

An Interview with Michael Torres

ROBYN EARHART AND LARISSA LARSON

Michael Torres is a VONA (Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation) distinguished alumnus and CantoMundo fellow. In 2016 he received his MFA in creative writing from Minnesota State University, Mankato; was a winner of the Loft Mentor Series; received an Individual Artist Initiative Grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board; and was awarded a Jerome Foundation Research and Travel Grant to visit the pueblo in Jalisco, Mexico, where his father grew up. In 2019 he received fellowships and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and The Loft Literary Center for the Mirrors and Windows Program. A former artist in residence at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, as well as a McKnight writing fellow, he is currently a 2021–22 Jerome Hill artist fellow.

His first collection of poems, *An Incomplete List of Names* (Beacon Press, 2020), was selected by Raquel Salas Rivera for the National Poetry Series, was named one of NPR's 2020 Books We Love, and was featured on the podcast *Code Switch*.

His writing has been featured or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets 2020*;

The New Yorker; POETRY; *Ploughshares*; *Smartish Pace*; *Los Angeles Review of Books*; *The Georgia Review*; *The Sun*; *Water~Stone Review*; *Southern Indiana Review*; *Ninth Letter*; *Poetry Northwest*; *Copper Nickel*; *Fifth Wednesday Journal*; *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*; *The McNeese Review*; *MIRAMAR*; *Green Mountains Review Online*; *Forklift, Ohio*; *Hot Metal Bridge*; *The Boiler*; *Paper Darts*; *River Teeth*; *The Acentos Review*; *Okey-Panky*; *Sycamore Review*; (*SALT*); and *Huizache*, and online as *The Missouri Review's* Poem of the Week and on *The Slowdown* with Tracy K. Smith.

Torres was born and brought up in Pomona, California, where he spent his adolescence as a graffiti artist. Currently, he teaches in the MFA program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and through the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop.

This interview was held in front of a hybrid (in-person and virtual) audience of Hamline University creative writing students, faculty, and community members on February 16, 2022. Torres was the visiting writer and as such held a master class, a reading, and this public reading. The two interviewers were MFA candidates Robyn Earhart and Larissa Larson. The interview began with Torres reading the poem "Suspended from school, the Pachuno's grandson watches Happy Days while his homie fulfills prophecy" from his book An Incomplete List of Names.

ROBYN EARHART: Thank you so much for joining us, Michael. We're so honored to have time with you. I'm going to just jump right in to a question about your book. In the foreword, Raquel Salas Rivera wrote, "These poems remind me that impermanence is a landscape, not just a way of being in relation to history. Those of us who write despite this impermanence often do so in order to pay homage to homeboys, grandfathers, Pachucos, and the selves we risk losing through survival." While you were working on *An Incomplete List of Names*, did you feel you were writing toward resisting impermanence?

MICHAEL TORRES: Yeah, I think that I was always trying to sort of capture something like that. You know, before the poem started, I—when I was a teenager, when I used to do graffiti and all, my homies would hang out, I would always make sure to have a disposable camera with me, because I always wanted to take photos. This was way before cell phones. But I always wanted to have that disposable camera with me to take those photos, because for some

reason I felt like what we were doing was going to be important to us, and it wasn't going to be a forever kind of thing. It felt very much in the moment.

I think when I started writing poems that were going to be in the book, it was like I was sort of looking back on those memories and all those years that I had been taking those photos and trying to recapture what that feeling was; to be that young. Especially the fact that we were all young and all together. Because as I grew up, you know, past high school, I went to community college and then transferred to university, but none of my other friends really came along with me. There was [a sort of] impermanence that I was very much aware of.

I mean, I have a distinct memory of my first day at a university after transferring and just kind of looking around and seeing little groups of friends and wondering, *How can you make friends so quickly on the first day of school? Did you already know each other?* And I was starting to realize, *Oh, maybe these people all went to high school together or something, and they just kind of all—like, you know, like you see in a movie, Oh, let's go to this college.* Like that's—all that bullshit, right? Where it's like the end-of-the-summer movie where they're all like, *Well, I'm going to go to Dartmouth or whatever, and I'm like I'm going to go to community college.* And every one of my homies went to work. In the poem I just read [*"Suspended from school, the Pachuno's grandson watches Happy Days while his homie fulfills prophecy"*], I was thinking about a friend who, in middle school, was just really smart, but he made bad choices or choices that were dependent upon circumstances in life. And he was involved with gangs and things like that. Some of the stuff he couldn't help; that was just a part of his life, and so I wondered about him in that poem, and I wondered about friends in some other situations. And I think all that, those permanent things, I was writing the poem to be a stake or a flag planted in that, maybe.

LARISSA LARSON: To build on that, Michael, I know a lot of the poems in your collection are about your friends and your homies, right? This collection, in particular, is specifically dedicated to them, the ones "who were there." I listened to your podcast interview on *Literature in Color*, and you really talked about how you wanted to write about the Latinx community specifically and that you wanted to have it accessible and have representation with them.

TORRES: Yeah.

LARSON: And I know that you talked about the reason you became a writer was because you read Luis J. Rodriguez's memoir, *Always Running*. I think it is so clear, in your prose and poetry, these easily digestible pictures that you paint of this beautiful representation. Your book opens with the quote from Larry Levis: "All we are is representation, what we are & are not / Clear & then going dark again." I think this is a beautiful quote, and I would love to hear you expand more on why you chose that quote in particular for your collection.

TORRES: Larry Levis's work just sort of touched me in a way, and I knew I wanted to use a quote. The idea of just trying to represent but also knowing that it's just for the moment. Like, my book, it'll disappear. You know, it's published and it's out, but one day I'll be gone and it goes out. It's here and it goes dark again. But I think it still does matter—like, who we are, that we existed. And it's in the book.

There are, like, scenes where me and my friends go to the mall in the book. I don't know if that happens more than once, but for some reason—and I went to the mall earlier today, and I was like, *Why am I so fascinated with the mall? And why were my friends and I so fascinated by those?* It was a place where you could, like—and, you know, yes, capitalism and consumerism—but it was also a place where we as young brown boys could go to become. There was a bunch of potential there. If we bought something, that said, *This represents us, and we are becoming something*. Because most of the time we couldn't enter into any sort of conversation because we never saw ourselves in a TV show, or we were misrepresented, or we were stereotyped in movies. But I thought I could at least try to show the complexity of it. Like, yeah, we wore baggy pants, but we also had all these other ideas about things, too, because we are as complicated. I think, yeah, seeing Luis J. Rodriguez do that, I thought, *Well, maybe I could do that too*.

EARHART: You know, I feel like so many of us have had friendships that have been complicated, or [we] have very complex relationships with people. But I felt so much joy in experiencing the type of devotion that you write from for others who appear in this collection. It's one of my favorite things about the

book itself. My favorite poem is “Horses,” which draws attention to the way poets write about love. I really appreciate the way that you did that and the form that you used there. And I’m curious: Do you think this poem creates a possibility that this book is a collection of love poems?

TORRES: You’ve got me. [*Audience laughs*]

TORRES: So, I think when I first—when I was writing this, when this was my thesis, one of the suggested titles that my advisor gave me was to call it “Love Letters” or “Love Letters to Danny.” It had more of that friend in there before it became, like, a bunch of other friends. I would say yes, in part, it is a collection of love poems, because I feel this tremendous sense of—you said devotion, but I also think, like, loyalty to these people. Early on, you know, I wasn’t—like . . . I kicked it with them in the streets and all that, but I wasn’t the toughest. I was far from the toughest one. And I think they started realizing that at some point, and they would always keep me away from, like, the melee [*laughs*]. And I really—I didn’t have the words for it then, but I really loved them for that. And I really appreciated that they didn’t have to—that they cared enough that they didn’t throw me into any situation that they knew I couldn’t handle, or whatever. And so in remembering these experiences, I thought about that, and I wanted to write to them, write for them, and I was sort of loyal to that idea.

In another sense, though, I’ve also thought of the book as sort of a love letter but also a breakup letter too, because a majority of the collection was written and drafted and redrafted and revised in Minnesota, when I had already left the place that is where most of the poems are set. And so later on, the book became this—sort of situated in grappling with this idea of having left and, within that, the realization that the speaker might not want back. I love them and also, I have to leave and I don’t know why; I can’t explain it. And maybe I’m thinking about that, writing about that for the rest of my life. But, yeah, I think the original version was very much love letters, and then I think once I realized I was sticking around in Minnesota longer and building a life here, then it became sort of like a breakup letter too.

LARSON: Wow. Fascinating to hear that you think of it as a breakup.

I've never thought of that before, so I'm going to reread it with that in mind. I want to stay on this thought of Pomona [California] and Minnesota, because they are two different, vibrant communities that you've now become involved in. Community is such a big part of who you are. And we see that in *An Incomplete List of Names*, but here in the Twin Cities, you do so much: the Loft Literary Center, Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop, where you're a teacher. You're a teacher at Minnesota State University, Mankato. You're a CantoMundo fellow and VONA distinguished alum. I think it's very admirable how you take this powerful activism on the page and exhibit it to your community. But like you said, it wasn't always that easy to do, especially when you made the move to Minnesota. Looking back to your younger self, if you had any advice for that transition or just in general, for an artist trying to seek community, if you could give a little tidbit of information to help. I know there's not a direct answer, but just since you've done such a beautiful job . . .

TORRES: I don't know what advice I have. I wouldn't even say trial and error with different friends and then you build a community off that. I think I just try to be as honest about who I am and what I care about wherever I go, and then, you know, friends I'll make and keep [come along]. And [those are] the communities I build toward, and I move toward what feels right. When I started working with the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop, it was because I happened to get into the Loft Mentor Series, and one of the writers that was in the cohort worked in the Prison Writing Workshop. And we became friends. I wasn't trying to seek some sort of networking. I never think about it like that. I don't know. Community is very special to me, and maybe that does come from having grown up in Pomona, in this place where you represented where you were from really hard, like, you cared so much about that place and the name of that place and the way the word sounded when it came out of your mouth when you told someone where you were from because there wasn't a lot of other things that were yours, and Pomona was ours. Like, it was *ours*. And so I think that and my bond with these friends and the place where we came from was so rich and so tight.

You know, that's what makes for good poetry, because it's heartbreaking that the speaker, that I, left. But I do the same things here, which is interesting, in Minnesota, because I have different pockets of those communities—like, I

have the university where I work, and I really love the colleagues there. I have friends who were in the program with me that moved up to the city, and I still stay tight with them. And then the Loft, people I met at the Loft. And I love those communities. Since the pandemic, with the Prison Writing Workshop, we hadn't been able to go into the prisons and teach that much, and then I got very busy teaching full time at the university. All this to say, whenever there was an email from the Prison Writing Workshop about "We're going to meet for this," I would always say in the email, like, "Yes, please include me. I don't want to lose touch with this community." I loved what they were doing, because it felt—especially with the Prison Writing Workshop—like a really important thing, and I wanted to be a part of that. Maybe that echoes back from my friendships in Pomona. Not that we were doing anything important; we were fucking around most of the time. But, like, the people I was friends with, we were a tight, a really tight group, and I like that sort of tight, honest sort of community wherever I go, I suppose.

EARHART: I love you saying that "Pomona was ours." This bond that you had with people in Pomona was very rich, very tight. And that is kind of the idea of what community is. Something that I really took out of your book was this exploration of an insider-outsider perspective. The speaker—there are two different speakers—there's the graffiti artist, REMEK, and there's the older poet. And the older—sorry [*audience laughs*]*—the older speaker really grapples with this idea of becoming unrecognizable or unfamiliar or just unbonded, maybe, with this past as they're moving into new spaces in Minnesota—academic spaces, traditionally very white spaces. While working on this collection, did you ever actively resist feeling like a Minnesota writer because of the potential for becoming or feeling like an outsider in Pomona?*

TORRES: Guilty, yeah. Yeah, I think there's a poem, something about my neighbor—"My Neighbor Who Keeps the Dying Things"—that was the first poem, I was like, "Oh, shit, this is set in Minnesota. I think I'm staying here." [*Audience laughs.*] Yeah, I mean, that did sort of cross my mind. What I haven't really talked about when I moved out here, but I knew that I needed to get out of California. I knew that it needed to happen. By the time I realized that, I was also already set on getting myself to write. Like I knew that I loved [*writing*].

I did the month in the NYU Writers in Paris, so I studied there. When I got home, I sort of felt bad that I couldn't fit. I talked to my mom—you ever had those experiences where you go back home and suddenly your homies have new friends and those new friends have nicknames for your friends, and you're like, *Why are you calling him that?* You're like, *You can't do that.* And you're the only one who thinks this is a weird thing; you're always going to kind of hold onto that.

There's like a trade-off. Like, I can't tap into Pomona in the same way, but I can see it with a lot more complexity. I'm not sure I'd have seen it if I would've stayed there and written about it in that way. By leaving, I got a greater look at socioeconomics and how people were living out here, the access to things people have here as opposed to over there. I could see all these things coming into play and what made Pomona the city sort of stay, like, impoverished compared to the very rich cities surrounding Pomona, even still. I don't think I thought about that too much. You're really close to the subject, and you can't see it fully until you've stepped back.

LARSON: You're talking about perspective here: having different perspectives and how that lends itself to your art and you as an artist. I want to talk about yourself as an artist, because, as Robyn mentioned, the younger artist was REMEK, right, this graffiti artist. It's not only a different perspective but almost a different identity. You mentioned in a *Cultural Daily* interview that "when I sign my book, I cross out my name and put REMEK over it." And you signed your books last night, actually, and that is exactly what you did, is you did this beautiful tag right in the front. I find it so fascinating that in a way you're crediting REMEK for this poetry collection instead of Michael, because you're crossing out your name and putting your other artist's name. I think about this as an artist myself and wonder, why didn't you write *Michael*? Is it leaning into some kind of imposter syndrome—and I don't want to presume anything, but I know a lot of artists feel that way, including myself—that you have this other artist persona. I would love to hear your thoughts on this artist persona that you have, REMEK, and why he's kind of carried with you, and taking credit for this poetry collection instead of Michael.

TORRES: I think part of it is this idea or that feeling of imposter

syndrome—that’s one part of it. REMEK (from the very beginning of being 16 years old was a made-up name) was whoever he wanted to become, created his own reputation, and was way more risky or bold than what Michael Torres the 16-year-old was. Part of me felt like REMEK had really sort of resurfaced to really dedicate himself to the writing of the poetry, trying to be an artist. People didn’t imagine me as an artist or didn’t see that I could become an artist. Strangers or acquaintances at work said that; my family was always fully supportive of me pursuing art, which isn’t actually what you hear from a lot of Mexican American households. The other part is that, like, sometimes I’m just like, *Well, why can’t REMEK write a book? Why can’t REMEK teach a class? Why can’t someone who was a graffiti artist do this any way in these other settings?* Maybe they’re not used to seeing that.

Right now, I teach an undergrad class, and I told them, “By the end of the week, you’re all going to pick monikers that you’re going to go by. You’re not going to go by your regular name the rest of the semester. You can call me REMEK.” And they email me; they’re like, “Hey, REMEK, I’m going to miss class,” or whatever. [*Audience laughs.*] They’ll sign their name. And I love it because REMEK got in trouble for writing on walls, right? He got detained by police and his mom had to pick him up. But REMEK is teaching English too. REMEK can be all these things—and I love that idea, I think.

I think maybe I was ashamed or didn’t want to write about graffiti or the fact that I did that for a while. And that’s happened to a lot of people who used to do graffiti. They look back on it, and it maybe was just a rite of passage to them or something. Like, one of my friends, he called me up and he had gone to this funeral. He’s like, “You know who I ran into?” And I was like, “Who?” He said, “This graffiti artist named Riot” that we used to sort of, like, beef it with. They were, like, enemies from a different crew or whatever. He’s like, “Yeah. I talked to him, and we were talking about graffiti, and he sort of called it—he was like, ‘Yeah, I remember when we used to do that dumb shit.’” And my friend was really kind of mad that he called it that. Because me and him sort of think the same way about graffiti; it was very formative and very important to us. And I want that—I like what my friend had said. I want to look back and for it to have been a good and important thing, you know? I don’t want people to think—and this is me going back to thinking about Pomona—I don’t want people to think, “Oh, you grew up this way”—and that’s mentioned in the book—“You grew up

in this rougher, bad way, really turned your life around.” Like, that’s so—that’s so oversimplifying it. That’s so putting me into this narrative of the minority that achieves overall or after all or whatever. But it’s like, no, REMEK helped me do this too and get here too. So that’s why I hold on to that persona or other self.

EARHART: I hope, based on what you just said, that you never give up on that, never let [those doubters] go. Because I’m really holding on to this line that you said, that “people couldn’t imagine me as an artist.” The back of your book, it’s described as a collection “that illuminates the artist’s struggle to make sense of the disparate identities others have forced upon him.” While so much of the poems are invested in that, I found that the ones about your brother and your work teaching creative writing in prisons really illuminates more of this idea of disparate identities, the ways that people see us, the ways people force their identities and their opinions on us. Do you have a hope for how readers view representations of REMEK?

TORRES: No. I mean, like, if they have questions and want to have conversations, that’s cool. But I think, especially with those poems about my brother or writing about prisons and teaching in there, I think I was just writing—I was trying to be very honest and be very, not careful, but being very honest in a way that you don’t simplify it and feel pity for one or the other—that you’re opened up to this fact that it’s all a very complicated situation. The poems about my brother aren’t just like, you know, *Brown man has a brown brother in prison*. It’s like, my brother’s in prison and I don’t know what to do about it, because I can’t help in any way and I’m hurting about it, right? So it’s this very complex . . . Or when I’m at the prison teaching, it’s not just about, like, “What am I observing in these students?” You know? It’s like, I’m looking out this window and seeing what is happening to these men who have very real lives in here despite all the things that they can’t have and do. All these things that are surrounding them, all the ways that they get through their day, and the small connection that my class provides . . . that’s just discipline.

I hope that my honesty about that is what reaches the reader and sort of opens them up when they finish reading, as a poem should, right, in a way that makes them want to read someone else’s poetry and not just go, “Oh, that sucks. I’m glad I’m not in prison,” you know what I mean?

EARHART: Yeah. Does that lend itself, then, to your teaching in the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop? Do you carry REMEK with you there?

TORRES: I don't know. That's interesting, because I try not to, because then I don't want it to be one of those things where . . . I'm conscious of like, I don't want to be like, *Yeab, we're the same, you know. I grew up in the streets.* That's not like that, you know, because they have different shit that they had to go through and handle that I didn't have [to deal with]. I had so many more advantages, I think.

The guards have their jobs to do and so they don't see my students as people. They see them as these numbers; they see them as a time slot that they move from here to here to here. And so I just wanted to talk to my students and hear what they have to say like I do with my students at the university, but I recognize that because my students at a prison don't get talked to like people, they're way more excited, invested, interested in talking to me about things that they are thinking about as it relates to art. And you know, they get personal. I want to tap into their creativity and their imagination when I teach.

LARSON: You were talking about the complexities of people and using art as a way to express those complexities. I'm a big supporter of art influencing art, and we talked about how REMEK, as a graffiti artist, has really influenced you as a writer too. Just looking at your cover of your collection, it's very clear that graffiti has inspired it.

TORRES: Yeah.

LARSON: It's beautiful. And I also see visual artistry in the poetry on the page, too. There are the shifting stanzas, you have great use of white space, indentations; sometimes there's even, like, created "holes" within the text, or the text is evenly spaced to fit the stanza. You talked about how you go to narrative structure, and pun intended, it paints this great picture for your reader. As a poet, those deliberate line breaks and the wonderful use of enjambment carries that tension of that narrative structure too. Do you feel like the techniques of graffiti have influenced your writing visually on the page? Or do you ever see those creative processes overlapping?

TORRES: “Visually,” I wanted to say, “not so much”—shut down your question. [*Audience laughs.*] No, no, no. Because line breaks seem—I’m going to confess: I have no fucking clue what I’m doing with that whole thing. [*Audience laughs.*] It’s all trial and error and seeing what works and what doesn’t with line breaks, with stanza breaks, and things like that. But maybe how graffiti comes into my writing is like an obsessiveness with doing the thing over and over again. We would do that, and I didn’t make that connection until well into writing books, but we would do that with graffiti all the time. We would write our names at night, go back in the morning to see if our names were there. A lot of times it was painted over already or crossed out. So we went back the next time and we did it again. We did it again and again in different places just to see our names up there. It was impermanent, but we knew we could be there for a moment. And the practicing and getting better, I think that is what happens when I write; it is that, like, that creative process in graffiti sort of helps me get through revision and this idea that the first thing I wrote isn’t the best thing I wrote and the poem actually needs more room to grow—whether that’s narratively or formally, or how the stanzas should be broken.

I was looking over the first poem in the book, the “Donuts” one [“Doing Donuts in an ’87 Mustang 5.0, After My Homie Chris Gets Broken Up With,” and I’d forgotten that—you know, the poem is a small block, right, but there were many versions where there was a really thin, sort of long stanza. And I just kept going back and forth between the two, and then slowly realizing that the poem that thin wouldn’t work because it seems like it’s rushing down the page. The poem itself is actually doing a lot more rumination, and it’s a lot slower and thinking through. The speaker is trying to slow the poem down. In the poem, the car is spinning and going fast, and the speaker, he’s in the car, he’s the passenger with a friend who’s doing donuts in the car because he’s heartbroken. And to have it be thin down the page just rushes through the moment, and my speaker really wants it to last a lot longer because he’s really trying to understand, *What is going on here, and what can I do? Can I do anything? Do I just have to sit here and be a friend?* Which he does. And I think just the shorter, bigger block of text, after a while going back and forth, was what it should be. That obsessiveness with going back and forth in a poem, I think that comes from graffiti, with being okay with going back to it, back to it, back to it, and not settling, I suppose.

LARSON: I'm just so curious—do you still practice any type of visual art at home?

TORRES: Yeah, I mean, I still do graffiti in, like, paper on books, not the streets [*audience laughs*]. Sometimes in Cali when I go visit, they have a bunch of public walls where you can go do it. Although real graffiti artists would be like, *You can't, you shouldn't do that; if it's a public wall, they make you pay for it.* But I don't know if I have the patience to get into anything like painting and oils and things. Like, I love it. I think I like seeing it happen. I like visiting galleries and I like watching interviews on YouTube where the visual artist talks about their painting or their sculpture or an architect talks about this thing and how it's done—I love hearing about that, but I think watching those things or studying those things will always feed into my writing. I like photography, but I'm scared to take someone's picture—I don't want them to get mad. I would like to try these other forms of art, but I also think that writing is where it's going to be for me; at least right now, this is what I think.

I tried to be a DJ—I did not like it; I tried to design T-shirts, and I did not have the patience for that either. And I tried to write raps. That's embarrassing. [*Audience laughs.*] But then the transition was going from wanting to write raps to going to spoken-word open mics. In the beginning, a lot of my poems were spoken-word pieces, which was interesting, because there's so much passion in that kind of poetry that you have to hear out loud and live. It's not the same on the page. And I don't know if that's in the book, if it feels like that, maybe in certain rhythms that some poems have. I don't know. But I really admired that sort of art, which was very close to, pretty much what I ended up doing.

EARHART: Well, this has been such a really great conversation, so thank you so much, Michael. I do want to go ahead and open it up for audience Q&A.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I loved the fact that you don't leave—you couldn't leave—REMEK behind. I love that. I think sometimes people try to remove themselves, and I've found that in my writing that I can't leave who made me behind. And sometimes I used to be embarrassed about it when I would write about it, and I would try to disguise it. And I remember you, Mr. Torres, taught me that past could be present. I remember you telling me or

teaching me how to shout some of my ideas, that, if I was ready to bring them out, even if I wasn't sure how people would react. I thank you so much for that. It's gotten me so far. Because of you, I really continued my writing. I'm from the South, and so I use a lot of verbal language. I was always upset about my words and I came to you and you were just like, "Oh, Miss B., you're wrong. Being you is the best way to write." And every time I write, people love it, because I just be me. And it's like I don't write from *today*, I always write from that little girl way back when, and that's how she talked at that time. So, yeah, I thank you so much, and I'm so happy to be here.

TORRES: How are you?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I am totally awesome.

TORRES: I love that you said you write from that little girl. I mean, that self, that younger self in us was so imaginative and didn't think about all those other things that would, you know, the pressures of what others might think and say. And so I think it is important to tap into that. Because as we get older, we go through school, everyone's all, "You've got to be this certain way." No. Or, you know, "You can't sound like that, because that's the broken way." Broken English. You know, that's a phrase that I would hear a lot. And it's a power move, someone saying, "Oh, you don't have this capability." But [that language] is still real, it's still raw, it can still say something very true, right? That self is important.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have two questions. You mentioned poverty porn. What do you mean by that? And number two, when you say "representation," who are you representing *to*? Who are you—who is that for?

TORRES: [I think] *poverty porn* is a certain look or gaze that others are having. It's the idea that you write about poverty or impoverished people only for the sake of telling this story so that someone can say, *Oh, that's so sad, what happens there*. And so it becomes this very surface-level thing. But you want to tell a story that's true even if it is in some impoverished war setting or whatever, but it's way more complex than that. So poverty porn is just this very

surface-level, one-dimensional kind of idea of that, writing of that place.

For my friends that grew up where I did and people who grew up in similar situations, because some might say, like, *Well, why would you write their stories? They know them; they were there [when] it happened.* But I think it's another thing for them to see themselves represented as complex characters, complex humans, in a book, in a movie, right?

If you google "Mexican American actor that plays every Mexican American character," this guy Noel G., Noel Gugliemi, will come up. He's played a character named Hector eight different times, eight different roles. The character that he plays looks like homies that I grew up with. But he's not allowed to be—those characters aren't allowed to be as complex; they're not fully represented. He's pigeonholed into that because of Hollywood, right? And so I would like more complex representation than that. And I think, in the book, I try to have a fuller view of those characters so that my friends, my homies can see them, and their children can see them, and maybe I can do a small little part of adding to that depth that we actually do have.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Like graffiti.

TORRES: What was that?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I said, "Like graffiti." Like, you know, graffiti on a train, with, then, people seeing it in a different way.

TORRES: Yeah, I like that metaphor.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: At your reading, you talked a little bit about how much you enjoy poems that talk about being poems and experimenting with how much you can "fit" inside a poem. In a self-aware poem like that, is the "you" addressed differently than the "you" addressed in a more typical poem?

TORRES: Yeah, because I think when I reference a poem in the poem, I'm involving the reader. So if I say the "you," I'm talking pretty much directly to the reader. And when I write those sort of "meta" poems, if you want to call them that, when I'm blatantly or directly saying that we are in a poem, it's because I'm really

interested in what a poem can hold for me now that I've chosen this life. And maybe that is sort of indirectly or directly connecting or relating to the fact that I left so much for this thing that I sort of took a bet on, that now I want to know, "Can you hold everything I care for, poetry? What can you hold? What is your capacity?" I'm also interested in the relationship between speaker and reader, because there sort of is an intimacy that starts when there's a poem, right, that is maybe echoing this nonexistent intimacy, now that I've left these friends. There's a desperation, I think, sometimes, a sort of reaching out and wanting to connect now where there are no longer these connections. And I think that's why these poems are happening.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I really liked your comment on moving from California to Minnesota, because I've also moved a lot. And as a writer, I find myself, when I've left a place, I can write more honestly. Has that been your experience of when you left Pomona? Were/are you able to write more honestly about it?

TORRES: Yes, I could. It was freeing in some ways. But then I also had to hold myself accountable. I talked about the leaving and what it's done to me and what it's done to friends. This idea that it's freeing, it almost makes me feel a little guilty, like I have too much of the freedom, like, *Aha! Now I can write about this place*. I'm always trying to balance it out. Yes, I have this greater perspective, but I have to implicate myself, too, and say, like, *how do I feel about this* with all this sort of perspective power.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How do you decide what stories you can write about others and the things that you can share? Does it have to be in some way part of your story, as well, for you to share? Is there a code? You talk about loyalty to these people and this place, and as a writer, it's really tricky to write about the people you love and are closest to with their—the stuff they carry.

TORRES: So, there's the book, but then there's also, like, tens of, maybe hundreds of files of stuff that no one ever sees that I write because I think something's there but maybe I shouldn't write it. Maybe, I'm not capable of writing it yet; I don't have the skill; I don't have the time away from it. I'm writing stuff right now that I feel like, *is someone going to be affected by this ten years from now? What are they going to say?* On the other side of that is: Am I implicated? Is the art worth [the implication] in a

dirty way, like is this going to make me money or anything, or is it saying something greater than myself and this relationship that I'm writing about? Is it doing something artful? I'm really, really patient with this writing and these circumstances and I'm very critical. And in order to be critical, I have to shelve it for a while and go back to it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How did you step into your power as a writer, in your art? Was there some pivotal moment that you can remember when you decided, "This is what I have to do, and I can do it"? I just wonder about how you stepped into what you were meant to do.

TORRES: (pause) That is a great question. I mentioned that I had full support from family. My sister, who's eighteen years older than I am, when I was coming up, she would have me read Shakespeare and *Beowulf* when I was, like, ten. She introduced me to that. And introducing me to that let me know that, *This is something you can do and read.* I have distinct memories of my mom giving me this sort of, I want to say, like, confidence or reassurance that made me think, like, okay I can do this. They allowed me to let my imagination get to be something important to me so that it became in a way that, sort of, I couldn't make the rest of my life part of it.

That support from family and teachers and professors very early on in my exploration of and education in writing created this network that allowed me to nurture my creativity. If there was one pivotal moment throughout all this, it had to be during my first poetry class in community college. I was either twenty or twenty-one years old at the time. One evening at home, I sat on the steps in my backyard trying to finish a draft of a poem I started in class. I had all these random lines and images jotted all over the page in my notebook. Putting that poem together, I don't know if I worked for twenty minutes or two hours, but I was completely zoned in. When I looked up, night was coming on. That might've been the reason I stopped working. Then I remember thinking, *if I could do this for this rest of my life, I'd like that very much.*

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I wanted to know what motivated you to write specifically and what continues to motivate you to write?

TORRES: People sort of ask that question when they ask, "How'd you go from graffiti to poetry?" Honestly, I was coming of age in the '90s and early 2000s, so

hip-hop—graffiti was hip-hop culture, and then when I was really into hip-hop, I read Tupac's *Rose That Grew from the Concrete*. And then I thought, "If someone who's so masculine onstage and in his presence, if he can write poetry—" it was a way for me to say, *Oh, I can write poetry*. That permission, along with the fact that creativity and imagination was okay in my household.

What motivates me now: other good writing, other great artists, the way they think about what they do. I can see in them or feel in them the passion that they have. I understand that, because I feel that too. And when I'm writing, when I'm working on a piece, I'm motivated by a breakthrough. It can be really frustrating to not get the thing down, but when there's a sort of breakthrough or when there's a moment that something changes, I feel really good about it. And it opens me up in a way that I think, if it opens me up, then it might open the reader up, and I get a thrill out of that. I love that feeling. I talked to the master class a couple days—or yesterday, that this is a quote from the writer Chris Abani. He said something like, "The poem isn't when you see the ghost; it's when the ghost sees you." That's that opening up for me. I love that feeling in a poem. Because if I can do that, and I feel that myself for something that I'm writing, then I believe hopefully that it can do that for a reader and they'll be changed by it too; they'll be opened up by it too. And that is a beautiful thing.



Ni de aquí, ni de allá: ni de la pinche luna

JOSE HERNANDEZ DIAZ

If we call ourselves Mexican American, we are sellouts.
If we call ourselves Chicanos, we are radicals.

If we write in Spanish, we are foreigners.
If we write in English, we are assimilating.
If we write in Spanglish, we have no class.

If we put accent marks on our names, we are trying to prove a point.
If we do not put accent marks, we have once again assimilated.

If we dress like a cholo, we are a threat.
If we dress preppy or like a surfer, we are whitewashed.

If we study Ethnic Studies, we are being difficult.
If we study English Literature, we are Tío Tomás.

If we stick to politics, we are pigeonholed.
If we write about the sunset, we are hopeless romantics.
If we write about the future, we are delusional.

Best to accept these contradictions.
Best to remember our roots.

