

INTERVIEW WITH LOUIS REYES RIVERA

Eric Serrano

Known as the Janitor of History, Louis Reyes Rivera is an award winning poet, essayist, teacher, activist, and host of a weekly radio show, *Perspective*, on Pacifica's WBAI (99.5 FM) in New York City. The author of three books of poetry (*Who Pays The Cost, This One For You, and Scattered Scriptures*), he has recently completed a 150-page epic poem, *Jazz in Jail*, a historical tribute to both the music and the incarcerated. He has edited numerous anthologies, most recently *The Bandana Republic* (2008), a collection of writings from former and current gang members, and continues to perform and lecture on writing and social struggle. Rivera has taught courses in Pan-African, African-American, Caribbean, and Puerto Rican literature and history at numerous colleges. He appeared on HBO's *Def Poetry* program. Since 1997, students at University of Massachusetts Amherst host a major annual Spoken Word program in which they present to selected cultural workers the *Louis Reyes Rivera Lifetime Achievement Award* in his honor.

Q *In your essay, "Inside The River of Poetry," you wrote: "Every human has a poem to write, a compulsion to contemplate out loud, an urge to dig out that ore of confusion locked up inside." What "ore of confusion" has poetry helped you to unlock?*

Certainly what *I have seen* and what I hear is confusion. That's because mediocrity rules over any attempt at excellence. I look at the president or the queen and I automatically submit to their authority just because he is president and she is queen and I'm saying *No No No*. There's something that is unnatural in the way that caste system works and it confuses us because it is unnatural, yet we work within its frame. We get locked up in trying to make ends meet within someone else's structure. Still, we have the capacity to help change that structure, and if we get through the confusion, we can see a way (in poetry) to help change things. You can't change it by yourself but you can contribute and that should be enough.

Q *Why do they call you the “Janitor of History?”*

The janitor is the person who has to clean up the mess that others left behind. (Laughs). He knows everybody’s business. So when it comes to history, I’m the guy who pops up and shows you where the dirt is and who swept what under which rug or into what closet.

Q *You are an educator, but you’ve spoken out about our education system, its specificity, its pedantic literary canon, and its poor resources in urban communities. You were self-taught from age fifteen until, in your early twenties, you sought an undergraduate degree. How important was this self-journey?*

My mother taught me how to read when I was barely four and I took to liking to read. I uncovered both an interest and a capacity to write. None of my teachers ever encouraged me to consider the possibility that writing as a career would be the thing. *No not for you, you’re Puerto Rican. You’re not supposed to write, not in English. You’re not one of us.*

If you are going to be that thing then you are that thing now. But school was not going to be the place I would rely on to get what I needed. So I had to engage my own understanding. The bookstore, the library, (back then) the local bar, and the streets became the basis for my curriculum. I knew there was a lot about writing I didn’t know, but I was willing to engage in searching for it. From age 15 to 29, I taught myself to do, what you call the implicit or the inference—I learned to read even the spaces between the words. See, all of that studying and I found that I wasn’t in the book. I had to hunt down all of the missing pages in my college years because I kept bumping into those blank pages in every textbook. There were blank pages that were unfilled and you have to fill them in, otherwise the purpose for education gets lost. So after college I reengaged in self-education to hunt Puerto Rican, Caribbean, African American, African literature and history. By 1986, I was considered an expert because my poetry was already reflecting the historical in addition to the immediacy of speech.

Q *It has been said that those who write history can, in turn, control it. Do you think this holds true for poetry? How does your work represent the historical tradition? How does it represent the contemporary?*

You have to become the metaphor that you’re exploring. You can’t be an outsider looking in, you’ve got to be an insider looking out. You’ve got

to be willing to stand *outside* of yourself to get *inside of ourselves*. If you're going to take writing seriously, don't simply be what the textbook canon says to be because that's only one aspect of it. We've been writing for at least twelve thousand years, that's how much literature there is. You can't be monolithic. There's a whole range of possibilities, there's no such thing as just simply one peculiar voice that you have and you develop. There's so much that you can realize and it takes your whole life to do that.

Q *In Scattered Scripture, you've expressed how the poems are chapters in a book, representing emotions from different eras of history. Can you expand on this?*

It took me twenty one years to complete because they were all going to be poems rooted in history and I was still finding the stuff out myself. So they're chronological in the sense of what period I'm reflecting upon but they're not chronological in the sense of when I wrote them.

Scattered Scripture reflects upon those issues and questions that are often dissed even in the sense of disrespected. In terms of the official canon, the official text book, those missing pages help to explain more about ourselves. And yes in chronological order according to the event so that you get a sense that you are looking at the missing chapters, each poem being another aspect of that, including a view about the indigenous populations.

Q *In your poem "(continuum)" from Scattered Scripture you wrote, "he does not know that much / but knows enough to know / the gap between the friction / of another aging generation / disallows a firmer grip on how & why / to mold these days / beyond the grave of repetition." What did you mean by that?*

Each generation has a way of misunderstanding itself. And continuum speaks to that. I'm not trying to rewrite *his*-story, I'm trying to *clarify* the relationship between yesterday's He, today's He, and tomorrow's He, and that's not gender by the way, that's entity. My generation blamed the proceeding generation for leaving us with these ills, that they had an opportunity to confront the issue and they didn't. That's a misunderstanding of history and so "(continuum)" speaks to that too. That we can't do that, we have to appreciate each moment for what it is, it's part of one long history. Where does the river begin? There is no beginning and no end

to the river. The precipitation from the ocean rises up into the air, comes down as snow and rain, onto the mountain, into streams, into rivers, so the river flows right into the ocean again, its one whole continuum; so too is human history. Each generation has its own set of conditions that it must learn to confront; when it does so, in and of itself it misses a point about “(continuum).” When it does so more within the context of the past as well as the future, then it is a clearer engagement of social struggle. Social struggle is *always* there, it’s as old as ass whoopin’ itself.

Q *In your opinion, what does the new generation of urban/ethnic poets bring to the table? Are their voices validated? Are contemporary poets knowledgeable about and reflective of those who came before?*

I have born witness (if you will) to a certain hunger among the younger generation. The problem is that technology and corporate absorption of so much has distorted the direction of that hunger in terms of how you’re going to satisfy it. So you have these younger folks paying more attention to the glitter and the glamour than they do the substance in their lives. There are those however who do hunger for the substance; they have to be willing to break with their own present. They have to get into the past as well. They need to hunt the information down themselves.

Q *You are part of the Jazzoets, a jazz group with three CDs to date. Your work draws on beat, rhythm, and the call-and-response technique. How has jazz—or music in general—influenced your work?*

It comes from here like I do: I grew up with jazz just like I grew up with rhythm and blues, doo-wop, church music, salsa, the mambo and merengue, the bolero, the plena and the bomba. Since ‘96, I’ve been working with musicians as another way of exploring the possibilities that poetry has for a public rendering. I create music with the poems that I write. Having laid down a good foundation for a solo poet, a natural extension is to delve into those other possibilities to explore a marriage between them. There was a time in history when you didn’t separate the song from the dance, from the poem, from the voice, from the instrument; they were all together. It’s European culture that separates and categorizes everything instead of seeing the commonality that runs like a seam between the parts of a dress or a pair of pants. And then there’s a seamlessness that you want to arrive at.

Q *The Bandana Republic: A Literary Anthology by Gang Members and their Affiliates, which you co-edited with Bruce George, includes literary works by ex-gang members-turned-activists, artists, and musicians. Why is it important to help people who have lived outside the mainstream find a venue in which their voices and talents can be heard?*

In order for there to be a literary movement you must take into account the degrees of difference between the worst and the best. You've got to understand that literature does not exist inside of one person, but in many. It is like the teaching of history. If you take a droplet of water out of the river and treat the droplet as if it's the whole river itself, you end up missing out on the trillion droplets that make a river possible. You need all of it. It's not just about Louis Reyes Rivera, it's about that entire generation that makes him possible. That needs to be appreciated.

Q *Scattered Scriptures serves as a timeline of history. Tell us how your latest work, the 150-page epic poem, Jazz in Jail, came about.*

This project began roughly seven years ago. What happens if Jazz (personified) gets busted and put in jail? For what? For trying to bring the music together. For trying to stand against the exploitation of music by the music industry. So, I had an opportunity in this poem: to pay homage to poetry, to pay homage to the music, to show you the conditions inside a prison and inside the court room, and I could even trace the history of it.

Jazz, the poem begins, realizes that the music has been exploited to the max and that Jazz is no longer the progenitor of the art form. So Jazz decides to try to bring together all of the music that comes out of the Diaspora—Reggae, Samba, Mambo, Calypso, Merengue, Hard bop, Cool bop, Be bop, the Blues, Mother Blues (the mother of Jazz), Grandpa Dirge, Grandma Praise Song, Work Song, Birth Song, the Chant—into one huge convention of the music, a family reunion—*Let's discuss our condition*. Lo and behold in the middle of this discourse, a terrorist task force raids the place and arrests as many as possible. The rest of the book, once this is laid out, is back and forth from court to jail, court to jail, until the issue is resolved. I thought that *Scattered Scriptures* would be my definitive collection. It's turning out that *Jazz in Jail* is going to tell *Scattered Scriptures* to move over.

Q *Where will Louis Reyes Rivera stand in the history books?*

I would like to be remembered as a poet who cared and who served

as a bridge between the various currents of the underclass. I hung out with forty dudes as a teenager; I'm the only one of the forty who graduated from high school on time. I owed them something because they helped nurture me. Remember that saying, "the pen is mightier than the sword." Well, I needed to hone that, but not to lie. That's why I'm not a rich writer. Poet? In this culture? *Brother, you ain't going to make no money, so what are you after?* Clarity and understanding of the human capacity to do, *to not blindly accept* the conditions that are imposed upon us even before we are born.

EXCERPTS FROM *JAZZ IN JAIL*

Louis Reyes Rivera

BENEATH THIS MAZE

Beneath
this maze of flat roof & razor wire
a rectangular world of brick & wall
built atop a speck of earth
abandoned even by the rays of the moon
that can't break in or out
through grated screens
of frosted glass in tiny squared designs

The sun does not shine or glare in here
the rain neither pours nor sprays
thick drops or tiny cadence
& the flat wind is but a whisper bare
a droning echo hardly heard & never felt
snow & sleet, hail & heat
are but figments of a glimpse recalled

Inside
these halls of cinder block locks

dull painted gates & iron bars
naked walls & checkpoint booths
a walk along & down any corridor
of doubled up lines single file & silent
is the closest Jazz can come
to caress a breeze without a touch
to the smell of green

yet whenever Jazz could catch
one quick glimmer of a world beyond these walls
the sound played, the thought heard
could sometimes even reach above
the razored edge of coiled wire
layered on top the upside squares
of space & silver fence
but only as imagination to the what of was
remembering a long ago

Inside

a mess hall for Jazz is not a CO's cafeteria
no fried chicken, no collard greens here
no sweet potato yams
no salad bowl or salad dressing
no carefully prepared lemonade
no kernalled rice warm & steamed
no double layered cake for dessert
only jello jugglin or vanilla powdered pudding served

For Jazz

it's a regimen of frozen patties on the plate
: patty veal, patty chicken, patty burgers, patty pork
dried to the crisp of hate
flakes & milk called mashed potatoes
with icicles dangling on the borders
of frozen vegetables mixed & lingering still
like the powdered milk & powdered eggs
damned by God & Satan too

From inside out
the woods are but a distant dream
where trees & hills of breasted slopes
recall the paths of earth brown trails
slightly mounded amid
broken twigs & fallen leaves
remaining but the substance of
a moment long gone then
when then was known to live
as now is but a plastered wall
with cot & sink & toilet bowl
a place to play the longing
in a lonely chord called Jazz.

TACTICAL SEARCH

Quiet
like the night they come
like a low keyed roll
across the skins of tom toms
steady steppin leather boots
the swish of brush on cymbals
the stomp & stamp
of trump trump tramp tramp
marching through the halls

they don't come by one or two
but five abreast & ten lines deep
blue cloth suits with rubber vests & helmets
face guards made from plastic hard
riot sticks & billy clubs cut from oak
like the brown shirts of yesterday's liturgy
or the hooded sheets of hatred so depraved
a smirk & snicker accompany the march

they charge into your cell
pin you up against the bars or walls
kneejerk kicks & night sticks striking
they bend your head into a toilet's bowl
overthrow your mattress
assassinate your books
expropriate your papers
settin fire to your clothes
then blame the flames on cigarettes & ashes

& you stand there listening to an old tune
as the fifty leave your cell
order you to strip down bare
turn around
bend back down
take your palms
arch them cheeks
while the captain tells a doctor
decked in plastic gloves
to enter your domain
fingers greased inserted in between
the silent clefs of a melody that had lost its mind.