



Book Review

Mind the Tracks

Sosa-Velazquez, Maida. (2018) Niagara Falls, ON: Grey Borders Books.
(saddle stitch paper) CDN\$7; 28 pages

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It might be unusual to review a pocket-sized saddle stitched chapbook of 25 poems like Maida Sosa-Velazquez's *Mind the Tracks*, published by Grey Borders Books, a small press from Niagara Falls, Ontario. *Mind the Tracks* is emblematic of a sea change in the social geography of Lake Ontario. There are different reasons for reading this chapbook as a sample of the next generation of literature coming from Canada's economic Golden Horseshoe.

Sosa-Velazquez was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, and now lives in Etobicoke, a suburb of the Greater Toronto Area. She is a full-time commuter on the provincial government's public commuter GO Train system. For 365 days, she wrote at least one poem about what she observes on the commuter train. The result is a collection of 365 commuter poems that have yet to appear in one book. *Mind the Tracks* is the first selection of those poems to be published in a chapbook.

The economy of Toronto has been radically altered by the policy and planning of provincial and city governments in the 21st century. While the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) has a substantial manufacturing economy, the downtown core of Toronto has shifted into a high-density information-based commercial zone. Workers have been priced out of the Toronto core by a sudden construction boom. The workforce has moved to the suburbs, as far west as Hamilton, as far north as Lake Simcoe, as far east as Oshawa. The GO Train is the pulmonary transit system for thousands of commuters each day.

Likewise, there has been a steady, incremental increase in the size of the newcomer immigrant community to southern Ontario. Toronto has always been the obvious destination for immigrants in Ontario, with many families

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landing in Toronto before either settling in community enclaves, or else bouncing to Oshawa, Mississauga, Oakville, Hamilton, Niagara Falls, Guelph, or London. The last ten years of changing economies and new condominium buildings, however, have narrowed the destinations for the most recent newcomers to the GO Train routes along Lake Ontario's north shore.

Meanwhile, academic sociologists and public policy researchers are now noticing new trends in the diverse multicultural diaspora of the GTA. Racialized and minority families are moving to the suburbs, east to Ajax, Pickering, Oshawa, west to Oakville and Burlington. The movement of second and third generation Canadians is as much a product of new housing opportunities as an attempt to avoid Toronto's racial profiling, which inspires landlords to exploit tenants and police to criminalize youth. Therefore, growing populations of the most culturally unique, mixed language, mixed heritage families, now live in the suburbs and work in Toronto. They are connected by the GO Train. The commuter culture of the GO Train's hour-long journey east, north, and west, is the daily reality of multilingual urban professionals of varying incomes and a railroaded homogenized working-class experience. The GO Transit system is being expanded toward the Niagara Region on the south shore of Lake Ontario, and Grey Borders, as a Niagara Falls publisher, is helping to complete that interconnectivity and the cultural sprawl of the urban GTA into the collective literary consciousness in the areas that the train is promised to one day reach.

Mind the Tracks' 25 poems reveal Maida Sosa-Velazquez has an original voice that is direct, plain spoken, and unpretentious. Her poems present her vision in two directions. Firstly, as an insider, she documents her commuter peers with speculative empathy about what GO riders can feel, think, and react to, while they are confined to a seat with strangers. The train is, in some ways, not a place in itself, but rather in-between places. Commuters are limited by their body's immobility and their overlapping personal space. Sosa-Velazquez documents how their confinement is not necessarily without its own tragic or comic episodes. On "May 24, 2017" Sosa-Velazquez records a woman avoiding the attention of a man by pulling her hair into a closed gesture and "pounding sanctuary on the pages of her book" while the man, "Lowers his lips to a coffee/and sips her." Whether their gaze connects or disconnects them is ambiguous. A mouthful of coffee, he metaphorically "holds her in his mouth/until her heat fades./He swallows./She burns inside." Sosa-Velazquez interprets the small physical gestures that communicate emotion and constitute the interactions of seated strangers in a muted but highly styled, shared daily ritual.

Secondly, as a newcomer and an outsider in a train car full of strangers, Sosa-Velazquez practices a kind of ethnography. Her ethnographic observations separate herself from other travelers. Her vision is wider than theirs. In "May 5, 2017" she observes, "Kids in costumes on phone screens./Kids on beaches on phone screens./Kids piled on other kids on

phone screens.” The kids have a narrowly concentrated gaze on a small patch of digital images in front of them. In contrast, Sosa-Velazquez, reaching for her phone, pauses before checking its texts, “I...rest my hand there for a minute./In the distance, a flock of sparrows take flight.” She notes the urban wildlife outside the train window. There is a context for the commuter experience wider than the GO Train aisle.

Sosa-Velazquez therefore is a dual observer. She is a lyrical voice from the tens of thousands of GO Train peoples. She is developing their literature, a library for a newly created intercultural, intercity lifeworld. She is also an ethnographer, a documentarian of what the others might also see, but only she has chosen to record and report. *Mind the Tracks* with its Go Transit-green tinted cover is pocket sized, purse-ready, like the normal ephemera of a Go rider on their way to and from work. Even though the chapbook is short, it serves as a record of Ontario society from a newcomer’s voice. It also serves as an example of the sort of art that can come from the notes we generate during ethnography and participant action research. In plain voice, presenting interpretation without the adornment of an introduction about theory, *Mind the Tracks* is worthy reading for students of field research or public policy to consider the ways their own work can be translated into literary work, and from literary work into a handy guidebook to the world they create.