

Deborah Miranda. *Raised by Humans*. San Fernando: Tia Chucha Press. 2015. 80pp.

<http://www.nupress.northwestern.edu/content/raised-humans>

Beginning with the title of her third poetry collection, *Raised by Humans* (Tia Chucha 2015), Deborah Miranda conjures the California mission system to reveal its haunting legacy of colonization. Miranda reminds her readers that native Californians, rather than Spanish soldiers and priests, were the humans who harvested the crops, and quite literally raised the adobe walls of the twenty-one California missions. While Spain, Mexico, and then the U.S sought the physical and historical erasure of California Indians, Miranda insists readers recognize their material and cultural contributions. She does not allow us to minimize the impact of the Franciscans who paradoxically sought to raise the souls of “child-like natives” up to heaven while enslaving them behind the adobe walls of the missions. But the speakers of her poems do not live in the confines of the past nor are they ghosts. Instead, they reach to the past only to move forward. In doing so, they weave together the concerns of indigenous communities with intimate, often painful desires and disappointments from within the family circle. These poetic narratives are not tales of misery—elegies for decimated people and cultures—but expressions of survivance.

Raised by Humans begins with the acrostic poem, “Alphabet of Lies” in which Miranda lays out an extensive and ongoing, if far from definitive, catalogue of lies that buttress genocide, theft, and subjugation. More importantly this A to Z list underscores the way language, particularly the written word, can be a powerful silencing tool in the process of colonization. As Miranda moves through the alphabet she uses the language of the colonizer to denounce “Casino lies cozy as road-kill in the beak of a crow” (7) and “Kinky lies strutting black Kevlar boots all over your water rights” (7) and finally “Zombie lies zig-zagging through generations like contagious zygotes” (8). She illuminates how these lies have been carefully, systematically, relentlessly nurtured from generation to generation. She closes the poem with the stanza, “Learn the drill. Teach your children; / Alphabetize. Civilize. / Reservation. Termination. / Savage. Savage. Savage” (8) thus weakening the power of the colonizer’s alphabet while teaching us how to read the rest of her collection.

Miranda parses the remaining poems into three chapters: “History,” “Education,” and “Faith,” each section further revealing the slippery instability of language as a tool of control. She acknowledges the erasures and inaccuracies that history, education, and faith often perpetuate even as she affirms them as centers of resistance. In “History,” Miranda defies the fantasy of vanished, static Indians and the fallacy that their many “authentic” traditional cultures are lost forever. In the poem, “Directions,” Miranda writes, “When we tell stories, / skeletons dance / in dark museums, / clappersticks crack / like lightning deep / in unmarked graves” (14). She refutes museum curators and others who continue to define indigenous tribes in terms of remains and artifacts. Then, turning her focus to the lived experience and resilience of Native Americans she intones, “. . . We speak / a bright language / with no word / for dead, or end, / or lost. Following / these constellations, / we will always / find our way” (14). In the eponymous poem, “Raised

by Humans,” the poet speaks of a much more recent history beginning, “My mother abandoned me. / Left me behind, didn’t look back” (20). She bears witness to the fact that a history of violence enacted on a people, a family, a human can turn someone into creatures that behaves “like a tamed fox” (20). In her abandonment, the poet admits, “and I hung around waiting, whimpering, chained / to my cage by a metal only the human heart / knows how to forge” (21).

In the second chapter, Deborah Miranda begins with an education in the harsh realities of material and spiritual poverty and in “\$10 An Hour” she admonishes those who continue to render poor people of color invisible with the charge, “You don’t see me. You won’t remember / me if you do. I’m a bucket full of Pledge, PineSol, sponges with / scratchy edges. You don’t see me vacuum, dust knick knacks, scrub / your tub, your toilet” (35). And yet Miranda does not linger in this poverty. Instead, she revels in the education of love—erotic love, tender love, and love of nature. In “Clementine for Beginners,” a simple peel of fruit can feel, “like a love letter on the table” (38). “Eating a Mountain” exalts the bounty of fresh meat and the connection to the world that its nourishment brings: “we are rich! I rinse, pack, / mark the cuts, this beautiful / deep red velvety offering. / Eating this deer means eating this mountain” (45). But it is “Wolf Lullaby” that promises, “me, I’ll welcome you into my body: / your howl the only heart I need” (49) and in doing so reaffirms the healing power and necessity of physical human contact.

Closing with “Faith,” Miranda turns Catholic imagery and dogmatic language that has, at times, served to manipulate and control into prayers of liberation through explorations of regret, grief, hope and thanks. For example, “Rosary” re-envision California missions not as static centers of pain and slavery but, rather, points on a continuous path of discovery and empowerment. “San Juan Capistrano, San Fernando Rey de España, Santa Barbara. / Let me pass by the adobe missions, the ridiculously renovated, the / melting rubble, with tender thoughts for the souls of my ancestors. / Like clay and stone, we transform: that is the string of miracles I follow” (61). This is not hope as much as it is an expression of certainty. And while the final poem in *Raised by Humans*, “Decolonizing the Alphabet” is in conversation with the despair and brilliant anger radiating from the first poem “Alphabet of Lies,” this time, Miranda imagines the alphabet, “going Native” (71), “becoming indigenous” (71). In “appropriating the weapon” of the written word, Deborah Miranda proves, “It’s alive. / It’s ours” (72). And finally, she explains, “We will not give it back” (72). With these final words she inscribes her vision of empowerment and victory onto the hearts and consciousnesses of her readers and they are a prophesy of the necessary narratives of survival, anger, beauty, and resiliency we can expect from Deborah Miranda in the future.

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