

SLOG

BOOKS

Tommy Pico's *IRL* Is Better Than the Internet

by [Rich Smith](#) • Jul 26, 2016 at 12:46 pm

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 Tommy Pico's poetry is hilarious, thoughtfully sassy, politically sophisticated, and loaded with language play.

In his debut book of poems, *IRL*, Tommy Pico filters the internet's endless feeds through poetry. NIQUI CARTER

Tommy Pico has TWO new books of poetry coming out, both from presses who typically publish very good work. First up is his first full-length book, *IRL*, forthcoming from Birds LLC. The second is *Nature Poem*, which will be published by Portland-based book purveyors, Tin House. If you are wondering whether it's weird for someone to have a second book contract signed before the first book even comes out, I can tell you that yes, yes it is a little weird. But after reading Pico's work, and after seeing him read, you get why presses are getting excited. You should be getting excited, too.

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IRL is a high-velocity 98-page long poem with several places to stop along the way and catch your breath. In classic long poem fashion, *IRL* begins with an invocation of the Muse, a beloved who inspires the poet's speaker to sound off. Throughout, Pico experiments with refrain, little clusters of rhyming activity, and other forms of language play that serve to

bind the poem's many thematic elements together. Text-speak colors but doesn't overwhelm Pico's chatty, attitude-heavy lines. The collective effect of these choices is a feeling of immediacy—you feel as if you're inside the head of a confidant, watching his brain spark around topics as seemingly divergent as blood quantum and salt 'n' vinegar chips.

The poem's speaker is off the Rez, in Brooklyn, on Grindr, and full of declarative statements about injustices related to queerness and indigenous people, philosophical queries about the redemptive possibilities of poetry, and praise for Beyoncé and Mariah.

He's also fucking hysterical, sometimes in corny, pun-based ways. I won't list one of the book's puns here, because it would be cruel. A pun alone is terrible. But a pun within the context of a poem radiates with meaning. In the case of *IRL*, the wordplay signals a speaker who cannot help himself. He has to make the joke. Because wordplay is pleasurable, sure, but also because it offers an agreeable pathway through the unknown. One word suggests another, for instance, and reveals some heretofore hidden idea. If you keep following the path—from phase, to moon, to mons, etc.—you might discover something about yourself and about the world around you.

(But I don't mean to oversell the pun thing. Mostly the jokes are clever, the political commentary is strong and evidence of an exasperated and reaching soul, and the level of melancholy reflection is sophisticated and self-aware.)

This Saturday, Pico is **reading at Hugo House** with two other indigenous poets, Seattle's Elissa Washuta and Portland's Demian DinéYazhi'. (Pico grew up on the Viejas Indian reservation of the Kumeyaay Nation.) Last Sunday I called him up to talk about *IRL* and *Nature Poem*.

You seem to have some kind of nickname on the internet. Teebs?

Teebs is a name that stuck in high school. I'm sure I had a clever story for it at one point, but I don't remember it anymore. It was something my best friends called me. But it's my familiar greeting, which is why I named my **Tumblr** and my zine series that.

You invoke the muse in *IRL!* Classic long poem technique.

When I started writing [the poem] I didn't know what I was doing. I wrote it as a very long Tumblr post. I wanted to write something extremely long so that it would overtake the entire feed, a Tumblr post that would cascade past the traditional Tumblr attention span. You'd be scrolling and scrolling and scrolling and you could never get away from the poem. That was the initial experiment, and that's what kept me going. As for the Muse in the very beginning—I just wanted to have a different name for this person I had a crush on.

How did the form of Tumblr influence the content of the poem?

When I started writing poems on Tumblr, I was competing with dick picks and cat gifs. I had to make my voice sharper and clearer so that after reading the first couple of words you would want to go to the next word. If I failed, you would just scroll down. So part of it was competition with the feed itself. There's this idea that our attention spans have been watered down or erased, and part of the challenge was seeing how long I could hold someone's attention.

Did any poetry influence your turn to the long poem?

A Tape for the Turn of the Year by A.R. Ammons. He'd written the poem on a piece of adding tape. There were words that were truncated, and they seemed like a really long text message.

You said your grandmother is the last person in your family who knows Kumeyaay? Did you ever learn it?

When I was younger I learned Kumeyaay. My dad was a tribal chairman and my mom worked three jobs. A woman from one of the Kumeyaay villages stayed with us and watched me while my parents were gone. She didn't speak English, and so I learned Spanish and Kumeyaay. I was super young, I didn't know I was learning the language, of course. But later on I didn't have anybody to practice with. There was a legislative push to cleanse American Indian people of their language and culture. The same policies didn't exist in Mexico, and so the language is very much alive there.

Why do you feel as if it's important to preserve that language?

I think that—it's a sense that I tried to impart in *IRL*, that there is something primordially indigenous and Kumeyaay about me that I don't have access to any longer. [The speaker] feels as if he's bereft of spirituality and language—that sense of absence and that sense of loss is just something you live with. But that connection to Kumeyaay, that understanding that he is of the ancient language, that can allay some of the grief. I suspect anyway, I don't know.

In the book you mention smoking weed and talking about the idea that people are composed of the consciousnesses that came before them, and that if we're merely descendants of those consciousnesses, then really people have known each other for hundreds of years. Are you into that notion?

I was when I wrote that. And I reconnect to that idea under the influence of herbal treats. But I'm a little bit more of a skeptic when my consciousness is unadulterated by certain things. There's something inside of me that does believe that I owe, on a secular level, my life and my livelihood to my ancestors who wanted to survive. So I do feel like there's a heft

of people lifting me up. In that sense I can get behind the idea that consciousnesses can exist outside of their bodies. But no one idea is set in stone with me! I can learn something tomorrow that will change the way I think about something.

There's lots of Mariah and Beyoncé in this poem. You sing their songs in Karaoke?

Depends on the mood that I'm in. If I am starting out in a relatively sober state, I might choose something safer. To ring the joint on a couple of shots and a beer, I might stunt a little bit more. I have a really flexible voice, so I can approximate singing in a lot of different styles. Right now I feel like my go-to song is "Hold On We're Going Home." I really like to sing, "That's the Way Love Goes" by Janet Jackson, because that's a song that everyone forgets they remember. Careless whisper by George Michael—that saxophone hits and everybody knows what it is.

"That's the Way Love Goes" is kind of a downer.

I don't mind bringing it down.

When did you start singing karaoke?

I sang at church a lot when I was younger. I sang a lot until I was made aware by other people that I had a very girly-sounding voice. And it became, like—when you're a young queer person, sometimes your voice can be a danger, your voice can expose you in ways you don't really control. So I stopped singing. I wouldn't raise my hand and speak in class. I got very self-conscious of my voice. It wasn't until my mid-20s when I came back to my voice and I said, "I'm the shit. This sounds awesome." I could get up in front of people and feel empowered by it.

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How's *Nature Poem* going to be different from *IRL*? Is it also a long poem?

It is a long poem. I see it as a sequel of sorts to *IRL*. The 'T' in *Nature Poem*, the hero of the poem, is still just trying to figure it all out. He suspects that poetry or singing or art or whatever is a thing that is waiting for him, or is an access point for a higher power or something. He's deciding to take on the legacy of American nature poetry, and the ways in which, as an American Indian person, he doesn't want to write a nature poem because it's too stereotypical. So the book is about him not wanting to write a nature poem and in effect writing a nature poem.

Do you feel some sort of low-level hum of antagonization when reading a nature poem?

One of the ways I feel suspicious about nature poetry is the way in which it presents indigenous American people as though they're part of the natural landscape, as though they're one with the natural landscape, and that dehumanizes them. If they're just another feature of the land, then it's okay to mow them down like grass.

But not all nature poems have Native American people in them, right?

No, but it's sort of that Emersonian idea of nature as this domain of purity or essential goodness. I don't know, I don't believe it. That's the thing the character in *Nature Poem* is not vibing with. He's like, "I live in a city, I give blowjobs in bathrooms, I don't give a fuck. I'll slap a tree across the face."

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