, includes Rodrigo Toscano and other writers like Harryette Mullen, Tan Lin, Susan Schultz, Myung Mi Kim, and Bob Harrison, alienated with those post-language poets "who highlight problems of identity politics from specific cultural positions, who critique the limits of identity politics, and who intend to cross and shatter cultural boundaries" ("Definitions" 3). Mark DuCharme thus points to this poetic tendency as an "attempt to articulate the provisional, or half-formed, into the face of history" ("Flux" 199), and when he adds human agency as an "ideological construct" ("After" 40) it becomes clear that these poets think in poetry as a mode of thought in Jamesonian terms, as described above.

Yet there are some other elements we must not omit when positioning Toscano's writing close to the postlanguage poets. Especially through these 4 propositions established by Wallace: a) that language structures affect and are affected by, the politics of cultural production, b) language is constructed by relations of power, c) postlanguage poets feel that theorizing their practice is a burden, and d) narrative, lyric, spirituality, and a poetics of the everyday appear often as elements of their poetry (Wallace, "Definitions" 2). It is clear enough that the theoretical assumptions between language and post-language poets are slightly different, since they are mainly just based on terms of human agency. That is why Toscano appears participating in both directions, incorporating the stereotypical devices of the language poets in treating poems as mere examples of the social workings, as well as close to the narrative demands of the post-language poets as seen through the social

³ Oren Izenberg affirms that the anaesthetic qualities found in these poets' writings bring indifference because of an extreme attention to the forms in which they really exist, though it is precisely "in our perception that these poems do not mean to become available for judgments of taste –do not mean to be understood, or revisited, or even well-perceived– that we register an interesting sense in which Language poetry might be said to be social, as well as the significant sense in which Language poetry is experimental" (134-135). Toscano participates in a varied catalogue of experimental approaches difficult to logically understand, but his poems are also *social* since they persuade us to see his writings as sites of human agency and ideological analysis. In this context, his specific references to everyday human experiences make him appear more linked to post-language poets as will be seen later.

constructions of the “wordworker” who delineates his cultural identity and subjectivity through a poetics of the “everyday poetics” remarking that the “socio-sexuality of the ruling class is flimsidity” (*Platform* 215), examining the evolution of the Ejido landholding community collectively owned in Mexico (*Platform* 223-227), or positioning himself in the 2002 Brazilian elections with an “All out for Lula!” (*Platform* 213). This open orientation to human experiences produce “jarring disjunctions”, though not only assigned to the “social conditions in the American southwest” as Mark Wallace indicates (“Emerging” 9), but also to any scene that puts a special demand upon the subject’s attention, like the “‘bomba economica’ that, comrade Messina summed up so well/ in San Francisco, to the great approval of the SF Labor Council” (*Platform* 212), or his poem “Notes on the Great Strike of ’97,” whose main focus is clarified in the epilogue, “On the victorious nation-wide Teamsters strike against UPS” (*Platform* 217). His technique based on deconstructing language paradoxically serves to construct and illuminate the subject. Individual words, lines and poems are hereby expanded and offered –no matter how obscure– as a field energizing an “on-going calibration of and struggle with our friend the dialectic between social being and consciousness” (Toscano, “Prologue” 228).

Finally, Rodrigo Toscano’s combined collective and individual consciousness requires a perspective that shows up “the conjured-up-life-structures and the cultural practices that surround them” (Toscano, “Georgetown” 10). This central question lays on a dialectic consideration of a writing community that should be receptive to social changes. On the one hand, a “decompositional aspect” governed by “a generalized atomization and delocalisation: deregulation, privatisation, decollectivization: the 1,001 coercions per month to achieve that...” (Toscano & Gilbert, “Transcriptive” n.p.), which is illustratively entailed to California props 187, 209, 227, 226. And, secondly, a reconstitutive aspect involving “a generalized drive (or desire) toward re-collectivization: a regroupment of working-class forces (and their allies), the 1,001 resistances to atomisation and alienation,” represented by the defeat of 226 in California, or “the potential of the Labor Party, SAWSJ (scholars, artists and writers for social justice), a rigorous examination of the most glib “post-feminisms,” “post-marxisms”... (Toscano & Gilbert, “Transcriptive” n.p.). This complex dialectic, traced in illuminating detail, pays attention to the subject’s tendency to communally develop his cultural and social goals. It is no longer necessary to observe

literature as an “illuſio” in Pierre Bordieu’s terms, “the objective truth of literature as a fiction founded on collective belief” (274), but rather as conjoining personal texts in suspense, ambivalent and paratactic, with diverse truthful social references to see how language hybridities and syntax resistance perform an ideal poetical “platform” of the “partisans” of a frontloaded poetry.

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