Hoffmeister, Robert J.
Reseña de "SIGNING IN PUERTO RICAN: A HEARING SON AND HIS DEAF FAMILY" de Andrés Torres
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

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people with limited incomes will be unable to stick around to enjoy the benefits.
The author moves us to a more dynamic understanding of gentrification that has real
roots on the ground and in people’s hearts, but at the same time never forgets the
central role of political, economic, and social inequality.

Martinez focuses solely on the Puerto Ricans of the Lower East Side, leaving
out Jewish and East European and Chinese communities, each of which has played
an important role in the struggles and the imagination of public places, and each
of which brings cultures and practices that have been at times at odds with the
commodification of space and gentrification. She does not pursue in depth the
role of assimilation and generational and class differences within the Puerto Rican
community, nor does she explore the implications of increasing transnationalism
and the pan-Latino identities. However, she does consider the broader trends of
globalization and the rising claims for the right to the city.

While the book looks at Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s policies promoting “the
luxury city,” it would have been interesting to contrast his extensive efforts to brand
himself as a “Green Mayor” through his long-term sustainability plan (PlaNYC2030)
with the “green” instincts of the gardeners. Bloomberg’s proposals to plant a million
street trees while laying more concrete and asphalt for a million new residents are
significant. There is no place in the long-term plan for community gardens, local
food, or the growing community-based movements to improve access to healthy,
culturally appropriate food and open space. The city is going from casitas to condos.

In sum, this is new and important scholarship that makes a significant
contribution to the literature on gentrification and Puerto Rican New York. It is
truly multidisciplinary; it should be useful in the classroom and also appeal to a broad
audience. Power At The Roots would be an excellent text for urban studies and social
sciences (including sociology, psychology, political science, anthropology), as well as
Puerto Rican and Latino studies, at the undergraduate and graduate levels. There are
other books on the Lower East Side, including From Urban Village to East Village, edited
by Janet Abu-Lughod (Blackwell, 1994); William Sites’ Remaking New York (University
of Minnesota Press, 2003); and Christopher Mele’s Selling the Lower East Side the city
as a whole. But none of these focuses on the process “at the roots” or is written from
the vantage point of Puerto Rican New Yorkers. Lance Freeman’s There Goes the Hood
(Temple University Press, 2006) makes an attempt to dig deeper in Harlem but is too
simplistic to be convincing. Power at the Roots belongs in a small league of nuanced
works, such as Arlene Dávila’s Barrio Dreams (University of California Press, 2004),
which focused more on East Harlem but also got close to the roots.

**Signing in Puerto Rican: A Hearing Son and His Deaf Family**

By Andrés Torres


200 pages; $34.95 [paper]

**REVIEVER:** Robert J. Hoffmeister, Boston University

*Signing in Puerto Rican*, by Andres Torres, is an autobiographical account of a
hearing child growing up in a family of two Deaf parents. Although having two
Deaf parents is a unique enough situation, Torres’ family is also Puerto Rican.
Being Puerto Rican makes Torres a minority within the dominant Hearing culture and having Deaf parents makes him a minority (in Deaf culture) within a minority (Puerto Rican culture). This is not a typical story of a child coming of age in New York City but a story of a child seeking to integrate several identities: Puerto Rican, Catholic, Deaf world, and Hearing world.

A hearing child of Deaf adults is called a *coda* ("child of Deaf adults"). This term is relatively new and was adopted in the literature about twenty-six years ago in a master's thesis by Millie Brother, also a coda. Though Torres grew up before the term “coda” was coined, there existed in the DEAF WORLD a sign that indicated who he was and where he belonged: the sign was MOTHER-FATHER-DEAF, a compound of three signs. Torres had an identity in the DEAF WORLD that placed him in a unique group. Unlike his easy acceptance by the DEAF WORLD, achieving an identity in the Hearing world would be much more difficult. He takes us on a ride to his integration of identities beginning with his opening chapter “The A train” and ending with the acknowledgment of the many borders he must still cross.

During this ride, the reader begins to understand how a child traverses and integrates the attitudes, beliefs, mores, and behavior exemplified by people from several cultures. Torres navigates this complicated terrain of being “other” somewhat similarly to the “double consciousness” of E. B. Du Bois as Torres presents his story as both an insider and an outsider, only his story is a bit more complicated. Most of us only have to contend with two cultural frames, the dominant one in which we live and the immediate one that we tend to live our everyday lives around, a simple “us” vs. “them.” Torres' story expands our understanding of this phenomenon from a unique and little known perspective: that of a hearing child of two Deaf Puerto Rican parents.

Through its socialization, cultural attitudes and beliefs, American society conditions the average citizen to believe that to be Deaf is a negative circumstance in life. This belief is rooted in how the general public and many professionals view people who consider themselves Deaf. We have been conditioned to see deafness as a problem, and those who are Deaf as having a loss of something. Yet, Deaf people, no matter what their ethnic origin, do not view being Deaf as having lost something. The average Deaf parent does not see his or her life as negative as a result of deafness. Instead, they locate the problem in how the Hearing world treats and views them. In this book, we begin to understand how a young child develops into a whole person in the face of this contrasting view of what is valid and what is not.

Torres introduces us to his extended family and we find that his family is not only unique in the Hearing world but also unique in the DEAF WORLD. His mother, father, cousins, aunts, and uncles come from families with extended Deaf lineage in the Las Piedras section of Puerto Rico. This predominance of genetic deafness is quite rare, as approximately 95% of Deaf people are born into hearing families and have hearing children themselves. Family life is centered around Andrew (“Ahtay” as his parents pronounce his name). Since he is an only child, he alone bears the responsibility of managing the border issues between his Deaf parents and the Hearing world. He is the main interpreter or translator when either his parents cross the border with him into the Hearing world or the Hearing world crosses into their home or the DEAF WORLD. One example of the Hearing world crossing into the DEAF WORLD is his father's love of baseball. Ahtay interprets baseball games in sign language as the games are relayed on the radio. Codas are usually very adept at keeping these kinds of border crossings manageable. Crossing the border into the Hearing world requires having to interpret concepts beyond your age of understanding, which can create huge cognitive
dissonance. In his traversing of one cultural boundary after another, we learn how some of this cognitive dissonance is resolved.

In this story, we see that Andrew must grow up essentially on his own. He must find his way in the Hearing world with little guidance from his parents. Luckily for him, a Hearing aunt is available to help answer questions about the Hearing world and to understand how his own immediate family fits into the neighborhood and the world. Andrew will grow up to be a Hearing adult and never have an official place in the DEAF WORLD similar to the one his parents have achieved. As with all children, he must grow up and become someone with an integrated identity. However, he (unlike most codas) does not have a parental model to achieve this. Codas are constantly struggling to understand the norms and values of the Hearing culture. In Andrew’s quest to search for a Hearing person to help him obtain a sense of his identity in contrast to that of his parents, he must cross into other cultural worlds. His parents have one foot in the Catholic world and thus Torres finds himself coping with both the education system and the beliefs of that world.

For Andrew, crossing the border to enter Catholic high school creates an escape. High school is nirvana, as there is no contact with his parents and no need to explain who he is and where he comes from. High school is a place where what he accomplishes and the struggles he entertains are his own and not a reflection of what people feel he must do on behalf of his Deaf parents. This struggle to separate himself from his Deaf parents is a common one among codas.

Torres uses his participation in the struggle for Puerto Rican independence as a metaphor for his life at home. He pours all his energy into the political and personal feelings of belonging to something: the movement to achieve Puerto Rican independence. In Torres’ case, he struggles to be independent without feeling guilty that he is not taking care of his parents, which is an issue faced by almost all codas, especially the oldest female child or (as in Torres’ case) the only hearing child in the family. We see the beginning of his move to achieve an independent identity from his parents when he changes his name from Andrew (Anglo) to Andrés (Puerto Rican).

Eventually, the author comes to see that there is a place for him both in the Hearing world and in the Deaf world through his connection to his Deaf family. Ultimately, he is able to integrate the experience of the boy, Andrew, into the man, Andrés. It takes longer for him to achieve this process, but achieve it he does. Today, Andrés Torres is a successful university professor.

This journey to adulthood demonstrates the pride, the normalcy, and the numerous cultural border crossings of a multicultural family, but it also relates the difficulty Deaf adults face in dealing with society at large and the hurdles a hearing child of Deaf adults must pass through to reach a positive sense of self. This book is for those who are interested in Puerto Rican issues, cultural issues in childhood, issues of Deaf families with hearing children, and those who are interested in cross-cultural relationships involving Deaf people. This book is an easy read, both enjoyable and informative, and filled with much information about new topics not typically encountered in the lives of Hearing people.

NOTES

1 The literature on Deaf people distinguishes between those people with a hearing loss who are members of the Deaf culture by using the capital ‘D’ and those with a hearing loss who identify as more hearing by using the small ‘d.’ I refer to the two cultural worlds using a capital ‘D’ for the DEAF WORLD and a capital ‘H’ for the Hearing world.
DEAF WORLD is taken from H. Lane, R. Hoffmeister, and B. Bahan, A Journey into the DEAF WORLD, San Diego, CA: Dawn Sign Press, 1996. The use of DEAF WORLD in all caps signifies two identities: first, English words in CAPS signify that this is a translation of a signed language form, and second, DEAF WORLD is the English translation of how Deaf people refer to their culture using a specific sign for this term, which we translate as DEAF WORLD.

A World among These Islands: Essays on Literature, Race, and National Identity in Antillean America
By Roberto Márquez
Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010
272 pages; $26.95 [paper]

REVIEWER: Efraín Barradas, University of Florida—Gainesville

Ojos puertorriqueños que miran al Caribe

En 1933 el gran erudito cubano Fernando Ortiz muy sabiamente definió en Caribe —al menos las islas que forman su centro o corazón— con certeras palabras:

Y a fe que no hay en nuestro planeta otra región que presente más diversos fenómenos naturales, más pintorescos episodios, más acentuados contrastes y más goces y dolores humanos que esta miriád de islas conocidas con el nombre de las Antillas.

Estas palabras de Ortiz sirven para presentar de manera sucinta el problema central que tiene todo estudioso de la historia y la cultura caribeñas: la diversidad parece imponer sobre la unidad y esto hace que la búsqueda de rasgos comunes que unan esa magna diversidad que llamamos el Caribe sea un grave problema, cuando no francamente una tarea imposible de cumplir. Aun desde la perspectiva geográfica es difícil definir ese mundo ya que, aunque las islas antillanas forman su núcleo o punto de apoyo, la Cuenca del Caribe se extiende aun más allá de los parámetros del mar que le da nombre e incluye muchas otras tierras. Si dejamos la geografía y empleamos otras perspectivas para definir ese mundo —la historia, la sociología, la antropología, la música, pongamos por caso áreas favorecidas por los caribeñistas— el problema es aun mayor y puede llevar a los estudiosos a incluir en esa entelequia intelectual regiones del norte de Brasil y partes del sur de los Estados Unidos, como le ocurrió a Antonio Benítez Rojo cuando trató de usar los parámetros económicos y sociales de la plantación para definir lo caribeño. Los historiadores y los antropólogos se enfrentan a un problema relativamente menor que los estudiosos que tratan de definir ese mundo desde la perspectiva de las humanidades, especialmente desde la literatura, porque en estos campos la diversidad y el desfase cronológico parecen ser la norma.

Dentro de este problemático contexto es que hay que colocar el más reciente libro de Roberto Márquez, A World Among These Islands: Essays on Literature, Race, and National Identity in Antillean America, donde se intenta ofrecer un panorama de las letras caribeñas producidas en las lenguas europeas que se han convertido en el medio de expresión de esta región: francés, inglés, español y, en menor grado, papiamento, lengua que en parte se deriva del holandés. No sólo intenta Márquez darnos un cuadro