

Natalie Diaz. *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Graywolf Press, 2020. 120 pp.

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In *Postcolonial Love Poem*, the eagerly-anticipated follow up to her American Book Award-winning debut *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012), Natalie Diaz offers readers intellectual complexity, formal diversity, and remarkably capacious lyrical attention. Grounded by single poems at the beginning and end, this collection interweaves several thematic strands across three sections. These sections feature eminently readable mid-length poems about erotic desire and family dynamics, longer forays that leverage states of fracture to explore the violences of colonialism, and several prose paeans to the pleasures of basketball. Diaz's sense of the lyric snakes methodically toward and away from the presuppositions of prose, drawing from multiple wells of readerly delight.

Fans of Diaz's 2017 *Envelopes of Air*, written in collaboration with Ada Limón, will recognize and be happy to see some of the poems generated from that epistolary project, only slightly edited here. Both wistful and searching, the poems from *Envelopes* keep easy company with Diaz's other questing lyrics of erotic desire. In poems like "From the Desire Field," originally published as a letter to Limón, romantic and sexual longing invites transformation: the expansion of the self from a stable, merely human entity to a roving intelligence that scours the world for what it wants in a rapidly changing carousel of expedient, extrahuman form:

My mind in the dark is una bestia, unfocused,
hot. And if not yoked to exhaustion

beneath the hip and plow of my lover,
then I am another night wandering the desire field—

bewildered in its low green glow,

bellling the meadow between midnight and morning...

I am struck in the witched hours of want—

I want her green life. Her inside me
in a green hour I can't stop. (12-13)

Diaz deploys this shapeshifting ability throughout her collection, as in “Wolf OR-7.” In this poem, the speaker watches the GPS signal emitted by a tracking device on the first gray wolf to reenter California since the last one was killed for a government bounty in 1927. As the wolf makes its way back across the arbitrary borders on a colonialist map in search of a mate, Diaz inhabits him, feels her desire through him:

...a trembling blue line,

south, west, south again,
twelve hundred miles from Oregon to California

to find *Her: gray wolf, Canis lupus, Loba, Beloved.*

In the tourmaline dusk I go a same wilding path,
pulled by night’s map to the forests and dunes of your hips,

divining from you rivers, then crossing them—
proving the long thirst I’d wander to be sated by you. (32, italics in the original)

Though some of these shorter works address issues of coloniality in addition to erotic longing (poems like “Manhattan is a Lenape Word” and “American Arithmetic” come to mind), the longer poems in *Postcolonial Love Poem* stretch out along the borderlands of the lyric to accommodate an even more discursive poetic mode. “The First Water is the Body,” for example, verges on the essay. This poem uses brief, prose-like stanzas to intersperse meditations on the inseparability of the body from water with explications of translation theory:

‘Aha Makav is the true name of our people, given to us by
our Creator who loosed the river from the earth and built it
into our living bodies.

Translated into English, ‘Aha Makav means *the river runs
through the middle of our body, the same way it runs
through the middle of our land.*

This is a poor translation, like all translations. (46, italics in the original)

Diaz posits, with considerable lyrical grace, that the futility of translation in this instance may not be the result simply of incompatible linguistic structures or vocabulary, but rather of centuries of genocidal environmental exploitation:

Jacques Derrida says, *Every text remains in mourning until it is translated.*

When Mojaves say the word for *tears*, we return to our word for *river*, as if our river were flowing from our eyes. A *great weeping* is how you might translate it. Or a *river of grief*.

But who is this translation for and will they come to my language's four-night funeral to grieve what has been lost in my efforts at translation? When they have drunk dry my river will they join the mourning procession across our bleached desert? (47, italics in the original)

"The First Water is the Body" achieves the considerable task of using carefully layered images and assertions to convey the crucial importance of its subject matter. In addition to the exercises in translation above, Diaz also draws connections between the degradation of the Colorado River and the lead poisoning of the drinking water in Flint, Michigan, and she points to potential remediation in the form of rivers in other countries that have been granted legal personhood. When Diaz writes, "How can I translate—not in words but in belief—that a river is a body, as alive as you or I, that there can be no life without it?" she shakes her readers by the shoulders to impress upon them the utter urgency of the matter (48).

Another long poem, "*exhibits from The American Water Museum*," likewise uses its extra length to sidewind along la frontera of the lyric, though it makes its moves through wry pastiche instead of a steady stream of discursive juxtapositions. "*exhibits from The American Water Museum*" is composed of numbered sections that appear to be jumbled, out of numeric order: the poem starts with a section titled "0." which is followed by a section titled "17." As pillaged objects are displayed in museums without respect for their contexts or for the people that created them, so to do these chaotically catalogued lyric fragments lay scattered across the imagination of the

reader, slowly accruing their meaning in relation to each other despite their fractured state. Though we have been reminded in “The First Water is the Body” that the body is inseparable from water, it is still shockingly moving to be told in this later poem that,

67.

There are grief counselors on site for those who realize
they have entered The American Water Museum not as
patrons but rather as parts of the new exhibit. (67)

The poem concludes with a statement of survivance in the face of the colonial violences of water contamination and theft and of erasure by exhibit:

11.

Art of Fact:

Let me tell you a story about water:
Once upon a time there was us.
America’s thirst tried to drink us away.
And here we still are. (72)

When Diane Glancy writes in her essay “The Naked Spot: A Journey toward Survivance” that “poetry is rebound,” she neatly prefigures the appearance of the three prose poems on basketball dotted strategically throughout *Postcolonial Love Poem* (271). In “Run’n’Gun,” “The Mustangs,” and “Top Ten Reasons Why Indians Are Good at Basketball,” Diaz unveils yet another strategy in her poetic arsenal: while this collection is challenging, intricate, dense, and beautiful, it is also extremely funny. The first of the series, “Run’n’Gun,” opens with an anecdote about “a Hualapai boy from Peach Springs” who “dunk[s] the ball in a pair of flip flops” to promptly slip and compound fracture his wrist. While the image deployed by Diaz here evokes previous extrahuman affinities and overlaps when she writes “His radius fractured and ripped up through his skin like a tusk,” the story arcs ultimately through the hoop of humor: a little bone poking through does not stop the boy “from pumping his other still-beautiful arm into the air and yelling, *Yeah, Clyde the Glide, motherfuckers!* before some adult [speeds] him off to the emergency room” (23). Though woefully injured, our man is nevertheless triumphant, nevertheless committed to his game and his joy. All three of these poems are celebrations of athletic catharsis—the delight that comes from playing big, fast, and fearless.

Postcolonial Love Poem is a rich collection with a wide and glittering array of poems on offer. Whether readers comb through this book looking for lyrical lust, potent theorizing, or ready laughter, Natalie Diaz offers readers opportunities to yearn, to grieve, and to celebrate. She is a poet of remarkable abilities, and this is a book of remarkable pleasures.

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Work Cited

Glancy, Diane. "The Naked Spot: A Journey toward Survivance." *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, edited by Gerald Vizenor. U of Nebraska P, 2008, pp. 271-284.