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Borders between truth, perception (Book Review) By David Mills

Since the early 1990s, cafe habitues have been exposed to poetry and performance dubbed spoken word. Poets of color Major Jackson, Natasha Trethewey, and Edwin Torres have flourished largely apart from this movement, concentrating on developing their craft on the page. Jackson and Trethewey, specifically, honed their skills as members of the Boston-based Dark Room Collective.

Jackson's first book of poetry, "Leaving Saturn," paints numerous portraits of an urban artist as a young man. The book is divided into four parts. The first - "Urban Renewal" - situates the reader in inner-city Philadelphia, which Jackson's imaginative powers transform into a character. This section is informed by the sublime lyricism of Derek Walcott's "Bounty." And though a fine poem, Jackson's "II" flirts with creatively plagiarizing Walcott's "Signs/I."

Part 2 nostalgically explores Jackson's youth from b-ball bravura to drug dabbling. Throughout, the poet, depicting inner-city activities as palimpsests, encourages the reader to recognize his peers' complexity, guys who might be smoking weed but who can philosophize about transcendental numbers, too. The phantasmagoric "Pest" finds Jackson and a police officer - an entomologist in a former life - mesmerized by "the laughter of termites inside a tenement wall." While being frisked, Jackson describes his body as a "sad, dark shell." His vivid drug-dealing portrayal elicits sympathy rather than contempt.

Part of Jackson's savvy is that he pacifically renders his potentially unnerving inner-cityscapes in both formal and free-verse environments. Confronting the mass media's caricatures of hard-core rappers, Jackson sculpts multilayered, urban black males. Part 3, peppered with the voice of avant-garde pianist Sun Ra, is anchored by America's classical music: jazz. Ra, as subject matter, brings an idiosyncratic element to Jackson's lyricism. Though a thematic potpourri, Part 4 contains poems that transport Jackson to bucolic environs like Cape Cod.

Ultimately, "Leaving Saturn" is an homage to the inner-city ugly duckling, which, through Jackson's humanistic powers, is transformed into a swan. While describing a woman doing a girl's hair, he asserts: "I pledged my life ... to braiding her lines to mine ... to anointing these streets I love with all my mind's wit." Jackson's verse insists that if you find yourself wandering down ghetto streets, they might be mean, but they are also multifaceted.

Natasha Trethewey's second book, "Bellocq's Ophelia," also explores how perception is, at best, littered with half-truths. These persona poems present an octoroon prostitute, imaginatively named Ophelia, living in the pleasure palaces of early-20th-century Storyville, New Orleans's red-light district. Divided into three sections, Trethewey's period piece covers Ophelia's life from October 1910 to March 1912. Sections 1 and 2 contain 15 letters; Section 3 has 10 sonnets.

Trethewey found her protagonist in 33 pictures of passing courtesans taken by photographer E. J. Bellocq. (Ophelia's father is white, but she doesn't seem burdened by racial self-hatred or pathologies.) The majority of Bellocq's photos are seductive nudes and not conservatively dressed like Ophelia. Trethewey's choice mirrors her formal exactitude and thematic fastidiousness. In relating her customers' peccadilloes, Ophelia tells us, "There are those whose desires I cannot commit to paper." Trethewey's restrained ear and eye lead to metaphorical epiphanies, such as when Ophelia admits in "Letter From Storyville," "I am the African Violet for the promise of the wild continent hidden beneath my white skin."

Ophelia possesses a robust interiority and intellectual curiosity. Her intelligence becomes a form of resistance. Her customers might have dominion over her body but not her mind. Ophelia relishes and resents memory and realizes how the "camera fastens us to our pasts." She desires freedom from it. But Ophelia's story unfolds through childhood reveries and letters to a hometown pal, Constance.

Shakespeare's deranged Ophelia - captured in English painter J. E. Millais's portrait, which Trethewey writes about - inevitably comes to mind. No tragic mulatto, Trethewey's main character is mentally stable. This book is no sophomore slump, but Trethewey could benefit from tonal and vernacular abandon. In all of her verse, the most compelling voices are the sassy ones: Countess P and Domestic Work's Aunt Sugar.

In "Vignette," Bellocq envisions Ophelia: "Imagine her ... - after the flash, blinded - stepping out of the frame, wide-eyed into her life." Ophelia goes from Bellocq's objectified subject to amateur photographer. Ultimately, she longs to escape the prison of technology and circumstance. Trethewey's Ophelia insists that one can't judge a book by its prim cover photo.

Edwin Torres is the only one of this trio who solidified his reputation in New York's spoken-word venue, the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. His second publication, "The All-Union Day of the Shock Worker," is composed of five idiosyncratic sections with interludes printed on gray paper. Life's gray areas, perchance? These breathers are lyrical vacations from Torres's linguistic tornadoes. He brings a painterly sensibility to his layouts, switching graphics and organic forms within, and between, poems. Torres emulates the collage work of Kevin Schwitter (Pop Art's grandfather), which explores how fragments hit and miss.

The second section of "All-Union" is divided into 16 "scenes." The brash third section engages cantankerous playwright Steve Cannon's dramas. Here, Torres's Spanglish tics coexist alongside his mass-media neologisms like "Span Si" (C-Span?). He is singularly bilingual: Spanish and English; sights and sounds. Section 4 reads like opening a Mac computer attachment on a PC. Section 5, entitled "Nuyo Futurists Manifestiny," explores the porous borders between Spanish and English. Throughout this section, he creates sardonic Spanish-English footnotes like "the h is silent the pple aren't."

Torres's sonic logic veers between conundrums ("There are Mondays in my Fridays"), sly lyricism ("Language is what creates us let's create something greater than you or I let's create us"), quirky ruminations ("Who gets this if there isn't a who there?"), and grammatical spasms ("Might that involve more involve?"). His uncensored psychobabble should be rolled around in the mouth - and mind - like linguistic butterscotch.

But Torres is a creature of the information age, and his "language" can read like information overload. And T. S. Eliot once asserted, "Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" The latter feels mechanical. The former is tempered by experience. Torres's first fully published book, "Fractured Humorous," was lyrically nuanced. "All-Union" pushes his already distended envelope of ideas to tatters. When reading Torres, Rainer Maria Rilke's "Letters to a Young Poet" comes to mind: "Do not look for the answers ... live the question." What ponderous questions Torres poses. Earlier, Rilke insists: "You stand before beginnings." "All-Union"'s first section is entitled "Unfinished Beginnings" - things that make you go "Hmm."

-David Mills is a freelance critic and poet.

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