

Review Essay: **Duane Niatum: A Retrospective**

Duane Niatum. *Earth Vowels*. Mongrel Empire Press, 2017. 96 pp. ISBN 978-0997251760. <http://mongrelempire.org/catalog/poetry/earth-vowels.html>

In 2017, Duane Niatum (Jamestown S’Klallam) published *Earth Vowels*, at least his 21st book. I say “at least” because it is genuinely hard to count the number of full-length books, self-published chapbooks, and anthologies Niatum has produced since *After the Death of an Elder Klallam* (1970), which most sources call his first book.¹ This prolific poet has also placed countless pieces in Native Studies periodicals including *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, literary journals like *Prairie Schooner*, and mass-market magazines like the *Nation*. Additionally, he had a unique position as the editor of a short-lived Native American authors series at Harper & Row,² for which he produced two major anthologies: *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* (1975), updated as *Harper’s Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* (1988). These were field-defining collections on a par with Geary Hobson’s *The Remembered Earth* (1979) and, now, Heid E. Erdrich’s *New Poets of Native Nations* (2018).

Niatum has been justifiably lauded: the Before Columbus Foundation gave him an American Book Award in 1982, and the Native Writers Circle of the Americas gave him the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019. And yet no one has given Niatum’s work a critical study, though at this point a book-length examination of his career would reveal a great deal about the growth of Native American and Indigenous poetry over the last five decades, and perhaps just as much about our field’s responses to it. Disappointingly, he has not been much reviewed outside of Native Studies publications like *SAIL*, *American Indian Quarterly*, and *Wicazo Sa Review*, or regional journals like *Western American Literature* and *The Raven Chronicles*. *SAIL* published two reviews of *Digging Out the Roots* (Harper & Row 1978), one by Maurice Kenny and another by Patricia Clark Smith. Kenny, being the poet that he was, focused on Niatum’s mastery of form: “To him a poem is the sum of its parts, not chopped prose lazily reclining for verse” (39). He also, along with Smith, pondered the relationship between the poet’s Klallam heritage and his education in Western traditions. For Smith, this was off-putting; she praised the Indigenous-themed poems as “sensuous” and transparent (they “don’t send a stranger to Klallam life scuttling guiltily to the library to read up on Pacific Northwest shamanism”), but criticized him for sometimes relegating content to form: “flashy and unnecessarily obscure imagery, where emotions and events are described so obliquely as to seem almost coy” (47). Kenny was less bothered by these alleged inconsistencies, stating simply that the poetry “is as much a product of European as of Klallam influence” (39).

Reviews of Niatum’s poetry—and, one would have to admit, of poetry by other Indigenous people and writers of color—continued in a similar vein over the years, oscillating between ambivalence about the “purity” of cultural expression and matter-of-fact acceptance that the poet could be and do many things at the same time. *SAIL* published no fewer than three reviews of *Songs for the Harvester of Dreams* (U of Washington P, 1981), all by major writers, all proclaiming Niatum’s tremendous productivity and *stature*. One was a delightfully idiosyncratic piece by Carter Revard, which mainly complained about Niatum’s love poetry—something most reviewers, in fact, seem to dislike. Joseph Bruchac put his fellow poet on a par with Simon Ortiz,

Leslie Marmon Silko, and James Welch, expressing amazement that Niatum had not by then received more critical attention. In Bruchac's evaluation, Niatum drew nimbly on a variety of sources, including Indigenous oral traditions, Eastern thought and Japanese poetry, and western classical poetic forms. He observed, too, that Niatum tended to return consistently to several themes, including "kinship with American Indian ancestors, both genetic and spiritual" ("Offering It All to the Sea" 14). Jarold Ramsey, meanwhile, lavished high praise on Niatum's talent and accomplishments, while railing against a critical establishment that kept refusing to accept American Indian poets into the ranks of "major" writers. Defensively, then, though he acknowledged Niatum's "delicately rendered" adaptations of traditional Salish songs, he was also at pains to insist on the poet's "growing *urbanity*" (9). The effect, in the end, is a review that belabors the "circumstantial remoteness of [Niatum's ancestral heritage] from his everyday life" and "the prospect of utter deracination" (10). These reviews, particularly Ramsey's, recall the literary criticism of the period, which was deeply preoccupied with debates over "mixed-blood" identities, hybridity, and ambivalence.

But perhaps a few decades of tribalcentric and sovereignty-minded literary criticism make it possible now to read Niatum differently. In *Earth Vowels*, a slim volume published in 2017 with Mongrel Empire Press, Jeanetta Calhoun Mish's independent outfit in Oklahoma, he is still working many of the same topics and forms noted by previous reviewers. There are the natural landscapes of the Pacific Northwest; Klallam ancestors and kin; urban settings; poetic mentors and inspirations (Roethke, Bashō); and family relations, including broken relationships with children and romantic partners. He has been working this terrain, it's worth noting, since well before the Jamestown S'Klallam received federal recognition in 1981 and began their own tribal resurgence; and he has remained active in his tribal community, including work with tribal youth on illustrations *Agate Songs on the Path of Red Cedar*, published by the tribe in 2011. Perhaps, today, we can understand Duane Niatum's work as always already what Heid Erdrich hails as "poetry of a new time—an era of witness, of coming into voice, an era of change and of political and cultural resurgence" (ix).

For example, Niatum has long joined other Pacific Northwest Indigenous writers in acting as a steadfast witness for salmon, both as image and as kin. To Jamestown Klallam people salmon is more than traditional sustenance; it is a material and spiritual "catalyst that brought [the people] closer together, a way for the people to maintain a continuance, a hold on their identity, a gathering sign, cause for celebration, a means of survival, a physical link to their heritage" (Stauss ix). Among the more powerful poems in *Earth Vowels*—and indeed among the more powerful ecocritical poems anywhere—is "The Disappearance of the Duwamish Salmon":

How long have they laid buried
in the sludge and grime of industry
erasing the river's breath

and almost erasing the Duwamish people
who once paddled their canoes down
its current swift as the wing of kingfisher?

Walking beside the river in 2009 you can

still hear the dreams and laughter
of children picking serviceberry

with their grandmother teasing a crow
stealing berries from her basket.

If Patricia Clark Smith were to review these words today, my guess is that she might call our attention not so much to its “sensuous” or romanticized imagery, but to the political history of the Green-Duwamish Waterway, which empties into Elliott Bay in Seattle and is now a major [Superfund](#) site. Despite a century of industrial pollution that is choking the life out of the water (“erasing the river’s breath”), both the salmon and the Duwamish people continue to inhabit and use these waterways. They are only “almost erased.” I take those children’s and grandmother’s “dreams and laughter” to be not only concoctions of the poet’s imagination, but realities—or at least literal possibilities, since Duwamish people have been actively working on river, plant and wildlife restoration (“Environmental Justice”). They are re-indigenizing the river and Seattle. Decades ago, Jarold Ramsey and other scholars seemed to understand “urbanity” and “Indigeneity” as more or less opposed, but today they would likely intuit a much more syncretic relationship between the two in Niatum’s apostrophe to that city:

Seattle, too easily the age slipped a false-face
mask on you, a glass and concrete fashion cone
to give roaches the run of skyscrapers.

Although an alien in Salish country,
you were destined to become Raven’s cousin,
Killer Whale’s distant, ambivalent friend. (17)

In stanzas like these, urbanity and Indigeneity are not so much antithetical as they are palimpsestic, with images of ancient Pacific northwest art and garb glimmering, holographically, through modern edifices. As the alliterative invasion of cockroaches implies, the battle between the human and the other-than-human is far from over. So, too, is the settler colonial project. Seattle, the poem reminds us, well pre-existed its Space Needle; it endures as Indigenous space, even if the new relations (cousin, friend) produced here are often distant and ambivalent.

Niatum loves a stanza; throughout his career he has used boxy sonnet-like forms; longish narrative free verse; and three-, four- and five-line stanzas, often numbered. The effect of these, as Maurice Kenny described it, is a balance of control and “form emancipated from strict structure,” as in the title poem of *Earth Vowels*:

Truth glows in the flaws of earth stone.
 A purple finch rises
from the dream nest,
 ignites yellow violets with song.

The creature with yielding sight
 opens the hour to its cave drawings,

a rider of need balances our own,
 now the racer, now the raced upon.

This wanderer from the sky blanket
 streaks beyond our eyes,
 disappears in the dream-wheel's hues,
 cross-stitches us into the day's vowel basket. (56)

Superficially, Niatum's lines can appear quaintly imagistic, but they often make surprising associations: truth "glowing" in rocky cracks; a bird's vision "yielding"; "us" (and who exactly are we?) being "cross-stitched" into a "basket" of sounds. Some earlier reviewers (e.g., Smith) complained that this strained their patience; but perhaps, as readers of this literature have matured along with this poet, we can see the urgency of such defamiliarizing tactics. Reviewing *The Crooked Beak of Love* (2000), which uses very similar forms and images, Margaret Dwyer found that Niatum was "ask[ing] readers to examine the world they pass through daily, and to find the spirituality and beauty of the environment there. The water we take for granted, the trees, plants birds and human elders we largely ignore, are avatars of a world much older and richer than we realize" (32). That world, of course, is also now facing catastrophe. So perhaps today we can see in Niatum's poetry an argument that is being more insistently articulated by more and more Indigenous activists and scholars: that nature has *agency*, that the Earth in fact *speaks*.

In a similar vein, the exploding canon of Native American and Indigenous literature might also help us read this long poetic career anew. The dream-wheel, for instance—into whose hues that purple finch disappears—is a trope that has appeared in Niatum's poetry for decades, indeed in the title of his first anthology. Some reviewers have found the image elliptical, including Bruchac, who felt it evoked roulette (18). However, a character in Richard Wagamese's 2016 novel *Dream Wheels* suggests a more useful, pan-Indian understanding of this term: it's "the sum total of a people's story. All its dreams, all its visions, all its experiences gathered together. Looped together" (320). *Earth Vowels* reads like a reprise of the dreams, visions, and experiences that Niatum has long been gathering: ancestral villages in old cedar forests ("S'Klallam Spirit Canoe"); treaty violations and the persecution of tribal leaders ("To Chief Leschi of the Nisqually"); seasonal change ("Ode to Winter Shoots"); or the pleasures of visiting Europe ("On the Streets of Paris"). That last poem is a villanelle whose refrain, "the time for dreaming isn't merely for the young" returns us to the dream-wheel, a loop of experiences that are collective rather than individual.

This collective, cross-temporal orientation is true, maybe, even of those love poems that so irritated early readers including Carter Revard, who was bothered that he couldn't tell whether a given poem was actually a "myth-poem," or just a really vague love poem. Admittedly, Niatum's voice tends to be a bit incantatory even when he is writing apparently autobiographically:

I will not deny as a young man
 with a keg of testosterone, I imagined
 myself troubadour Crow of sex and play (53).

Later in life, though feeling more reflective, his tone still gestures toward the status of myth. But that may be purposeful. Consider a poem to his estranged son, which hopes that

before I'm but a memory horn in the night
 I count on us becoming friends
 . . . while nerves swim like fish in hope's pond (33).

This self-consciously lyric voice can actually heighten the heartbreak, especially if we read such poems as a "loop," as the "sum total" of many Indigenous families' stories, not just Niatum's. Read those lines, for instance, alongside the deathbed scene of "The Story Our Mother's Absence Left Us":

We, your four children, sit with you like death clerks;
 pretend none of us will choke
 on this confusion clot.

While sinking into the last coma,
 you told me you hated your mother for abandoning you,
 your brother and two sisters.
 A teen-ager hungry for revenge, you ran
 from your father's house dreaming of the street
 drama to be found along the labyrinth
 of the city of plenty, plenty clams.

Read together, these stories about broken relations between parents, and between parents and their children, start to feel less like confessional poetry and more like a dream-wheel of intergenerational trauma. What is newer about the "relationship" poems in *Earth Vowels* is a greater emphasis on healing and reconciliation, even if the reconciliation is itself only a dream. After his mother's death, her sister Pearl redeems her with a different story:

She whispered that no matter what went wrong
 in your lives, what tantrums or screams filled the air
 with the sound of smashed toys,
 grandma loved the difficult daughter with a heart
 the swallow-tail butterflies in grandpa's rose garden
 courted each spring.
 . . . Wrapped in your mother's shawl,
 with rivulets of salmonberry dew down
 her cheeks, she spoke of your mother's jokes,
 laughing and teasing the family into not collapsing
 inward on themselves. (37-38)

Aunt Pearl's gift is tremendous: a story that restores love and kinship in the very telling. And told by "we," the stunned "death clerks," to "you," the larger-than-life mother chasing her dreams in the city's labyrinth and her sister with the salmonberry-dew tears, this poem really does read like "the sum total of a people's story."

In a much-quoted statement, Niatum once disavowed the idea of a Native aesthetic (“On Stereotypes” 554). The master of transmotion himself, however, caught Niatum out in a contradiction, noting that in his intro to the Harper’s anthology, he also described Native poets as sharing a “spirit of a common cultural heritage” (x). “The simulation of a ‘common cultural heritage,’” Vizenor wryly remarked, “suggests a literary nuance but apparently not a discrete native aesthetics” (8).

Perhaps by now Niatum will have changed his mind, or finessed his remarks; or perhaps tussling over tribal specificity versus pan-Indianism versus universality are simply an enduring feature of this literature and its discussion. In 1982, Ramsey and his colleagues were worrying about what appeared to be the central conundrum of Native American poets at that time: the desire to be accepted as great poets without being relegated to the margins of “Indian poetry.” In 2018, Heid Erdrich is to some extent confronting the same conundrum; but she and her colleagues seem able to write, at least, without fears of “utter deracination.” If poets like Layli Long Soldier can write confidently from positions of Lakota language and experience, and if poets like Tommy Pico can write from city spaces while still being considered irreducibly Kumeyaay, perhaps Duane Niatum can now be (re)read as a resolutely S’Klallam writer who has been steadily contributing to and paving the way for that broader Indigenous poetic resurgence.

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Notes

¹ He published at least one earlier; for example, many bibliographies list an experimental verse drama called *Breathless* (1968), but this is no longer available. Despite the dearth of criticism, biographical essays about Niatum are numerous; see for instance (Lerner) and (Niatum, “Autobiographical Sketch”)

² Often referred to as “controversial.” The only person I can find to address these controversies in print is Joseph Bruchac, who in 1982 questioned where the profits from the series were actually going, and noted that at least one talented poet he knew would have been eligible for the “Indian” series but not for the “regular” publishing stream (“A Good Day to Be Alive” 3).

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