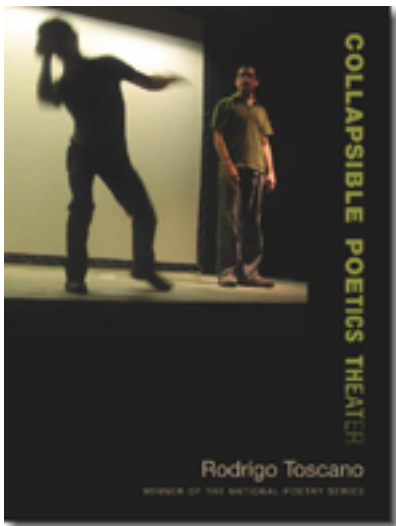


Rodrigo Toscano's *Collapsible Poetics Theater*

Urayoán Noel | University at Albany, SUNY

Toscano, Rodrigo. *Collapsible Poetics Theater*. Albany: Fence Books, 2008. 153 pages. \$19.00 paper.

Performance by Rodrigo Toscano and his Collapsible Poetics Theater (James Belflower, Colie Collen, Anna Eyre, Natalie Knight, and Urayoán Noel), March 10, 2009, New York State Writers Institute at the University at Albany, SUNY, Albany, NY.



For nearly a decade, Rodrigo Toscano has been seeking out a negative dialectics in the damaged dialects (i.e. discourses) of the American (i.e. global) tribe: from hip-hopped Marx-speak to Williamsburg hipster-activist parodies. The back cover of *Collapsible Poetics Theater* describes the book's contents as ranging from "polyvocalic pieces for multiple readers to 'body movement poems' to 'simultaneous activities pieces' to anti-masques and plays." The title, often glossed as CPT, is also the name of the makeshift, all-volunteer performance project with which Toscano has been touring colleges, art spaces, alternative radio stations, and experimental poetry festivals for the last few years. Multiple senses of his "collapsible" project pop up on and off the page, but the most immediate concern the collapsing of linguistic and cultural borders and the tension between the book as more-or-less stable repository of textual experiments (as in various avant-garde poetics) and as a score for future performances (as in varieties of contemporary spoken-word). Like the language and post-language poetics with which Toscano was initially identified, the book approaches identity politics with a high-textualist Marxist skepticism, yet at key moments looks to Chicano border politics for a trans-American/hemispheric opening. Like the "glyph" poetics of the later Alurista (see *Spik in glyph?* 1981), Toscano works toward a transnational writing raised off the page; he arrives at a

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performance project by working both from and against the confines of the print poem.

One way Toscano links print poem and performance is through a clever and sustained riffing on the multiple meanings of "movement"/ "movimiento": from the movement poetics of the 1960s and 1970s (Latino/a and otherwise) to the national/international Labor Movement, from the movement of people and goods across and along the U.S.-Mexico border to, perhaps most importantly, the movement of bodies and interplay of voices that characterizes his CPT performances. In "Truax Inimical," subtitled "A Trans-Modern Masque for Four Voices," four voices take turns spouting truisms that double as non sequiturs and as empowerment slogans, in what reads and sounds like a disjunctively self-reflexive meditation on the co-optation of movement politics and the successive failures of formalist poetics (any "ism" will do):

(3) *Movimiento a la poesia translinguistica*

(1) Where do I sign?

(2) *Movimiento a la poesia multimetricalista*

(4) Where do I sign?

(20; italics and missing diacritics in the original)



Fig. 1: Natalie Knight, Rodrigo Toscano, Colie Collen, and Urayoán Noel performing the polyvocalic audio piece "TRUAX INIMICAL."

Photo by Dan Wilcox (March 10, 2009 at the University at Albany, SUNY).

Although the italicized Spanish text might read as a familiar trope (italicizing Spanish words and phrases for readability's sake has long been an almost obligatory move in U.S. Latino/a poetry), elsewhere in the book italics function as performance cues (indicating dramatic emphasis or change in tone) and/or signal the text's origins in and

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affinity with various counter-traditions of vanguardist *écriture*.

Whereas various Black Arts and Nuyorican poetries can be and have been read as print scores for an eventual performance¹, *Collapsible Poetics Theater* is a maddeningly, productively unstable score, since it resists easy equivalences between pagebound and embodied iterations. There is, in fact, a nod to a non-print archive: in the Acknowledgments section, Toscano provides links to websites featuring photos and video clips from various CPT performances, but the performed versions vary widely in tone, speed, setting, and in the quality and degree of interaction with the audience and the performance space. To a great extent, this difference is built into the performance project: as noted in the brief description included at book's end, the CPT "assembles itself within a given 24-72 hour period of each performance" so that each locale "(with its resident poets, experienced actors, experienced non-actors) brings an entirely new set of possibilities" (n.p.). Complicating the relationship between archive and repertoire (to use Diana Taylor's terms), Toscano splits the difference between the sited body and the coerced/coercing expressions of its web-sited avatars. More recently, he has generated theoretical/poetic text based on the online photos from the CPT performances, so that what was once supplement is now primary corpus and the pendulum from writing to performing starts to swing the other way.



Fig. 2: Anna Eyre, Rodrigo Toscano, and James Belflower performing the body movement poem "SPINE."

Photo by Dan Wilcox (March 10, 2009 at the University at Albany, SUNY).

By turns Beckettian and Ionesco-esque, Toscano's project eschews characters in favor of nameless and/or numbered "voices," which allows him to explore polis/poiesis in and as a series of competing and contested commitments, highlighting contradictions and overlaps through slight shifts in pace and tonal register. Thus, the anonymous cultural workers that populate much of the book morph into middle managers or ad executives or MLA presenters (and back again), in what might be described as a poetics of polyvocality *and* as parody of the same, somewhere between "Fight the power!" and PowerPoint

(one of the book's most memorable refrains is "Scrolling" "Pointing" "Clicking" "Selecting"). In its simultaneously tic-like and mantric role call of revolutionaries (heroic and otherwise), from Evo Morales to Hugo Chávez to W.E.B. DuBois to Rubén Darío (!), *Collapsible Poetics Theater* asks: can the cultural work of poetry (and culture more generally) provide an alternative to the glib neo-liberal power lunch, or are the internationalist/Marxist avant-gardists simply aping the lingua franca of global co-opt? Can a poetics of openness actually open anything, or must it remain comic relief from the logic of collapsing borders/markets/identities? All this is hard to grasp from a cursory reading of the book—a line like **"Does anyone here have a developed sense of bookspeak?"** (112, bold in the original), the closing refrain of the body movement poem "Spine," comes across as mostly snarky and sarcastic on the page; it is only in performance that the question comes alive as a moving, utopian provocation, as an attempt to imagine a participatory poetics of collapsibility where writer/performer, reader/audience, print/sound all bleed into one another in painful, hopeful ways.

Toscano's Marxist/border transnationalism poses a challenge to performance studies scholars who assume as default political horizon the discourses and institutions of liberal multiculturalism, so that nonwhite performance is always minoritarian and supplementary, always a kind of deliberative community empowerment that shadows the democratic institutions of the nation-state.² Against the open-access, open-market model of slam, Toscano posits poetry as a damaged form of publicness: a collapsible poetics would embody the failure of poetry's publics, either as parody or condition of possibility or, more likely, as both. Perhaps CPT's most important contribution is its careful positioning: its embrace of border vistas that allow it to operate both inside and outside of various power grids, its insistence on a constructivist/materialist mode that fuses theoretical reflection and embodied praxis, rejecting fiat and a prioris.³ The border becomes an opportunity to cross-pollute bodies, nations, and archives, pushing us away from empowerment metaphors and towards uncomfortable encounters with the sited yet digitizable body.

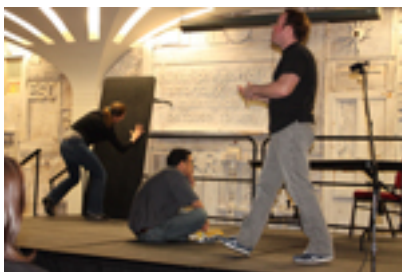


Fig. 3: Anna Eyre, Rodrigo Toscano, and James Belflower performing the body movement poem "SPINE."

Photo by Dan Wilcox (March 10, 2009 at the University at Albany, SUNY).

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In 2004, about a year after meeting Toscano, I was drafted to perform with him at the Poetry Project what would become the last piece in *Collapsible Poetics Theater*. I remember it as an experience at once exciting, challenging, and annoying. As a poet/performer, I was now dispensing Brechtianized vernacular, and felt like I was both performing the score of my own alienation and shouting out my (our) own complicity with the insincere modes of publicness (the Broadway slams! the vanity retreats and residencies! the hustling for gigs! the blog sniping!) that shape contemporary poetry.

In a way, the most frustrating aspect of CPT is precisely its self-selecting nature: operating more-or-less firmly within the self-contained networks of the experimental poetry scene⁴, at times the project appears to be preaching to the choir. If it avoids the facile community politics of an open-access or democratizing conception of poetry, in its one-off quality and its dependence on poetry circuit designated hitters it also appears to foreclose the kind of repository of cultural memory of, say, the Teatro Campesino or the Black Arts Repertory Theaters. For all the terrain Toscano opens up with his turn from language poetry to performance (especially in the less text-based and more body-centric pieces like "Spine"), in its less interesting moments CPT could be seen, from a performance-centered point of view, as far more metapoetics than embodied poetics, too dependent on discursivity and negative critique and too tentative in its explorations of the sited body.



Fig. 4: Natalie Knight and Rodrigo Toscano performing the poetics dialogue "BALM TO BILK."

Photo by Dan Wilcox (March 10, 2009 at the University at Albany, SUNY).

What CPT lacks in full-contact, however, is more than made up for by the imaginaries it opens up, especially for those of us invested in an optics of trans-American performance. The kinetic yet kinless (defamiliarizing) quality of Toscano's poetics of opening was apparent throughout his 10 March 2009 performance at the New York State Writers Institute at the University at Albany,

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where I now teach. It was my first time seeing a full-fledged CPT performance, though I had been following the project's development online, and had seen a number of Toscano's solo performances over the years. In addition to my institutional role as presenter and faculty moderator for the evening, at Toscano's request, I also performed one of the four voices from "Truax Inimical." As I tongue-twisted my way through the translingual and transnational provocations, trying to gauge audience response (guarded laughter, some confusion), I was reminded that innovative poetics, on or off the page, are always about complex ways of reacting and relating, working from and against the functionality of language. *Collapsible Poetics Theater* was chosen in 2007 for the prestigious National Poetry Series, in many ways the institutional public face of the poetry business in the United States, yet its relevance stretches beyond this realm of official literature. Toscano's project points to ways of reading and making beyond the insularity and built-in politics of merely oppositional poetics (whether textualist or body-centric). What CPT puts forward, in its many permutations, is a practice-centered politics of (personal/ communal/ institutional) positioning, back and forth from poetics to theater, from instigation to institution, from border to hemisphere.

Urayoán Noel is Assistant Professor of English at the University at Albany, SUNY. His recent poetry and performance works include the book/CD *Boringkén* (Ediciones Callejón/La Tertulia, 2008) and the performance/sound installation *trill set*, based on digital (mis)translations of César Vallejo's *Trilce*. A contributing editor of *Mandorla: New Writing from the Americas*, he is currently at work on a book-length study entitled *In One Breath: Nuyorican Poetries on and off the Page, 1964-2009*.

Notes

¹ See the essays by Lorenzo Thomas and Maria Damon in Charles Bernstein's edited volume *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford UP, 1998).

² I am thinking of Jill Dolan's analysis of *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* in her *Utopia in Performance*.

³ For a similarly charged border constructivism, see the Youtube video "voice exchange rates" by Tijuana writer (and Toscano ally) Heriberto Yépez. What Yépez and Toscano have in common is a post-1990s move away from reading the border metaphysically, as the liminal oppositional site par excellence. As such, their work seems to respond to some criticism of earlier work on related themes: Claire Fox took Guillermo Gómez Peña's *Border Brujo* to task for its border metaphysics, and more recent essays by Marcial González and Maria Josefina Saldaña warn against the one-size-fits-all liminality of much Chicano/a and border theory.

⁴ Toscano was well-known within the Bay Area poetry scene, and since moving to New York has become an important figure in the downtown poetry community based in and around the

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Poetry Project.