

*THE HAPPY END / ALL WELCOME*  
(UGLY DUCKLING PRESS, 2017)

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Mónica de la Torre

REVIEWED BY TIMOTHY O'KEEFE

In 1980, French theorist Michel de Certeau published *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a work that mines the intricate relationship between the ruling strategies of a technocratic elite and the resulting tactics that common workers employ to shortcut, alchemize, and otherwise disrupt the imposed hierarchy. That may sound like stock Marxist fare, but the book's most elegant sections (at least to this reader) illuminate the activities that constitute the bulk of waking life: working, pretending to work, cooking, cleaning, shopping, getting from here to there, getting on with your neighbors, daydreaming, procrastinating, and so on. With these repeated behaviors, consumers become themselves secondary producers whose product is the innovative performance of common tasks set forth by a ruling elite. This marks a cunning form of resistance without violent overthrows or systemic ruptures. Instead, it refashions the materials, spatial constructs, and cultural conventions by which we live. It redirects the exertions of a power structure that it cannot escape.

Mónica de la Torre's most recent collection of poems, *The Happy End / All Welcome*,<sup>1</sup> directly references de Certeau's work only once,<sup>2</sup> but it's a crucial link to the larger, collaborative project that she's realized. Many artists pay homage to their precursors. "I'm continuing a conversation that began years ago," they sometimes say. De la Torre's collection takes this platitude and makes it a structural principle from the outset:

After Martin Kippenberger's installation "The Happy End of Franz Kafka's *Amerika*" (an assortment of numbered tables and office desks with pairs of mismatched chairs within a soccer field flanked by grandstands) which references a giant job fair held by the Nature Theater of Oklahoma in Kafka's unfinished *Amerika*. (8)

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1. Hereafter referred to as *THE/AW*, which seems to me perfectly aligned with the book's many moments of absurdist hilarity.

2. And this relates to de Certeau's coinage of *la perruque* (French for "the wig"), which describes the process of appearing to work in accordance with an employer's expectations, while in fact working for one's own personal goals.

Kafka never completed his novel, Kippenberger (who never read it) responded with a pop-chic landscaping of its final chapter, and de la Torre populates Kippenberger's vision with an assortment of would-be workers interviewing for jobs: lifeguards, contractors, line cooks, armchair psychologists, guerilla advertisers. In this way, *THE/AW* presents itself as an imaginative iteration of a project that crosses centuries, continents, languages, and genres. As Kafka's protagonist Karl declares (and de la Torre echoes): "Everyone is welcome!"

The individual pieces in *THE/AW* often work serially. One group of poems is titled "Yes or No," with declarative statements that are constantly undercut by the interrogative framing: "So that personnel can move around and up and down and function as vertical machines, office landscapes are sectioned into action offices" (54). Another group offers various "views" from iconic chairs — the Utrecht, the Monobloc, the Womb, the Dodo, the Aeron, etc. — though the views depend not on a shifting landscape, but on slight changes in the sitter's bodily position, which are comedic in their thoroughgoing detail. Yet another group, and one that adds a metatextual lens to the growing polyphony, "advertises" the book itself by providing cheeky sketches of its characters, structure, potential effects, and alleged intentions:

The poems in *The Happy End / All Welcome* start in medias res, no establishing shots for context. Enter the slash: and as well as or and line break. As in voyeurism / exhibitionism / numbered exhibits. It's not just poetry. Is poetry not just — ? Thanks for asking. (80)

The cyclical nature of the book not only mimics the redundancy of job-fair questions, answers, gestures, and small talk, but reifies de Certeau's concept of production-as-consumer-performance. De la Torre's voices are by turns zany, tender, absurd, and mundane — one moment they play their narrative roles in the overarching scene, and in the next, they introduce speech acts that seem bent on breaking those roles. It's a range of inflection that participates in but speaks away from the bureaucratic system imposed on it. This too becomes an order, and like many of de la Torre's poems, it substitutes ambiguity for definitiveness, specificity for trite generalization, generosity for constriction, and whimsicality for austerity. One of the metatextual "Ad Copy" poems begins, "Language round-

abouts that go places, not language about”(89), and this becomes a kind of credo for de la Torre’s whirling creations — they are not poems about an art installation or poems that attempt to resolve what Kafka never finished. Instead, they keep the thrill-ride going while exposing the alienating rigors of corporate acculturation.

*THE/AW* is a work that refuses simple answers to the most compelling questions it raises. Perhaps the most poignant of these is whether we’re finally offered a dystopian or utopian view of the way we live (as refracted through Kafka and Kippenberger). One of the collection’s early poems, “Career Track,” ends with its own unsettling view:

Think about it: Really, it isn’t out of the question that you might be chosen and might one day sit as a worker at your desk and look out of your open window with no worries, for a while. (10)

It’s the “for a while” that sets the spine tingling with the knowledge that you’re never really in the clear, never mind the suggestion that you may never even have a *moment* of feeling in the clear. This kind of heaviness could easily sink a writer without de la Torre’s gifts, and the longer I sit with *THE/AW* and let its roundabouts work their way through, the more keenly I feel its undercurrent of ecstasy. It’s an ecstasy born of a willingness to accept the terms of consumerist culture but not the fulfillment of those terms. It’s the choice of how we cross a street, how we sit in a chair, how we view a city skyline, how we complete any number of seemingly fixed tasks. It’s a freedom that’s easy to ignore or, worse, to never discover at all. De Certeau articulated a version of this freedom almost forty years ago, and de la Torre pays her own homage by improvising on an improvisation of an unfinished work, by reminding us that there’s always room for more. We make the room there is. We populate its space. In this, *THE/AW* is a kind of open circuit, one that invites us into its looping structures without promising how or if things will resolve. And it’s not a matter of coyness or evasion; it’s a matter of joyous proliferation and eschewing any definite claims to knowledge. As de la Torre says in the collection’s final poem, “We don’t know what this is and that is why we like it” (114).