
Notes Toward a Review of *IRL* and *Nature Poem* by Tommy Pico

Tommy Pico. *IRL*. New York: Birds LLC, 2016. 98 pp. ISBN: 978-0991429868.

<http://www.birdsllc.com/catalog/irl>

Tommy Pico. *Nature Poem*. New York: Tin House, 2017. 136 pp. ISBN: 978-1-941040-63-8.

<http://tinhouse.com/product/nature-poem-by-tommy-pico/>

Tommy Pico's recent collections resist reviewing for three reasons: one, they've already been reviewed in some of the best journals and magazines in America; two, excerpts from his writings do not fully demonstrate the artistry and power of his collections, and three, the intertwined complexity of the two collections leads to shape-shifting—in the first reading, the two books reveal only what they wish to while whispering among themselves and casting spells that take effect in future readings. In subsequent readings, new meanings are created, the world expands and explodes, and the conversation continues. Because the experience of reading the two collections together is one of shift and shimmer and slip, this will not be a final, comprehensive review of these two collections—instead, these are *notes toward* a review.

Perhaps because of the amplitude of *Nature Poem* and *IRL*, thematic elements and stylistic choices are often the primary concerns in previous reviews—the use of text message style, the fast, sometimes shallow, and not always satisfying rhythms of city life, of gay life, of urban NDN-ness—there is no doubt that Pico has offered an epic (*IRL*) and an eclogue (*Nature Poem*) for our time. In this review, I'd like to look more closely at the stunning *poetry* of Pico's two books, the many moments of sheer beauty and pain for which the ground has been carefully prepared by a poet very much in control of his craft. The purpose of this review is to highlight Pico's mastery of poetics—his status as cultural-icon-in-the-making will take care of itself among at least two generations of NDNs, especially urban NDNs, as will, perhaps, among queer communities, the creation of a presence not unlike Allen Ginsberg's (whose ghost, summoned or not, inhabits the books).

Pico's work is as multilayered, hypertextual, and allusive as any of the great poets' work—Eliot, of course, comes to mind. Moreover, Pico's allusions engage at least as large a field as Eliot's: contemporary pop culture and music; poetry of many eras, capital "H" History, Native American history, Kumeyaay culture, Greek myth, gay culture, social media, puns, linguistics, etymology, and more. Looking up text message abbreviations, pop cultural references, and allusions in Pico's poetry might make one wonder why the books weren't published—or simultaneously published—as online/digital media hypertexts instead of only in print. Perhaps, though, an audience that needs to look up the references is not the audience Pico is addressing.

In Pico's writings, inside the world of text message abbreviations and twitter hashtags and an ongoing conversation with his Muse, something like emblem poems arise, poem-sections which often use emblem structure—description / invocation of a thing / idea followed by meditation on the thing / idea—except, in Pico's works, especially in *IRL* but also in *Nature Poem*, the descriptions / invocations and meditations happen cyclically, recur in different forms, and are

sometimes repeated. One might also call *IRL* an emblem-poem because its form and style reveal the *shape* of a hyper-connected world where selfhood is continually renegotiated in conversation with real-time feedback from social media—on the page, *IRL* looks like a scrolling series of text messages or a Twitter feed. The following excerpt reveals the emblem-structure while also offering an example of the text-message style of the text.

The influence of Muse
is not unlike *being*
under the influence, the way a poem
is spontaneously drunk
on Robert Graves.
.....
The temple of Muse
is all around you. Don't patron-
ize me, tradition
is a cage Conflict constant . . . (*IRL* 31)

“Tradition” in both culture and poetry is a common theme in Pico’s writings: how to resist it, how to work within it, how to *make it new*. In *Nature Poem*, social-media-speak is also used; one piece begins, “the fabric of our lives is #death” (32) and each line of this page and a half poem ends with the same hashtag, a device, epistrophe, both emotionally devastating in its repetition and disturbing in its accuracy—death sells and is cheapened on social media.

IRL and *Nature Poem* both make use of text-speech, approach many of the same themes, and are narrated by “Teebs,” (Pico’s *IRL* nickname), but differ in their formal choices, density / intensity, and tone. *IRL* uses short lines and is composed as one long poem; its density and intensity lend it the feel of an epic, and the tone, while it varies and ends on a note of personal integration, is, overall, one of loneliness and alienation:

I am so good at being Alone.
All I need is my phone.
Subway, elevator, drifting off
in a convo—no one really seems
to notice, occupied by their own
gleaming pool of longing. (*IRL* 32)

Pico’s facility with sonics is displayed here, in the repetition of “o” sounds that intensify the representation of loneliness.

Nature Poem appears on the page as a series of individual poems that are nonetheless intertwined and that work best when read as part of the whole. The lines are longer than those in *IRL*, often crowding the edge of the page, and the tone is somehow more hopeful, more kind to its narrator. Throughout the book, the narrator of *Nature Poem* explores the many reasons he can’t write a “nature poem”: colonialism, noble savage narrative, loss of land, loss of culture, the fact that “nature” contains much more than a pretty landscape and includes the often ugly and mean actions of human nature. Pico notes in a *Rumpus* interview that this book is an attempt “to rewire

and channel the sense of cultural loss that I feel into a new kind of culture, without losing myself or having my identity subsumed into a monolithic ‘Indian’ identity” (Knapp).

I can’t write a nature poem
bc it’s fodder for the noble savage
narrative. I wd slap a tree across the face,
I say to my audience. (NP 2)

Pico’s wry sense of humor is often showcased by his line breaks—breaking the line after “savage” complicates the idea of the sentence because it appears that nature poems are fodder for the noble savage” *poet*; on the next line the completion of the phrase “noble savage narrative” turns this section to a critique of representation, not of (or maybe in addition to) those who represent.

In both collections, Pico’s use of texting acronyms / abbreviations pushes poetic compression near its limit. While e.e. cummings wasn’t composing text messages, his use of abbreviation, of compression in context, word choice, and “story” could be thought of as antecedent to Pico’s use of texting-language. In Pico’s work, abbreviations and acronyms seem to collapse the difference between sign and signal and noise, context and interpretation, a collapse that reflects the shifting contemporary boundaries between self and other, between private and public, and, for Pico / Teebs as for many of the social-media generation, the real-time necessity to negotiate several different constructions of self: NDN, gay, urban, rez kid, child of colonialism-influenced family dysfunction, and more.

Leaving yr status
up to the feed, open
to the scroll, who do you
want knowing you r suicidal?
the obvi answer is every-
body, but the whisper
is more
particular.
Ppl lean in.
.....
. . . Who r you trying
not to text talk
.....
What texture
of the grey audience puts
the “firm” in affirming? (IRL 39)

As an added difficulty to his generation’s all-consuming media-tion, the narrator Teebs, like many young, contemporary, urban NDNs (Pico’s usage), struggles to integrate his Kumeyaay culture, heritage, and history with the fast-paced, tech-mediated life he lives in New York. In a *Hooligan* interview, Pico states, “I think one of the problems I had to overcome was the idea that being Indigenous and contemporary were two different things” (Haparimwi 8). Part of Pico’s

project is rectifying or integrating, for himself and for others, the terms “indigenous” and “contemporary.” And, perhaps surprisingly, for series of writings in which self is constructed through media, Teebs’ complex identity is abundantly embodied: his Native body, his gay body, and his grappling to make them one.

. . . We are mixed (blood) but full NDN.
I cd see my date says, squinting
half Asian? Tho everyone
 can yell I mean tell I’m a fag
 Part of me in sharp
 relief, a part of me half
 hidden. (*IRL* 42)

In this excerpt, Pico tweaks a common trope used in mixed blood Native poetry to express Teebs’ divided self, a fascinating revision which leads to philosophical questions about selfhood as it is expressed through the body as well as interrogating recent claims that racial identity is commensurate with gender identity and that both are *merely* or *only* performative.

Pico has stated in several interviews that his work is influenced by A.R. Ammons’ poetry—in the case of *IRL*, particularly Ammons’ *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, a long poem composed on an adding machine tape. Ammons is present in the text as well, often in references to another book-length poem, *Garbage*. Moreover, Ammons’ compositional style interspersed his meditative, culturally-critical poems with what Robert B. Shaw called “jokes, slang, ironies . . .” a description that would serve Pico’s work as well. However, Pico’s deft handling of “real-time” description, meditation, negotiation, and politically-charged issues calls to my mind Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*.

Juliana Spahr describes Hejinian’s work as influenced by “language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s aphoristic statement that ‘the limits of my language mean the limits of my world’” (103). Today’s ascendancy of messaging and other written forms of internet communication seems to confirm Wittgenstein’s statement—the networked world is large and interconnected and requires code-switching and constant attention to / policing of language.

In *IRL*, the ubiquity of text is imaged as the writing-over of self, of memory:

. . . I see so much
 text all day—the door-
 way of my memory
 has shit typed
 in Raleway all over it I
 see fonts in my dreams
 oily strings of letters
 in the corners of ppl
 mouths . . . (*IRL* 23)

The remarkable imagery in this excerpt figures text as invading the deepest aspects of personhood and as disgusting “oily strings of letters,” an illness perhaps, affecting everyone. The challenge is to construct a language sufficient to inscribe yourself into the feed while, at the same time, “Saving something for the self,” (*IRL* 79). One way to remain intact in the world of text is to allow one’s sorrow and cultural terror its expression:

The seam
of my skin bursts open
routinely. It’s a condition. In
the valley I lived in for
thousands of years, in trad-
itional times, I’m sure I would
have been a mourner, called
on to cry bc I do it all the time. (*IRL* 86)

There are few metaphors that capture existential sorrow better than the “seam of my skin” splitting along the fracture lines of one’s psyche. There is also the play on skin / Skins and the recognition that the speaker would have had an honored place in his Kumeyaay traditional community. Love, which the narrator Teebs seems always to be searching for, is one respite, one small bastion against the world and its demands:

Knowing the moon is inescapable tonight
and the tuft of yr chest against my should blades—
This is a kind of nature I would write a poem about. (*NP* 26)

In addition to Hejinian and Ammons as influences, there is an aura of Ginsberg and June Jordan in these two collections, the latter poet one whom Pico often names as a major force in his poetic ancestry. Both poets are present in Pico’s deep critique of America and in the straightforward, yet lyrical approach to the critique:

. . . America
never intended for me to live
so the *we* never intended
to include me. (*IRL* 70)

Nothing can fall that wasn’t built

except maybe my self-esteem bc I have a hunch I was born with it
intact but then America came smacked
me across the face said *like it* (*NP* 26)

Not only does this poem revisit Teebs’ defensive announcement about slapping a tree “across the face” in an earlier poem, but America as dominatrix will surely be recognized as one of the most apt and satisfying metaphors ever found in a poem.

While reading Tommy Pico's *IRL* and *Nature Poem*, I was exhilarated and astonished. I felt as if I had washed up on the shore of a new country of language, a new continent of metaphor, a *making* that is likely not available to me but one which I nevertheless recognize as masterful. To preemptively rebut any future criticism which might claim that Pico's writing is all social media style and no poetics and to acknowledge Pico's reference in *IRL* to a similar critique of another American poet's collection, I'll quote one last poem here, a poem that says, quite clearly, that Tommy Pico can write *that* kind of poetry if he wishes and with as much craft as anyone else.

I'm old women scattered
 along the creek
 my little hands squeeze
 my little mouth shut
 drawn into nooks
 within the valley
 like a sharp breath
 while shaggy men on horseback
 following the water
 seek brown bodies
 for target practice strong
 brown backs for breaking (NP 45)

While Tommy Pico *can* write a conventional poem, there are few, if any, American poets today who can compose in his 21st century aesthetic. If you have not yet read *IRL* and *Nature Poem*, I urge you to do so as soon as possible because between the covers of these collections is where the future of American poetry is being birthed.

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