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# The Kinetic Poetics of Sherwin Bitsui, Natalie Diaz, Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, and Layli Long Soldier

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**THÈSE**

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Stephanie Papa***

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***“The Kinetic Poetics of Sherwin Bitsui, Natalie Diaz, Allison Adelle Hedge Coke,  
and Layli Long Soldier”***

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## Introduction

### Personal Beginnings: Naming the Unnamed

Where does inquiry begin? No research lacks an underlying frame of reference, or as Natalie Diaz describes, one's "personal truths". I would firstly like to explain my own, not with the intention to explore "égo-histoire", Pierre Nora's auto-historical approach, but to express my personal commitment to my work and the responsibility to preface this research by naming what is otherwise left in obscurity.

I first heard about the Carlisle Industrial Indian School in Pennsylvania in the context of modernist poet Marianne Moore; her life in Carlisle and her role as a teacher at the school from 1911 until 1914, when federal investigations closed the business department where Moore worked. Founded by Richard Pratt—who, as Moore put it in a 1960 interview, was "so monumental" that "no one could dare approach him to tell him one approved of the work he was doing"—the federally funded school's "work" from 1879 to 1918 was indigenous linguistic and cultural erasure. Children and teenagers from indigenous communities around the country—even as far as the Kodiak and Woody islands in Alaska, where poet Abigail Chabitnoy's orphaned native Alutiiq great grandfather lived before being sent there—were transported to Carlisle to be assimilated into the America society and its ideals of a prosperous civilisation.<sup>1</sup> This was a genocidal project embodied in Pratt's now notorious motto, "Kill the Indian, save the man", and part of the colonial mission that remains largely unknown to non-native populations. Moore, who

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<sup>1</sup> I am half-British, and as using British spelling is more natural for me, having lived outside of the United States for more than a decade, I use British spelling throughout my thesis unless I am quoting an American text or interview.

taught renowned Sac and Fox footballer and Olympic athlete Jim Thorpe at Carlisle, avoided questioning by investigators when suspicions arose, before moving to New York and eventually becoming one of the giants of American Modernism. Although she mentioned years later that she was just “soldiering” through at Carlisle (Leavell 118), she never protested the “cruel neglect and abuse”, as her mother wrote, denounced by the students, and promised the superintendent that she wasn’t implicated in their demands (119).

I start with Moore for two reasons. Firstly, the personal specter of an unnamed, absent presence: I grew up 36 miles from the town of Jim Thorpe, the athlete’s namesake, a familiar name because our schools’ football teams played each other, not because of Thorpe’s celebrated athleticism, nor because we’d learned anything near the extent of genocidal erasure and assimilation in which Carlisle Industrial Indian School, 100 miles away, played a significantly detrimental role<sup>2</sup>. However, I had ironically learned about Marianne Moore, who, featuring prominently in ecocritical studies, is rarely associated with the institution. Secondly, the duty of naming: Mojave and Akimel O’odham poet and former professional basketball player Natalie Diaz, one of the four poets studied in this analysis, met Thorpe’s daughter, Grace, at a protest in the Mojave desert against a nuclear waste dump. In Diaz’s essay, “A Body of Athletics”, she mentions this meeting, alongside Thorpe’s athleticism and his subjection to racism, in order to magnify the corporal dynamics of poetic language:

[...] the way I exist in it [my body] and use it is a different kind of intimacy than what a non-athlete can know. [...] It’s the way I make sense of the world, a lover, a book, the earth—I touch them, put my hands in them, see how I can open them to find the quiet or noise of them. You

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<sup>2</sup> Chabitnoy herself admits that, because her family history was never explained in detail, and her great grandfather’s experience at Carlisle is reduced to one photo, she too was unaware of the “atrocities” committed at Carlisle, as it was never part of the educational curriculum, let alone accurate information about the lives and traditional cultures of local indigenous communities (Chabitnoy, “Repiecing”).

know the body differently when you break it, whether your own or someone else's. (Diaz, "A Body of Athletics" 12)

Some of Diaz's relatives also went through Carlisle's assimilation machine (10), which Moore witnessed in silence. Corporal ruptures—tearing an ACL, for instance, as Diaz did—can be understood as transferred ruptures: "If memory is passed down in DNA, I learned defense long ago, from my ancestors, from all they had to defend themselves and our people against", Diaz writes. Diaz names corporeality as the filament between language and "the earth" in the context of Grace Thorpe's presence at the nuclear waste protest, which was a threat to the land's own corporal networks. This naming therefore bridges colonial legacies which are continuously made invisible—the capitalist-driven mines, dams, pipelines and nuclear waste which push all bodies to the edge of survival—with political and institutional structures' refusal to face the historical and continuous nexus of extraction. Diaz discloses the body of the *text* above as well: language is a gesture or movement, the act of opening. If we accept the gesture of language, what follows are the questions Diné poet Sherwin Bitsui asks himself about his own poems: "How do I have it make sense on all these levels, how can they also work sonically, how can they also be driven, how can they also drive the imagination, how can they also be an engine in a sense, how can they be kinetic, how can they move things, how can they just exist?" (Bitsui, Personal Interview, Annex 2)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This personal interview will be cited as (Bitsui, PI) henceforth.

## Framing the Criticism: Kinetic Poetics

This study examines several ways in which techniques of kinetic poetics—through translingualism, form, aural and visual iconicity, punctuation, and verb use—manifest in the work of Mojave poet Natalie Diaz, Diné poet Sherwin Bitsui, Oglala Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier, and Cherokee, Huron and Creek poet Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, and underline non-human relationships and decolonial thought. Not enough attention has been given to the innovative linguistic practices of these poets, nor to what I call kinetic poetics, following Sherwin Bitsui’s own use of the word “kinetic”: the textual and physical movements accessed by these techniques. I refer to these overarching elements as kinetic poetics, or kinetics, to examine how visual and linguistic gestures contribute to the quality of being “unpinnable”, as Diaz explains—beyond the grasp of fixed structures, particularly those grounded in Western and/or colonial ideologies—thus retaining the tension of potentiality in their work. Secondly, I address how these textual movements are not autotelic entities—a vacuum of form and content as the New Critic’s credo—rather they are kinetically inclined towards the extra-textual body; pleasure, inheritance, transference, and transformation, in relation to other human and non-human bodies. Indeed, this extrinsic trajectory also involves the relationship with the reader, taking cues from a non-quantitative version of reader-response theory while integrating each poet’s culturally distinct modes and cartographies of storytelling, which I particularly address in chapter three in reference to Hedge Coke’s unconventional tone and narrative methods in her verse play, and in chapter four in reference to Diaz’s poems “*exhibits* From the American Water Museum” and “How the Milky Way Was Made”. Alongside these kinetic techniques, all four of the selected poets integrate indigenous worldviews which disturb ideological and linguistic borders, and

denounce the colonial, extractivist industries which dictate America's relationships to and dependence on indigenous land. How do these poets' unconventional techniques condemn the continuation of mass extraction, damming and colonial containment—as Ōiwi scholar Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua theorises, discussed in Chapter 1—while reframing pleasure, autonomy, “decolonial practices”, and renewed affirmations of pre-colonial human and non-human relationships (Curley 58)?<sup>4</sup> How do their kinetic poetics translate contemporary ontologies and challenge colonial hegemony, while challenging the borders of language and conventional first-person narrative poetry? In particular, I chose to expand approaches to poetic mobility to advance and interpret expressions of the human body and the lives of non-human bodies formulated by Bitsui, Diaz, Hedge Coke, and Long Soldier themselves. As Lakota scholar Kim Tallbear affirms, “research is for social change. People in communities do theory, they do deep analyses”, and so do poets (Tallbear, “Decolonizing”).

Firstly, I clarify that this is a literary critique and not an anthropological one<sup>5</sup>. In the current body of contemporary poetry critique, scholars often foreground anthropological, socio-economical, and cultural frameworks at the expense of more thoroughly addressing *how* these issues are represented in the poetry itself. One example is Stuart Cooke's essay “Indigenous Poetics and Transcultural Ecologies”; while Cooke aims to highlight the transcultural elements between indigenous poetry from Australia and South America, only a few lines of poetry are deemed worthy of citation, with little analysis of how the indigenous

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<sup>4</sup> I use “decolonial practices”, following Andrew Curley, rather than “decolonised”, as these are ongoing practices and efforts in continually colonial spaces.

<sup>5</sup> Many indigenous communities prefer to keep certain cultural epistemologies private from those outside their communities. I owe much of my research to the poets' own explanations of their understanding of language from within the value systems of their particular heritage. However, I also acknowledge academic tendencies and desires to grasp information, and I acknowledge the fact that communities chose to withhold or safeguard intimate information that has been colonially mined.

knowledge systems “as an alternative, syncretic understanding of the contemporary” manifest in the poetic expression in question. The article thus morphs into a cultural, anthropological overview, framing spiritual and cosmological identities outside of poetic innovation, and melds a broadly defined multi-tribal indigenous experience which dramatically and questionably privileges the global over the local, following Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*<sup>6</sup>. Scholarly discourse often neglects what Anishinaabe poet and translator Margaret Noodin is so keen for us to engage in—“a close analysis of language and narrative patterns”—which she outlines in *Bawaajimoo: A Dialect of Dreams in Anishinaabe Language and Literature*: “Readers are invited to unravel the web of knowledge contained in Anishinaabe words. Poets can learn how to carry the language and images forward” (Noodin, xvii). Noodin continues that a poem “is an invitation to think differently, to bend straight lines into circles and to set familiar circles spinning on the edge of the universe” (181). My study accepts Noodin’s invitation for a close analysis, in parallel with Daniel Heath Justice’s emphasis on literary dynamics<sup>7</sup>. These four poets demand our attentiveness to the hybridity, metamorphoses, and tensions of language in order to unlearn our fixed gazes and responses. I therefore approach the poets as artists, as linguistic innovators in response to somatic relationships, and examine how they “disrupt

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<sup>6</sup> Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* argues that ecological discourse should engage with “territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet”, and that a focus on local ecosystems and belonging can be detrimental to “the planet as a whole” (Heise 10), while my argument considers these poets’ work to be highly place based.

<sup>7</sup> I follow Daniel Heath Justice’s call for a continued appreciation of the “self-critical (and always contested) understanding of literature as both artistic expression and political instrument and an assertion of literature within a larger matrix of relationships, influences, and effects”. Building on the work of Cherokee scholar Sean Kicummah Teuton, in order to engage with the dynamic continuity of indigenous peoples and nations and challenge national and disciplinary boundaries, Justice argues for “the transformative potential of Indigenous intellectualism” in contrast to rhetoric that “focuses on Native peoples as merely cultural beings”, (336) to be rather “fully attentive to the literature and literary traditions that are at the foundation of our specific work as literary scholars”, to be “appreciative of the very best work that Indigenous artists have to share” (Justice, “Currents” 347).

deep-seated settler ideologies” (Romero 55) but also unsettle expectations within the sphere of contemporary poetic themes at large (56).

I examine how verb use, translanguaging, syntax, form and typographical lineation influence Diaz’s discussion of poetry as “touch”, an “unpinnable” gesture enabling the “autonomy of pleasure”; Bitsui’s notion of a linguistic “continuum”; Long Soldier’s thought processes on motherhood, somatic sincerity, and transference; and Hedge Coke’s approaches to multivocal prosopopoeia and her adoption of Arthur Sze’s decentred narrator. Their distinct understandings of language, body, technique and land-based relationships are not purely novel modes of relationality; they probe, as Diaz writes, a “compelling and familiar” understanding of the “natural condition” of transition and kinetics. “The future”, a migration *towards* change, is often “a return” (Diaz, “Borderlands”) to previous transferred and transferable forms of knowledge (Diaz, “Borderlands”)<sup>8</sup>.

#### Contextualising Poetic Movement

How have flexibility and mobility previously been described by poets and scholars of poetics? The elements of movement I consider, or as Diaz writes, “how a poem moves”, involve gestures beyond the fact that literary texts can move in their physical reproductions, “whether across country, or between worlds (and languages)” within “moving-yet-local cultures” (Cooke 25)<sup>9</sup>. Movement, transformations, and a sense of mobility in writing have long been deliberated;

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<sup>8</sup> Similarly, David Stirrup quotes Scott Lyon’s approach to the X-mark, which represented native tribes’ signatures on historical treaties, which he describes as “another stopping point in a migration that is always heading for home” (Lyons 10, qtd in Stirrup 78).

<sup>9</sup> For a list of translations of the poets’ work in other languages thus far, see the references list.



from Marguerite Duras’s “écriture courante”<sup>10</sup>, Merleau-Ponty’s notion that writing is not a chain of ideas but has “the same kind of existence as [...] a thing in motion, which must be perceived in its temporal progression by embracing its particular rhythm”, not unlike the “rhythmic simultaneities” produced in visual art, to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, encapsulating the shifts non-humans and humans experience, sometimes harmful, sometimes liberating<sup>11</sup>. Parallel to these European-based notions are a variety of indigenous scholars’ and poets’ perceptions of movement which I engage with in this study: Vizenor’s conceptualisation of transmotion<sup>12</sup>, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair’s assertion that indigenous poets use language to “provoke waves of movement, silence and stillness” (Sinclair 209), Luci Tapahonso’s vision of language as a form of reaching, dg okpik’s understanding of time as “ever-changing and ever-present, past and ever-future” (okpik 226), Simon Ortiz’s idea that stories, songs and poems are types of perception that are “occurring, coming into being”, or even a type of “touching”, the road from inside one’s consciousness to outside the self. Alutiiq (Sugpiaq), Dena’ina Athabaskan and A’aniih scholar Carol Edelman Warrior wrote in her essay “Indigenous Collectives: A Meditation on Fixity and Flexibility” that many indigenous philosophers of the Western Hemisphere agree that “‘things’ are not things so much as *process* or movement [...] in a continual process of becoming and unbecoming—of trans-formation—which can be seen as a

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<sup>10</sup> An almost distracted, preoccupied writing that keeps running on the cusp of meaning, as if to grab the words to come: “Je parle de la crête des mots, c’est une écriture qui courrait pour aller vite, pour ne pas perdre [...]” (qtd in Aliette 59).

<sup>11</sup> Ted Hughes’s translation of “Tales from Ovid” reads: “Now I am ready to tell how bodies change into different bodies”, and A.S. Byatt comments on Ovid’s unfixed nature of things, “who would believe if they didn’t know that an eagle comes out of an egg?” (Byatt, “In Our Time”).

<sup>12</sup> Vizenor’s transmotion has become a key aesthetic theory in the study of native narratives, with its associations with survivance, sovereignty, and “natural motion” in resistance to static taxonomies, as Kimberely Blaeser and as David Stirrup build upon. While I mention Vizenor in this critique, I chose to interpret alternative poetic expressions of corporal and figurative movements formulated by Diaz, Bitsui, Long Soldier and Hedge Coke and lesser-known indigenous scholars.

new phase of becoming” (Warrior 368, author’s emphasis). Diaz, who yokes transformational elements of Greek myths with Mojave narratives throughout her work, points out that while natural changes may surprise us, the world depends on them, as does language; as I will discuss in Chapter 1, she insists on her own translation of the Mojave endonym as a river that moves in her body. Simultaneously, the ability to control transitions and movements fuel extraction: “[...] We do have to be brought to the brink often for a transition to happen, we see it as an upgrade. But transition is a natural part of any being, any energy. And we’ve found ways to really capitalise on that, how do we control the river [...]”, for example (Diaz, “Borderlands”). Given these notions of temporal, physical, and perceptual modes of transition and becoming, I argue that the page is not a “blank neutral space” (64)<sup>13</sup>, but rather that uncharted patterns of kinetic happenings off the page are echoed in these poets’ linguistic transformations<sup>14</sup>.

This analysis is not only a discussion of visual aesthetics, but also movements that are *not* seen concretely, and what is being revealed through them; disappearance or absence is often simultaneously a type of visibility. How does movement challenge the reader to “see what’s not there”, as Bitsui notes, and for poets to “ride the line” of what language can reveal in the “gravity of one’s language” (Bitsui, PI). This facilitates a poem’s tendency towards the hyper visual, or the extra phonic: Bitsui’s *Dissolve* presents us with snapshots that escort us one way, then veer towards another landscape of snapshots, creating a set of continuous “illuminations” (Bitsui, PI). Long Soldier’s punctuation, topography, and lineation often imply a textual dimension, and thus

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<sup>13</sup> Media-driven poetic experiments, such as video poems influenced by the 1950s Noigandres movement or literary groups like L.A.I.R.E. (Lecture, Art, Innovation, Recherche, Écriture), used animation to form new “grammatical and expressive possibilities in the transformation of blank neutral space into something enlivened” (64).

<sup>14</sup> In line with this correlation of movement, Abigail Chabitnoy notes how Kanaka Maoli writer Kristiana Kahakauwila has emphasised that “physical patterns in our natural and cultural worlds can provide patterns for our own interior storytelling” (Chabitnoy, “Repiecing”).

offer the potential for movement, as in her diamond-shaped poems which she cut out and sewed onto a wall-length Lakota star quilt. This type of “riding the line” is also behind Hedge Coke’s inter-conversational prosopopoeia in *Blood Run*.

The types of movement I discuss—phonic, synesthesiac, metaphorical, verbal, formal and syntactical—essentially cut ties with established American “truths”—“when and where do truths begin, and whose truth is it?”, Diaz asks (Diaz, “Energy” 32). In order to lift the anchors of mainstream linearity and trajectories of desire, so that sincerity becomes corporal, these poets create a linguistic “third place” in which sacred localities and fragmentation, human and non-human, visibility and invisibility, whole and part, pleasure and possibility, seek out one another.

#### Beyond Framing “Resistance”

Another fixation in recent studies in poetics on poets of native nations is negation, the framing of poetry as almost solely a resistance against hegemonic structures and persistent colonial forces, and thus the critique is predominantly centred around resistance-based content, neglecting kinetic devices and references to embodied somatic transference off the page<sup>15</sup>. In the introductions to the most comprehensive anthologies of indigenous poetry since 1988<sup>16</sup>, the

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<sup>15</sup> The term transference here is not to be confused with the same term in psychoanalysis, in which a patient unconsciously displaces or projects feelings towards a therapist or other figure which were originally directed towards another individual, usually a significant individual to the patient.

<sup>16</sup> *Harper’s Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* (1988) edited by S’Klallam poet Duane Niatum, *Sing: Poetry from the Indigenous Americas* (2011) edited by Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, *New Poets of Native Nations* (2018) edited by Ojibwe Heid Erdrich, enrolled in the Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa, *Native Voices: Indigenous American Poetry, Craft and Conversations* (2019) edited by CMarie Fuhrman, of Southern Ute heritage, and Dean Rader, and most recently, U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo’s *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry*, with Leanne Howe as associate editor and Jennifer Elise Foerster as contributing editor. The latter is the first Norton anthology featuring solely of native poetry (Harjo and Gloria Bird’s seminal 1998 Norton anthology *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language* includes prose as well), and the only one that addresses “the historical arc of time and place of indigenous nations’ poetry” (Harjo, *When the Light* 6).

“stylistic approach, tone, intent, relative content, challenge, device and literary value” (Hedge Coke, *Sing* 12), the continued investment in poetic language “that has emerged from rich traditions of the very diverse cultures of indigenous peoples” (Harjo, *When the Light* 1), the “vast diversity of literary approaches and national stances” (Erdrich xii) from within a “literary context” (xv), and the historical truths of colonialism have been emphasised far more than any overarching resistance inherent in the collected works, although it is no doubt palpable. While it is not the prime focus in this analysis, there is no doubt an evident decolonial dimension in the work of Diaz, Bitsui, Hedge Coke and Long Soldier; the formal techniques of these four poets directly or indirectly subvert the hegemony of the federal government, from the origins of settler-colonialism, to the dictations of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, to the “trust relationship” and “ongoing treaty relationships with the U.S. government” (Womack 6). As Bitsui mentioned to me in conversation, this involves resisting Western tropes projected onto Native artists from the outside<sup>17</sup>—echoing Gerald Vizenor’s “survivance” which “creates a sense of narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihilism, and victimry” (Vizenor, *Native Provenance* 38)—or resisting the assumption that all poetry by native writers must be spiritual, for instance, as well as the challenge of “owning” one’s heritage (Bitsui, PI), embracing cultural knowledge while rejecting what writer Travis Hedge Coke—Allison Adelle Hedge Coke’s son—calls “identity indictment” (Hedge Coke 116-120). A continuous “identity politics” is not necessarily the reason for being funneled into cultural clichés or broad labels such as “Native American” which ignorantly assumes a horizontal sameness, but, as Sandeep Parmar argues, it’s rather that

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<sup>17</sup> Bitsui echoes Lloyd L. Lee’s list of modes of Diné resistance including “a countering with cultural and linguistic voice and action; demands for tribal sovereignty, self-governance, and self-determination; the creation of Indigenous-centred, non-Western institutions; and the advent of tribal nationalism” (Lee, *Diné Perspectives* 50).

publishers and scholars often “stage a poet’s racial identity when that poet is not white”, ornamentalising race and identity over subjective experience, poetic innovation and “intellectual authority” (Parmar, “Not a British”). This echoes Métis scholar Chris Andersen’s argument in “From Difference to Density”, quoted by Mark Rifkin; when non-native scholars expect and maintain that there is an exclusive alterity in an essentialised group of indigenous writers, despite having distinct cultural references and geographical perspectives, “Indigenous complexity [is] reductively fixed in time and space through apparently objective, logical markers used to bear the discursive weight of our authenticity and legitimacy”. He proposes, instead, to begin “with the assumption that Indigenous communities are epistemologically dense (rather than just different)” (Andersen 97). In addition, Bitsui, Diaz, Hedge Coke and Long Soldier are resistant to colonial extraction and actively engage in decolonial, land-based relationships within their own communities *outside* of the text. Therefore, their poetry remains a site of linguistic, formal and technical depth which both “critiques subjugation” and “exercises freedom” in ways that are often overlooked (Diaz, “A Lexicon”). Their poetry is not defined solely by declaring a resistance *against*—the body not always one “in opposition” (Diaz, “A Taste”), Diaz says—but also by enacting a somatic language, integrating their distinct syntactically rich indigenous languages and modern linguistic exploration, exploring how language implicates the body, non-human bodies, pleasure, autonomy and responsibility: “it’s one way of just reminding myself that I’m still here, I’m still capable of things”, Diaz confirms (Diaz, “The Verb”). They refuse, from their subjective ontological cartographies concerning indigeneity, to accept colonial extraction and forms of linguistic, educational, and cultural containment, but they equally highlight the contrary: capitalising on colonial exploitation of the land itself resists indigenous

presence, refuses to accept reciprocal relationships in our most visceral daily acts, which these poets bring to the fore. Diaz writes, for instance, “these companies have managed to connect the rivers and understand those connections, and yet in our everyday intimate moments we seem to refuse that” (Diaz, “Borderlands”). I follow, then, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair’s notion that “Indigenous poetics” does not need to be branded as a resistance in every sense, but can reside, like all poetry, in “bodies, minds, and mouth”, in the “everyday expressions of Indigenous peoples living their lives” within particular socio-political climates, and in shared songs and perceptions (Sinclair 208). I reaffirm Diaz’s insightful position, quoted in Chapter 4, that in her most intimate relationships, she does not define herself as “a queer Mojave, Akimel O’odham, Mexican, LatinX woman”, yet, she continues, “that doesn’t mean we don’t talk about what it means to be us [...]” (Diaz, “Ways To Become”).

#### Ecocritical Perspectives: “Technologies” of Poetry Beyond Catastrophe

Sarah Nolan argues that eco-poetic approaches are only beginning to “move beyond” combing for remnants of pastoral or romantic nature in poetry. She asks: “What makes eco-poetics so rigidly confined to traditional conceptions of nature even when ecocriticism has so clearly moved beyond such limitations?” (Nolan 125). Her exploration drives her to, following recent trends after Brenda Iijima and Scott Knickerbocker, derail from “traditional ideas of nature” towards what she calls “unnatural poetics”, poetic sites of “natural-cultural” experience (Nolan 4): the minimised access to natural spaces and a higher prevalence of “digital and built sites” or trash dumps (6). I argue, however, that a contributing factor to the limitations Nolan observes is that the “traditional” romantic pastoral projections of non-human spaces mirror Western traditions. Poets doubly appreciated in ecocritical scholarship as “eco-poets” and

avant-garde or conceptual, as in Nolan's view, are by and large non-native. Yet, poets whose aesthetic modes break from the lyric narrative<sup>18</sup> or the "traditional" romantic depiction of nature are not constrained to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century lineages of American poets emerging from modernism. Indigenous poets have been overstepping and continue to overstep these limitations in their politically subversive poetic forms—language being one of the most effective "physical and emotional technologies" in contrast to the federal technology, as Diaz writes (Diaz, "The Body")—despite having been on the receiving end of cultural assimilation and colonisation from which these very limitations have emerged. Their representations of human and non-human relations are not only far from "traditional" in the Western sense—providing their own linguistically inherent understandings of transference, somatic exchange and land—they also meld the man-made effects of extractivist toxicities, mining, damming, urban development and water exploitation on their homelands.

Secondly, Nolan and Morton's approach, what Morton calls "ecomimesis", aims to extract from conceptual poetry an experience "beyond the aesthetic dimension altogether" (*Ecology* 31, qtd in Nolan 128), framing the value of "the artificiality" of conceptual writing. Following Deconstruction, this focus on how numerical configurations and abstract representations of conceptual poetics present "slippery" signifiers (Morton, *Ecology* 31) often neglects the corporal dimensions of experience articulable through unconventional punctuation, lineation, form and symbolism, as present in these Bitsui, Diaz, Hedge Coke and Long Soldier, informed by new approaches to long-established relationships with non-human life in our current precarious context. This emphasis differs, however, from Scott Knickerbocker's "organic

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<sup>18</sup> The equivalent, as Parmar points out, to the gentility and irony of post-Movement style poetry in Britain (Parmar, "Not a British").

formalism” applied to Stevens, Plath, Bishop, the New Formalists, and Language poets. While I echo Knickerbocker’s call for an attention to poetic artifice, I do not imply that “the artifice of poetic form foregrounds the *most real* relationship we have with the natural world” (my emphasis, Knickerbocker 159), nor that “the sound patterns of verse do not merely ‘echo’ the rest of nature; they *are* nature” (my emphasis, 162). Rather, I argue, citing John Berger whom Diaz enlists in her poem “The First Body is the Water”, for an attention to the verbal “physiognomy” and linguistic “visceral functions” of poetry that carry both physical and mental experience, both “inarticulate as well as the articulate” (Berger, “Writing”). In other words, both the equivocal and unequivocal body of the poem verbalise our ontologies beyond the text, towards human and non-human bodies which depend on the decolonisation of relationships for survival. As Bitsui says, he feels the text “exists” or is most alive when he reads it aloud to an audience, emphasising the somatic transference of language and how its deliberate arrangements transfer a particular effect.

Thirdly, while concerns over the nature-human binary and rethinking labels such as “environment” or “nature”, as Morton suggests in *Ecology Without Nature*, are consistently reconceptualised and claiming ground, ecocriticism, especially the focus on materialism, owes much of its thinking to indigenous worldviews and practices. Indigenous communities have well-established, precolonial, linguistic and physical understandings of land, and the individual and communal body beyond simple cause and effect relationships, and beyond the detached distinctions of an othered “nature”, which merit more critical attention in poetic analyses regarding the decolonisation of extractivist spaces and capitalist borders. Indeed, as Robert Dale Parker suggests, the very alienating concept of “nature” stems from colonial racism. Poets of



native nations today are continuing to express their own ideologies surrounding these relationships<sup>19</sup> (Parker 33). Greta Gaard's eco-feminist approach resists the "master model", proposing the "self-identity of the 'political animal' (Gaard 1998; Sandilands 1994, 1999), a view that resituates humans within ecosystems (thereby eliminating culture-nature dualisms)" (Gaard, "Indigenous Women" 92). However, Gaard admits that Idle No More-Duluth<sup>20</sup> leader Reyna Crow, for example, "doesn't need" her "updated theory", as Crow already imparts an "inclusive perspective" climate change, and "feminist environmental justice" (Gaard 92).

I do not suggest that poetry itself should be considered as effective as communal movements against resource-hungry extraction on native lands especially. Instead, I inquire *how* any environmental injustice issue is evoked and articulated in poetry itself—despite Morton's emphasis on the immeasurability and unchartability of climate change—why it pertains to local cultural values, and how it may provide consciousness shifts. Mason, Szabo-Jones and Steenkamp are concerned that the "challenge ecocriticism faces in academia is to translate these ethical concerns into models of activism", and their response is to create a crossover with postcolonial studies (5). Echoing this is Timothy Clark's concern that literature lacks an effective "real action" to do this<sup>21</sup>. Yet, indigenous writers have been consistently engaging in activism

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<sup>19</sup> If poets like Samuel Sixkiller, a Cherokee poet and Carlisle School graduate in 1895, described his indigenous classmates as "nature's children" who shall become "pure Americans", mimicking—perhaps as a survival strategy as Parker suggests—the romantic views a "dying" indigenous populations because it was what Carlisle wanted to hear, not necessarily what he believed, Diaz, Bitsui, Hedge Coke and Long Soldier fulfill none of the stereotypes that are unfortunately still expected of native writers, in other words, they deliberately do not deliver what the non-native audience wants to hear.

<sup>20</sup> Idle No More is an ongoing "First Nations–led movement" (Privott 100) initiated by Nina Wilson, Sheelah Mclean, Sylvia McAdam, and Jessica Gordon in November 2012 in response to the introduction of Bill C-45 by Canada's Harper government. The bill proposed "a series of legislative attacks on indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections" (Simpson, "Dancing"). The movement developed in different bands in communities across Canada as well as the United States. Idle No More-Duluth is the group in Duluth, Minnesota.

<sup>21</sup> Rather than being concerned about whether it is "convincing" to read poetry, if such an effort is "hollow" in a time of crisis, as Clark notes is often the "ecocritical mission", my approach is that the two are not mutually exclusive. The work of these four poets exists in parallel with the effective ecological and social

through poetry as well as primarily beyond the text in their communities; as Lakota scholar Nick Estes writes, they have been widely overshadowed by Western perspectives of sustainability which are often deemed more legitimate, and therefore more visible (Estes, “Indigenous People”). Hedge Coke, as I will explain in Chapter Three, is perhaps the only known poet whose work *directly* and successfully achieved an act of ecological protection on a legislative level; her reading of the beginning of her verse play *Blood Run* before the South Dakota Fishing and Gaming Commission impacted their decision to protect the Blood Run site. However, as Diaz asserts, poetry is “a practice field” for life; the challenge should not be to expect poetry to galvanise material action, yet because of linguistic and formal innovations pertaining to corporeal experience and reoriented ontologies, poetry does affect how we perceive these ethical issues. I echo Huggan and Tiffin’s notion that examining poetry as ecological “activism” first and foremost risks not only “underestimating” but overlooking entirely the “aesthetic complexities” of each poet’s artistic gestures that disrupt expectations of contemporary poetry as a whole, not solely in the ecocritical domain.

Finally, one of the major epiphanies these poets offer is that, unlike trends in contemporary ecocritical scholarship, they are not disaster or catastrophe orientated, as in Ulrich Beck’s “global risk society” paradigm, Kate Rigby’s concerns surrounding eco-catastrophe, Timothy Clark’s insistence on incalculable “scalar effects” and overloaded “encroachment”, Louise Squire’s “Death-Facing Ecology in Contemporary British and North American Environmental Crisis Fiction”, or the catastrophe-driven poetry which Lyn Keller points out in her book *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry from the Self-Conscious*

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actions of indigenous communities; there is no need to either justify poetry with theories that might in turn “dis-embed knowledge” of why and how stories are told, as Madeline Whetung, a Nishnaabeg scholar, reiterates (Whetung 152), or to take poetry less seriously as a craft.

*Anthropocene*. My focus is not how to endure the tug-of-war between, as Gerrard outlines, “the painful sense of insignificance that assails us” and the magnitude of the pollutants of the Anthropocene beyond individual control (Gerrard 64). Rather, these four poets create a renewed “third place” as I discuss in Chapter One, for the body of language and the bodies of the land, and how the permeability between body, land and language reflect our continued efforts, rather than “inhabiting a historical cul-de-sac of catastrophe (Cohen, “Stroied Matter” x). This is an ongoing, challenging task. Inuit activist and writer Sheila-Watt Coultier writes: “we are more than the trauma that we have gone through, we are people who can offer to the world the lessons of sustainability” (Watt-Coultier, “The Right”). I discuss how linguistic flexibility and consequently communal action can circulate beyond trauma and eco-catastrophe in recalibrating the linguistic and physical possibilities in the present.

### Choosing the Corpus

My reasons for choosing the work of Diaz, Bitsui, Hedge Coke and Long Soldier are various. Firstly, as previously mentioned, they have all developed distinct modern epistemologies and views on poetic craft related to form, the body, and what linguistic movement means to them. The qualitative research used in this thesis, including published interviews, personal interviews, recorded readings and essays by the poets, speaks to the poets’ individual approaches to craft which cannot neatly be categorised in ecocritical theory, nor in relation to major literary movements of anglophone poetry in the 20th century, nor those in the air this century, whether they be historical (Tyeimba Jess, NourbeSe Philip, Natasha Trethaway), migratory (Ocean Vuong, Chen Chen, Mary Jean Chan, Javier Zamora, Warsan Shire, Nick Makoha), or on racial experience for instance (Claudia Rankine, Evie Shockley, Nikki Finney, Jericho Brown, Terrance

Hayes). This hybridity and malleability distinguishes them in the current generation of contemporary poets. Secondly, I wanted to discuss poets who were particularly pushing language to its edges in the techniques I have established, such as form, spatial dimensions, syntax, sonority and punctuation, while adopting highly distinct aesthetics—having each inherited a different heteroglossic set of poetic influences—worldviews, ontologies and indigenous ways of knowing grounded in responsibilities towards communities and non-humans alike<sup>22</sup>, and to further delve into the cultural and linguistic variety of poetic expression from native poets, which Harjo’s aforementioned anthology comprehensively displays. Thirdly, these poets contribute to and vocalise a complex de-patriarchal feminist experience: Diaz confidently praises female, homosexual pleasure, coupled with traditional non-human interactions, while mourning the loss of thousands of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), a crisis exacerbated by man camps, the focal points of resource extraction<sup>23</sup>; Long Soldier proposes a

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<sup>22</sup> While this study incorporates primarily indigenous scholars, poets and activists, my analysis does engage with some non-native notions regarding poetic technique, following what Diné scholar Vincent Werito writes that there is not “only one truth or philosophy superior to others” and preference to discover the many ways of “finding out” about oneself (“Understanding Hózhó,” 33-34). For instance, Diaz, whose father was Spanish and Mexican, has been influenced by Federico Garcia Lorca, Jorge Luis Borges, and Pedro Salinas, whom she often references in her work. She also draws inspiration from Mahmoud Darwish and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, whom briefly I mention in the first chapter in relation to her poem “The First Water is the Body”. In a *New York Times* review of Long Soldier’s *WHEREAS*, discussed in chapter two, Diaz notes that the collection’s visual forms and syntax are in “deep conversation” with M. NourbeSe Philip, bpNichol and Gertrude Stein, as well as indigenous writers like Zitkala-Sa, Ofelia Zepeda, and Simon J. Ortiz (Diaz, “A Native American Poet”). Hedge Coke notes that “it was the presence of Amiri Baraka”, whom she worked with at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) that brought her “to book publication” (“Szeism”). She recognises, through the mentorship of poet Arthur Sze, the influence of the Deep Image Poets, New York School Poets, Language Poets, and classical Chinese poets on her work, the latter of which I discuss in chapter three.

<sup>23</sup> “In September 2016, the Government of Canada launched an entirely independent National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. In June 2019, the MMIWG National Inquiry released their final report, finding that persistent and deliberate human and Indigenous rights violations and abuses are the root cause behind Canada’s staggering rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people” (“Missing and Murdered”). As I mention in Chapter 1, Kandi Mosset-White explains that industrial extraction projects have been known to accompany higher cases of abuse because of the large groups of male workers near indigenous reservations. For more information about MMIWG, see the extensive list of resources provided by the University of British Columbia: <https://guides.library.ubc.ca/mmiwg>

matrifocal experience, intertwined with historical and present female roles and care within communities; Hedge Coke's *Blood Run* centralises the role of "Clan Sister", and her "Summer Fruit" is an experimental paean of female desire. Bitsui likewise converges song-based symbols of birth alongside our spectral, extracted ecosystems driven to infertility. I also develop the work of female indigenous scholars, not because, as Greta Gaard writes, the act of "placing indigenous women and feminist environmental perspectives more prominently in [...] the environmental humanities" is "strategically useful", but because their work is crucial to the relevant questions of contemporary poetic kinetics and community engagement.

#### Chapter Introductions

I chose to organise this research into four chapters, mainly divided by poet, to emphasise each poet's highly distinct aesthetics, cultural backgrounds, and modes of poetic mobility. In the first section of the first chapter, I examine the effects of translingualism engaged by Natalie Diaz using the Mojave language and Sherwin Bitsui using the Diné language. Translingualism, in particular the etymological significances in their respective languages alongside English, not only demands a multilingual engagement from the reader, challenging the "convenience in a country where multiculturalism goes hand in hand with monolingualism" (Spivak 37), it also highlights embedded relationships existing within these languages which English lacks. My first focus is Diaz's poem "The First Water the Body", in which the Mojave endonym, 'Aha Makav, develops a union between land and body, prose and poetry, and interrogation without direct response. Building on Carter Revard's explanation that any translation must be treated "with respect" as with any ancient form, "not as entertainment, but as revelation" (Muller 43); Driskill's notion of decolonial skillshares; and Diaz's own counter argument to Derrida's claim,

via Sinan Antoon, Darwish's translator, that a text remains in mourning until it is translated, I explore the eco-linguistic etymologies related to our physical relationships with water. I discuss how Diaz's prosimetrum probes the absence of this kinetic relationship in English translation—a language that relies on the American myths of “goodness” as she notes—and I argue, using Kyle Powys Whyte's theories of futurity, that Diaz evades the common ecopoetic trope of apocalypse and catastrophe, as elaborated on in Keller's *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry from the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*, in part by eliciting John Berger's notion of the “third place” of translation, rooted in somatic relationships. In the second part of this section, I draw on Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy's (Hupa, Yurok, Karuk) research in horticulture and women's ceremony in California nations as well as Diaz's use of both Mojave and Spanish to discuss Diaz's poem “The Red Blues”, which arrives at another conjunction with the body and the Mojave language via ancestry and the lived female experience. I discuss how this poem, capsizing the uncomfortable and desire-stripped experience of menstruation, intertwines with the female inheritance of colonial violence, especially the harming land extraction and damming on the Mojave reservation, exacerbated by, as activist Kandi Mosset-White (Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara) explains, the tangled web of pollution, man camps, and capital investment.

In the second section of the first chapter, I explore the use of Diné sound symbolism and anthimeria (nouns in verb forms) in Sherwin Bitsui's kinetic aesthetics, and how they are often integrated into English, drawing on Diné scholar Lloyd L. Lee and Anthony K. Webster, linguist on the Diné language. Firstly, I discuss Bitsui's verb use in English and Diné translingualism, using Keith Basso's study of Western Apache storytellers as “place-makers” (Bryson 8) which explores topophilia, what Yi-Fu Tuan calls “the affective bond between people and place” (Tuan

4), and which results in “interanimation”: “[...] When places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind [...]” (Bryson 10). Bitsui’s understanding of seeing the world as “alive”—a vision from the heights of the plateau he climbed as a shepherd boy in Dinétah, the Diné word for Navajo land—is translated into the movements of non-human life, which I compare to Diné poets Laura Toha and Luci Tapahonso, while drawing on other native scholarship on “storied” landscape. In his latest collection, *Dissolve*, images are “stopping in mid-movement”, photographically “painted”, and “being etched into form”, while in *Flood Song*, the poet’s own song is a way of accessing or recreating the phonic “portal” of songs learned from home. I then describe how Bitsui’s linguistic “continuum”, as he defines it, involves an orchestrated, shifting morphology interweaving Diné narratives and the visually-charged desert landscape with the haunting presence of colonial extractivism—particularly coal mining and uranium mining on the Navajo Nation—and its effects on bodies, languages, and their non-linear relationships, which Bitsui expresses through punctuation (witten our as words) and metamorphosing, interacting symbols. These ties to ancestral homelands meld celebratory permeable interactions of non-humans and humans—seeds, mountains, bird song, canyons, celestial entities, lakes—with the federal extraction and continued colonial containment of a land we “never own”, but are just “hovering above” (Bitsui, PI). Finally, I retrace Berger’s “third place” and connect it to Bitsui’s use of the very same expression, to highlight how the violence and extractivist origins of border towns and the federally-contained Navajo reservation are confronted by the relief and physical comfort of family and clan ties.

In the second chapter, I define what I call thought-music in Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier's work: the poet's innovative use of lineation, punctuation and spatial configurations which translate the intimate interrogations of her thought processes surrounding motherhood, sincerity, and somatic transference. While her collection *WHEREAS* has been discussed as a rebuttal to the 2009 Congressional Apology to Native Peoples of the United States, little has been said about her punctuation, typographical, syntactical innovations addressing motherhood, which I discuss first, drawing on James Wright's notion of the "poetic occasion" and Simon Ortiz's notion of a poem as perception. Secondly, I discuss her matrifocal shape poems, which I call embodied poems after Ross Gay's use of "embodied". I argue that Long Soldier's spatial dimensions differ from calligrammes and 20<sup>th</sup>-century concrete movements in their attention to female physicality. In this second section, I outline how Long Soldier typographically translates sincerity—using examples from Robert Frost and Paul Valéry for comparison—and responsibility, as also iterated by Gerald Vizenor, Haunani-Kay Trask and Kyle Powys Whyte. I also discuss, drawing on Arthur Sze's negation of hierarchies, the diamond-shaped poems "Obligations" 1 and 2, which were displayed on her wall-sized paper star quilt, featured in an exhibition first shown at Racing Magie in Rapid City (2017-2018), and which reiterate somatic transference, inheritance, responsibility and continued relationality to land and non-humans. I follow with a discussion of Long Soldier's more geometrical poems which are not directly related to motherhood, using Leanne Simpson's *As We Have Always Done* and exploring an alternative poetic approach to Michelle Raheja's understanding of visual sovereignty. Finally, I discuss the autonomy and use of white space in Long Soldier's "disclaimer". Approaching visual architecture as a form of intimacy in Long Soldier's poetry, this chapter continues to reiterate the



relationship between language use—both Lakota and English—and the body through the poet’s denunciation of America’s destructive ecological relationships and colonial injustices. Her spatial dimensions reflecting fields of physical interactions counter the lack of presence in the federal apology’s delivery and thus its feigned sincerity.

The third chapter is a close reading of Allison Adelle Hedge Coke’s verse play, *Blood Run*, which, as previously stated, may be the only known book of poetry to have directly influenced a decision to protect a sacred site. Hedge Coke uses a set of place-based personas—humans, plants, animals, and celestial objects, and most prominently, indigenous earthworks and burial mounds—to speak of the network of movements at the significant Blood Run site, an “everywhere” or “a vital ‘here’”<sup>24</sup>, straddling the borders of present-day South Dakota and Iowa. I first examine this intertextual prosopopoeia and her use of lists to incite non-linear indigenous chronology against the financially-oriented, Christian cosmological mission of settler-colonists. Building on the work of Choctaw scholar, poet, fiction writer, and playwright Leanne Howe; Anishinaabe scholar, poet, fiction writer, and songwriter Leanne Betasamosake Simpson; and Swinomish and Tulalip photographer Matika Wilbur, I argue that Hedge Coke’s prosopopoeia in this verse play expands Bakhtin’s narrow insistence that poetry is limited to unitary discourse, and that heteroglossic features belong to prose. Secondly, closely reexamining place-based deep symbolism through kinetic non-human interactions, syntax, and textual reconstruction of site, I take a lexical and typographical approach to access Hedge Coke’s literary reinterpretation of the topography, ceremonies, plant and animal life specific to the Blood

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<sup>24</sup> The place-based word “everywhere” is listed in *Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing Within the Anthropocene*, as arising when “anywhere is considered a vital ‘here’”, corresponding with “poetic embeddedness or embodied poesis” and is “continuous with a range of healing gestures”. The structure of Hedge Coke’s verse play corresponds with healing-based poesis proposed here.

Run site itself. This differs from Kelsey and Carpenter’s focus on the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act’s (NAGPRA) relationship to the text<sup>25</sup>, or Chadwick Allen’s focus on *Blood Run*’s mathematical encoding and anthropological connections. I move on to develop Hedge Coke’s decentring expression away from the first-person lyric partly inspired by Sze, her complex embedded motifs, and her ceremonial storytelling in *Blood Run*, building on Ortiz’s self-assertion and poetry as a manifestation of flexibility.

In the final chapter, my lens shifts to the kinetic poetics surrounding what Diaz calls the “autonomy of desire” (Diaz, “A Lexicon”) and relationships with all life forms in Diaz’s poetry, predominantly the love poems in her newest collection *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Using Deborah Miranda’s (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen) advocacy of the erotic, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s “decolonial love”, Dena’ina Athabascan and A’aniih scholar Carol Edelman Warrior’s argument on defying categories, and Diaz’s own poetry as “touch”, I argue that Diaz’s celebration of the body’s pleasures and autonomy manifests itself in metamorphosis and disappearance, hybridity, and complexifying Christian beliefs which affix sensuality to sin. I also involve Italo Calvino’s theories of “lightness” to demonstrate how Diaz’s kinetics forge a constant collision of both the weight and lightness of desire. While her renditions of formal poetic structures, such as the aubade, emphasise these blurred binaries—weight and lightness, beast and lover—I contrast Knickerbocker’s claim that “traditionally formal verse is more organic than free verse since it more consistently expresses the combination of chance and order we find in nature”, for example, fractal geometry (162)<sup>26</sup>. Rather, Diaz uses both recognisable

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<sup>25</sup> For instance, Kelsey and Carpenter explain that one of the pitfalls of NAGPRA is that it adheres to the federal recognition of native nations and is thus reductive when it comes to repatriation of artifacts, such as the ones Hedge Coke describes in *Blood Run*.

<sup>26</sup> Using the notion of fractal geometry, Knickerbocker updates poet A.R. Ammons use of chaos theory to explain Ammons’s line breaks in “Corson’s Inlet” and the “rulelessness” in nature. Knickerbocker explains

poetic arrangements as well as her own architectures and symmetries to disrupt expected patterns and perceived boundaries, to impart an alternative, materialised version of desire and autonomy predicated on Mojave values, which she reaches towards in English translation. Therefore, as opposed to the graspable, contained forms of traditional verse, Diaz's reader is invited to *not* fully extract linguistic and ontological fixities. I also examine her structurally singular poem "*exhibits from The American Water Museum*", a textual museum of both water extraction and an alternative depiction of human/water relations in which the readers are both the curators and museum goers. The piece manipulates movement and takes up space<sup>27</sup> using sensory and corporal experiences to navigate the water crisis, contamination, containment and ecological injustices in America. I apply Diaz's theories on pleasure, desire and corporeality to examine how the poet textually marries the body/land union (recalling her definition of the Mojave endonym in chapter one) with autonomous pleasure. In an analysis of "How the Milky Way Was Made", I return to the use of the Mojave language and the potentialities to perceive bodies—the body of a poem, of humans, and non-humans, including water—as carrying one another, drawing again on Simon Ortiz, Osage poet Carter Revard, Philip Klasky's writing on Mojave songs.

#### Indigenous Poetry in Academic Settings

Finally, in regards to how this research contributes to the intellectual sphere within and outside of institutions today, I follow Daniel Heath Justice, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou), Eve Tuck (Unangax̄), and K. Wayne Yang's support of a respectful appreciation

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that natural shapes which appear to be chaotic or random are actually governed patterns, from plants to human organs, and therefore New Formalists impart poetic mechanisms that are more "organically" representative of nature (Knickerbocker 161-162).

<sup>27</sup> The discussion of occupying textual territory builds on Diaz's conversation with friend and poet Roger Reeves, recorded by poet Rachel Zucker.

of indigenous voices, activism and innovative artistry, while acknowledging my non-native background, which involves giving space to native voices (Smith et al. 7). Reflecting on Smith's work for the need to listen to indigenous scholars who create, as Smith says, the "academic language we need", I have tried, to the best of my ability, to engage with the work of indigenous scholars and poets in this literary analysis in order to expand the approaches to and possibilities of poetics. I also have done my best to engage in Kim TallBear's description of decolonising methods: "Rather than integrating community priorities with academic priorities, changing and expanding both in the process, decolonizing methods begin and end with the standpoint of indigenous lives, needs, and desires, engaging with academic lives, approaches, and priorities along the way" (Tallbear, *Native American DNA* 20). Throughout my endeavour to highlight how these poets contribute to both the poetic and political spheres and to cultural awareness, by engaging in personal interviews and elaborating on their own viewpoints, I have aimed to present my utmost respect and admiration of their work, and to account for the relationality of their readership. I follow Elizabeth Hoover's sentiment; my hope is that my project can be relevant for the poets, their continued craft, and their communities (Hoover 16).

When poets of native nations are taught in universities, departments can very much benefit by asking, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou), Eve Tuck (Unangax̄), and K. Wayne Yang suggest, "Who is making the call? [...] What Indigenous capacity is being developed and how is that being sustained over the long term?" (Smith et al. 8). Again, a thorough appreciation of the text which engages in the poets' own theoretical, linguistic conceptualisations as well as those of other indigenous scholars will help probe these questions. On October 15th, 2018, Céline Planchou, associate professor at Université Sorbonne Paris Nord,

invited Lakota activist Jean Roach and Choctaw activist Jimbo Simmons to speak about the movement at Standing Rock against the DAPL, alongside a selection of art relevant to the water protectors' presence in 2016 and 2017, and on June 23, 2016, Bénédicte Meillon, associate professor at Université de Perpignan Via Domitia, invited renowned Choctaw poet Linda Hogan to speak on her own behalf on the topics of enchantment at the International Ecopoetics Conference in Perpignan. Such exchanges are appreciative steps towards listening to and prioritising indigenous voices, improving relations and engaging students with indigenous thinkers to shift institutional practices. While much progress has been made since 2001 when Daniel Heath Justice wrote that academic spaces remain “largely white, largely male, largely straight, and largely dominated by Euro-American ideals of individualism, capitalism, conformity, and knowledge as property” (Justice, “We’re Not” 256), there is still a need for an “increased visibility and tribal advocacy in all fields and disciplines” as well as the understanding that writers of native nations “have both the right and the responsibility to represent ourselves” (Justice, “We’re Not” 267)<sup>28</sup>. My research in the poetic sphere takes these ideals into consideration: I use these poets’ aesthetic and theoretical cartographies to analyse both literary flexibility and imagination which balance language on its outer edges, where elements of surprise and non-fixity are at their fullest potential.

## Biographies of Poets in the Corpus

### ***Bitsui, Sherwin (b. 1975)***

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<sup>28</sup> Most indigenous scholars and poets continuously advocate for self-representation, for instance Craig Womack’s *In Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, and what Scott Richard Lyons names “rhetorical sovereignty” in “Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing”.

“Sherwin Bitsui is from White Cone, Arizona, on the Navajo reservation. He is Diné of the Todíh’ii’nii, born for the Tlizi-laaní. He received an AFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts and a BA from the University of Arizona in Tucson. Bitsui is the author of *Dissolve* (Copper Canyon Press, 2018); *Flood Song* (Copper Canyon Press, 2009), which received a 2010 PEN Open Book Award; and *Shapeshift* (University of Arizona Press, 2003)”.

“Bitsui is the recipient of a Lannan Literary Fellowship, a Native Arts & Culture Foundation Arts Fellowship, a grant from the Witter Bynner Foundation, and a Whiting Writers’ Award. He teaches in the low-residency MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. He was the judge of the 2021 Inaugural James Welch Prize for Indigenous Poets, distributed by *Poetry Northwest* magazine”.

His essay “Converging Worlds: Nizhoni Bridges and Southwest Native Communities” appeared in *Blueprints: Bringing Poetry into Communities*, edited by Katharine Coles (2011).<sup>29</sup>

### **Diaz, Natalie (b. 1982)**

“Natalie Diaz was born and raised in the Fort Mojave Indian Village in Needles, California, on the banks of the Colorado River. She is Mojave and Akimel O’odham, and an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Tribe. Her first poetry collection, *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, was published by Copper Canyon Press in 2012. She was a 2018 MacArthur Foundation Fellow, a Lannan Literary Fellow and a Native Arts Council Foundation Artist Fellow”.

“Her second collection, *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020), was a finalist for the National Book Award for Poetry, and shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize in the UK. She was awarded a Bread Loaf Fellowship, the Holmes National Poetry Prize, a Hodder Fellowship, and a PEN/Civitella Ranieri Foundation Residency, as well as a US Artists Ford Fellowship. Diaz teaches in the Creative Writing MFA program at Arizona State University, where she is the founding director of the Center for Imagination in the Borderlands”.

“Her poetry appears in the anthologies *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* (2020), *New Poets of Native Nations* (2018), *Sing: Poetry from the Indigenous Americas* (2011)”.

“Her essays appear in *Bodies Built for Game: The Prairie Schooner Anthology of Contemporary Sports Writing*, which she also edited, in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and on the *Best American Poetry Blog*”.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Biographical information from The Academy of American Poets website:

<https://poets.org/poet/sherwin-bitsui> and the IAIA website:

<https://iaia.edu/explore-programs/creative-writing-mfa/mfa-mentors/>.

<sup>30</sup> Biographical information from Diaz’s personal website: <https://www.nataliegermainediaz.com/about>, and <https://poets.org/poet/natalie-diaz>.

A Swedish translation by Athena Farrokhzad and Adam Westman of *When My Brother Was an Aztec* was published in 2020 by Rámus Förlag.

Béatrice Machet has translated excerpts from the same collection on the website Recours au Poème: <https://www.recoursapoeme.fr/natalie-diaz/>.

### ***Hedge Coke, Allison Adelle (b. 1958)***

“Allison Adelle Hedge Coke grew up in North Carolina, Texas, Canada, and the Great Plains region. She is a poet, author, activist and educator of Huron, Metis, French Canadian, Portuguese, English, Irish, Scot, and mixed Southeastern Native heritage. She attended North Carolina State University, Estelle Harmon’s Actor’s Workshop, Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics Summer Writing Program, and earned an AFAW in creative writing from the Institute for American Indian Arts and an MFA from Vermont College. She is the author of the poetry chapbook *Year of the Rat* (1996); the full-length poetry collections *Dog Road Woman* (1997), winner of American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, *Off-Season City Pipe* (2005), *Blood Run* (2006 UK, 2007 US), *Streaming* (2014), an illustrated (by Dustin Illetawahke Mater) special edition *Burn* (2017); and the memoir *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer* (2004, 2014). *Streaming* comes with a full album recorded in the Rd Klā project period with Kelvyn Bell and Laura Ortman. Several of the poems in *Streaming* also influenced the film she is currently in-production directing, *Red Dust*”.

“Hedge Coke has also edited numerous anthologies: *Coming to Life, poems for peace in response to 9-11* (2002) and *They Wanted Children* (2003), *It’s Not Quiet Anymore* (1992); *Voices of Thunder* (1993); *To Topos* (2007); *Effigies* (2009), a collection of work by Inupiat and Hawaiian Native poets; *Sing: Poetry From the Indigenous Americas* (2011); and *Effigies II* (2014)”.

“She is a King-Chavez-Parks awardee, a Pen Southwest Book Award winner, has twice received the Writer of the Year award for Poetry and twice received the Editor of the Year Award from the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. In 2015 she was also awarded the Native Writers’ Circle Lifetime Achievement Award. US Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera selected her for a Witter Bynner fellowship in 2016. She has taught at many universities, and is currently a Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside”.

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### ***Long Soldier, Layli (b. 1973)***

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<sup>31</sup> Biographical information from Hedge Coke’s personal website, <https://hedgecoke.com/>; *Poetry Out Loud*, <https://www.poetryoutloud.org/poem/america-i-sing-you-back/>; and *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/allison-adelle-hedge-coke>.

“Layli Long Soldier is Oglala Lakota. She earned a BFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts and an MFA with honors from Bard College. She is the author of the chapbook *Chromosomory* (2010) and the full-length collection *Whereas* (2017), which won the National Books Critics Circle award and was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award. It was also awarded the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award and the 2018 Griffin Poetry Prize”.

“She was a contributing editor to *Drunken Boat* and poetry editor at *Kore Press*. In 2015, Long Soldier was awarded a National Artist Fellowship from the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation and a Lannan Literary Fellowship for Poetry. She was awarded a Whiting Writers Award in 2016”.

“She read a prose piece in response to Zoe Leonard’s ‘I want a president’ (1992), on November 6, 2016, hosted by High Line Art. The text was later made available and entitled ‘The Presidential Terms of ‘Brother’ and ‘Sister’”.

“In 2012, her participatory installation, ‘Whereas We Respond’, was featured on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Her visual art, which also integrated her poems, was featured in the exhibition ‘Responsibilities and Obligations: Understanding Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ’, curated by Clementine Bordeaux, Mary V. Bordeaux, and herself, which was first displayed at Racing Magpie 2017-2018, Rapid City, South Dakota”.<sup>32</sup>

Béatrice Machet has translated the full collection *WHEREAS* as *ATTENDU QUE*, published by éditions Isabelle Sauvage in 2020, and Vincent Broqua has translated an excerpt from the collection in *Nioques* in 2020, coordinated by Double Change.

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<sup>32</sup> Biographical information from *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/layli-long-soldier>; University of Chicago Arts website, <https://arts.uchicago.edu/event/poem-present-reading-layli-long-soldier>; and the Racing Magpie website, <https://www.racingmagpie.com/mitakuye-oyasin-exhibit>.





## Chapter One: Natalie Diaz and Sherwin Bitsui's Translingualism, Verb-centred Language, and a "Third Place"

### Introduction: New Approaches to Poetry as a "State of Movement"

North American poets, and indigenous poets in particular, have actively and innovatively responded to postcolonial neoliberalism surrounding local and national ecological crises in recent years, and as a result, ecopoetic and postcolonial approaches, and the dialogue between them, have become increasingly developed in the humanities. Foregrounding the colonial elements of ongoing and worsening ecological crises has been a reactive way for poets of indigenous nations to textually "augment and differentiate" (Moten qtd in Wallace, "Fred Moten's Radical Critique") their experience within an extractivist empire whose containment strategies are "reminiscent of the darkest days of our history", remarks Deb Haaland, U.S. Democratic representative enrolled in the Pueblo community (Haaland, "Trump Wants Immigrants"). However, the pertinent linguistic and syntactical nuances, translingualism, and formal interrogations from indigenous writers who go beyond a cursory "intersectionality" (Diaz, "Between"). While these aesthetic intricacies underline that "autonomy means nothing and can't exist if it's not in relation to who is around you" (Diaz, "Between"), their significance in reinventing contemporary poetry is often overlooked, in part because of the false, reductive assumptions that a monolithic connection to the land will be the essential import in indigenous poetry. This assumption neglects the poets' complex synergy of linguistic and non-human relationships reiterated in the continuously emerging, yet increasingly precarious, present (Diaz, "Between"). This underpins the "state of emergency" which ecocritical studies discourse often frames as a novel exception today. Yet, as Diaz, who grew up on the Fort Mojave Indian

Reservation as a member of the Gila River Indian Tribe, points out, the “white ecstatic”—a nostalgic return to a state of conquering a human body or a body of land physically or intellectually, and thus assuming the right to “step into” that body in order to do so, while “stepping outside” of one’s complicity, which Tuck and Wang call “settler moves to innocence” (“Decolonization” 9)—and forms of empire have been and still are at play<sup>33</sup>. The desire to intellectually extract a broad, essentialised connection to the land also discludes systemic complications; for instance, that some indigenous communities are “tethered to a resource extractive occupation” as David Naimon notes (Diaz, “Between”) such as fracking, oil, or, as Diaz notes, the “academy”, to earn a living in the very same system, a cycle embodied in Sherwin Bitsui’s line “Ladders followed us from mines” (*Dissolve* 38). Poets of indigenous nations have been putting forward languages and worldviews from distinct community experiences, which are “new, yes, in a contemporary sense, but with far-ranging particles of legacy” (Hedge Coke, *Sing* 9), as Hedge Coke states, and which are often eclipsed by more widespread rhetoric of catastrophe, the anxiety of coping with “world risk society” in Ulrich Beck’s terms. The innovative linguistic nuances used by indigenous poets to express these invisibilised issues—from within their distinct nations and cross-cultural discourse—merit more attention, an attention which does not diminish their decolonial activism and communal engagement on and off the page, but enhances it. Elissa Washuta says “the work of native writers is so often valued by non-natives primarily for the lives and struggles it documents. But when we write, we care about craft. We have always been innovators” (Washuta). While socio-political

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<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin writes, “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘State of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realise that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency [...]” (Benjamin, “Theses” 256).

conflicts, including colonial and ecocritical struggles, have prominence in literary analysis, the devices of craft are, as Washuta mentions, often glossed over. This reflects the need not to ignore poetics in favour of political signifiers; as Cherokee poet Santee Frazier says, he hopes contemporary American poetry by all minorities, including indigenous people, is seen as artistically “equal, to be held in the same regard as Stevens and Ashberry” (“Cave Canem”). Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan shares the same concerns; in a three-hour televised interview, listeners called in to ask her exclusively socio-political questions, to which Hogan commented, “No one is asking me writing questions” (Hogan, “In Depth” 2011). Diaz, however, reminds us that poetry is only one mode of language, as a catalyst for movement beyond the page:

There’s a way that I’ve realized that language, yes, it’s a part of me and it’s important to me but I’m having a really hard time just stepping in and talking about craft. It’s not that I’m not engaged in what is a line break but I’m only engaged in it in terms of how it catalyzes, energizes, or what the energy of a word or language can do in that respect. For me, when I think about poetry I guess what I’m thinking about is what is the language that’s meaningful for me. Some of it does go into my poetry yet the greater body of that language happens far outside of poetry. (Diaz, “Between”)

Diaz suggests that the poem’s kinetics—that is, the force of the word’s origins, its relationship with the body (a loss, an elation, a desire, a wound), and its gesture outwards—appeals for movement outside of itself; a word is only the beginning, not the end, of expression, whether it concerns the relationship to land and community or the colonial extraction and elimination of that knowledge while shirking responsibility, the “white ecstatic”. It is Diaz’s attention to what “catalyzes” language which enables a command of whatever she wills to come and go, an artery in which she doesn’t ask “the state for permission” (Diaz, “Between”). What practices occur in these linguistic happenings, either “out of time”, as Diaz describes, or through a verb-based continuum, as Bitsui suggests, which intend to create temporal and physical movement on and

off the page? How does this space of “touch”, as Diaz aims towards, or a “third place” as I elaborate on in this chapter, suspend our interrogations of our own actions, complicities, ignorances, and desires?

In this chapter, I will discuss Natalie Diaz’s poems “The First Water is the Body” and “The Red Blues”, followed by a discussion of Sherwin Bitsui’s work spanning three collections. I chose to discuss Bitsui and Diaz in the same chapter to align their themes of translanguaging and verb use, often in relation to capitalist-driven land destruction affecting their communities in the southwestern region of the U.S. Their integration of verb-centred conceptions to kineticise English also illuminate simultaneities and superimpositions of the body’s materiality and that of non-humans and homelands. Even more, they both use the term “third place”; Diaz distinguishes this place—following John Berger—as both a somatic and non-human triad which precedes language and which she calls for in the act of translation, and Bitsui refers to it as an asset of bilingual Diné and English writers, but also a sound-based approach to the “resonance” of language (Bitsui, PI). I also argue that this “third place” constitutes what Bitsui calls a “place of exiting”, which I apply to his poetics.

Firstly, I will explain how Diaz’s own definition of the Mojave endonym, *Aha Makav*, asserts a synchronal, verb-based relationship between river and body, and between the loss of the river and the loss of language, by addressing the linguistic and somatic rupture with land-based, non-human synchronicity which occurs in her English translation. Building on Driskill’s “decolonial skillshares” I will also address Diaz’s demythologisation of her translation, and elaborate on her own question of whether or not “a text remains in mourning until it is translated” (*Postcolonial* 47), invoked by Sinan Antoon via Derrida. Drawing on Carol Edelman

Warrior's analysis of the intelligent, morphing slime mold, I then explore the effects of Diaz's series of questions which project this interrogation of the linguistic chasm, suggesting a non-apocalyptic suspension, and her choice to oscillate between rhythmic, lyrical sequences and prose statements, a new iteration of prosimetrum. Finally, building on Cutcha Risling Baldy's work on indigenous traditions in California nations, I examine Diaz's poem "The Red Blues" which streams cyclical pollution, oil extraction, and colonial trauma into the body's experience of the menstrual cycle, with metaphors in both Spanish and Mojave.

In the second section of the chapter, I discuss Bitsui's linguistic iconicity and sound symbolism drawing on Anthony Webster's work and, in correlation with Diaz's description of *'Aha Makav*, his verbal anthimeria and translingual expression, which all contribute to a sense of toponophilia. These place-making elements, however, are enmeshed with a splintering of land and non-humans, "non-place" as described by Augé or dislocation, and metonymies of extractivist legacies, including water pollution, damming and rerouting emphasised in Diaz's poem. I end with Bitsui's discussion of the "third place", echoing Diaz's elaboration on Berger's "third place" of translation, or a pre-verbal mode of kinetics referring to the physical, "a state of movement" as Sherwin Bitsui says of his own work (Harjo, "Sherwin Bitsui by Joy Harjo"). Both Diaz and Bitsui's work is not only translingual, but uses Mojave and Diné structures respectively to reconfigure nouns as verbs which evoke place-based ontologies into English, negating a so-called "degradation of verbal invention" (Valéry, *The Art* 222) which Valéry mourned in poetics of the early 20th century. Eppelsheimer, Kuchler, and Melin's ecocritical pedagogy promotes the inclusion of multilingual and transcultural literature in ecocritical discourse—a reflection on Ursula Heise's "way of reading rather than a canon" (Heise 638)—which seems a

suitable approach to Diaz and Bitsui's translingual expression. However, Bitsui and Diaz question the definitions of American multicultural inclusion and idealism. Although these poets are aesthetically disparate—Diaz's "The First Water is the Body" being more narrative with prose-like vignettes, although she uses formal renderings elsewhere as I will discuss in Chapter 4, while Bitsui's work is imagistic, lyrical and almost hypnagogic—these verbal qualities and somatic intentions, whether translingual or rendered into English, are bilateral forces in their poetry.

In his 2011 article "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends", Lawrence Buell writes that environmental humanists would benefit from negotiating linguistic differences to construct a "shared critical vocabulary" in ecocriticism; for instance, to be attentive to the untranslatability of words such as "environment" in Chinese, or "wilderness" in Spanish (Buell 107). My interpretation of Diaz and Bitsui's work, however, attempts to reveal how the poets go beyond negotiating these lacunae in translation, pointing to a pre-verbal locus of both desire and pain where expression is not only vocal, not unlike the "inner space", or *mamatowisowin* in Cree, as Willie Ermine writes, but the capacity to tap into a creative force grounded in ontology and somatic exchange (Ermine 104). Even more, while Walter Benjamin views translation as an "afterlife of the original" because "important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin" (Benjamin, "The Task" 254), these poets are their own translators in their own time of origin. In fact, both poets' language shifts and surprising renderings of English highlight their ability, as okpik writes "to maneuver in and out of consciousness, time or space". Okpik continues: "Arthur (Sze) taught me about seeing an object from many points of departure or angles: as if it were a crystal ball hanging from a string,

multi-faceted, collecting light while twirling in freedom. Seeing the star Polaris from all trajectories in the sky at once is how I think of time and place in writing” (okpik, “Uncoverage” 228). Enabling such trajectories allows a poem to become—in its non-fixity—“alive and breathing on its own as a living language [...]” as okpik says. Indeed, my aim is to contribute to the dialogue between postcolonial and ecopoetic discourse in an attention to Diaz and Bitsui’s kinetic, verb-centred expression and “third place”, which also challenges anthropocentric epidemics outside of the text. Rather than confine Bitsui and Diaz’s work as solely ecocritical in accordance with recent Western frameworks, I highlight the complexity of their land-based translations evoked through form and phonic experience, often pitted against the rhetoric of capitalism. These poets do not necessarily cultivate a “*new* sense of *ecology* related to the use of language” (my emphasis, Eppelsheimer 2), but rather enmesh the movements of our anthropocentric modernity, underpinned by long-established pre-colonial beliefs and languages which American colonialism attempted to systematically erase.

#### Pre-verbal Physicality: Translating the Body in “The First Water is the Body” and “The Red Blues” by Natalie Diaz

Firstly, I use “kinetic” and “kinetic poetics” in this section largely to refer to Diaz’s understanding of poetry as, in her words, “one of the many ways language touches” (Diaz, “A Taste”), which is in line with Simon Ortiz’s understanding that song and language are ways of perceiving one’s “relationships to all things” and even “a way of touching” (“Song, Poetry” 38). If both language and touch exist “outside of time”—existing in the past, present and future, or as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes, as mentioned in Chapter 3, “the past and the future collapsing on each other” (Simpson, “Leanne”) rather than a linear Western chronology—and



“outside of the self”—the potential “energy that might yet become action”—then one can approach a poem as a gesture or movement towards the reader outside of the fixities of text (Diaz, “A Taste”). This shares elements with Gerald Vizenor’s transmotion: “actual and visual images across, beyond, on the other side, or in another place, [...]” (*Native Provenance* 47) and “scenes of natural motion” such as “in native creation stories, visionary dream songs, and literature” (37). Vizenor highlights transmotion as “survivance”, and “resistance to the pushy ideologies of nationalism, ethnographic simulations and models” (37), and yet Diaz has clarified that she is tired of her “body always being in opposition” (Diaz, “A Taste”). Thus, while these poems are in dialogue with transmotion, Diaz points us more directly towards “a space compelled by sensation”; the possible linguistic gestures unifying the body and land that might shift ontological perspectives (Diaz, “A Taste”). For instance, Diaz notes that the Mojave language “carries in it the ways we love and touch each other”: “to say, kiss me, is to say “fall into my mouth” (Diaz, “If What”). Subsequently, the poet carries sensual, land-based beliefs from Mojave “onto the page” (Diaz, “If What”), highlighting these verb-centred qualities of Mojave alongside English, embedded with ecological relationships and responsibilities.

Furthermore, although Diaz’s work is not solely ecocritical, the poems I will discuss here—in particular “The First Water is the Body”—signal that, as Heid Erdrich writes, “what happens to the land, happens to us” (Erdrich, “Placed” 101), and as Joy Harjo has recently reiterated in the comprehensive anthology *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry*: “We are literally the land” (Harjo, “Introduction” 1). Thus, one of the reasons I situate Diaz’s “The First Water is the Body” and the “The Red Blues” together with my exploration of Bitsui’s work which follows, is because of her

verbal emphasis, drawn from Mojave linguistic constructions and practices, on the chiasmic experience of “what happens” to one’s body and the land, which manifests in Diaz’s poems as a type of palindromic reciprocity, a continuum of call and response, so that the poems are not *ab ovo* enunciations but are reactions to these non-human interactions, particularly with the Colorado River in Diaz’s case. The poems I will investigate in this section particularly emphasise that, through this synchronal understanding, we can learn, as Diaz writes, “how to speak to each other, how to talk about the land and water” in relation to ourselves (Davis 2013). Diaz thus translates long-established beliefs grounded in human/land relationships to condemn new manifestations of colonialism and industrialism, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline<sup>34</sup> and the excessive rerouting of the Colorado River.

#### The Mojave Endonym: Translating a “Happening”

In 2009, Diaz began seeking support from Arizona State University’s Center for Indian Education for a Mojave language revitalisation project on the Mojave reservation. She subsequently acquired a National Science Foundation grant, which led to her becoming Director of the Fort Mojave Language Recovery Program in 2013. Natalie Diaz has continued to work with the few fluent Mojave elders still alive, in particular her uncle Hubert McCord, by documenting their language and oral heritage, including the knowledge of bird songs. McCord is in fact the last surviving fluent bird singer (Davis). She recounts that sometimes when she’d ask McCord how to say certain words, he’d answer, ““There’s nobody left for me to ask”” (Diaz, “Back to the Body”). Extrapolating the visceral grief of language loss, “The First Water is the

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<sup>34</sup> The Dakota Access Pipeline is a 1,172-mile-long (1,886 km) underground oil pipeline. Construction began in June, 2016 and it was operable in 2017. It was contested for months by up to 15,000 people on and near the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. I will refer to the pipeline as DAPL henceforth.

Body” pivots the reader’s awareness towards global destructive forces which Achille Mbembe names “fast capitalism” and “soft capital warfare” (Mbembe, “Rethinking Democracy”), but is more specifically charged with Mojave meanings and the values shaped on Diaz’s reservation, as she unravels her physical response to the exploitation of the Colorado River, which is linguistically and ideologically aligned with the body. In this section, I will discuss Diaz’s elucidation on her translation of the Mojave endonym; its verbal quality which centres the translation on somatic relations, as in Driskill’s “decolonial skillshares”; the loss of linguistic translation for which Diaz draws on Antoon and Darwish; and Diaz’s demythologising of American identity tropes of indigeneity.

Growing up on the reservation, the river reminded Diaz of her Mojave heritage and her individual potentiality:

My mind, my desires, my wonders, my imagination, were all shaped in the desert, not just the desert but being next to the Colorado River. [...] A blurring of what is body and what is land, it’s a very Mojave way of thinking, and down to our language, [...] they are the same. And so I have a very different lens of looking at the world, [...] and in some ways it’s always a fissure for me [...] to realise what it is we’re doing to one another’s bodies, what it is we’re doing to our lands. (Diaz, “Hilton Als in Conversation”)

She therefore begins linguistically, through her interrogative elucidation on the Mojave endonym, ‘*Aha Makav*’<sup>35</sup>, which she translates towards the beginning of the poem:

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<sup>35</sup> Although the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe held a successful 113-day occupation in 1999 against a proposal for a nuclear waste dump at Ward Valley, “defunct mining operations and other abandoned industrial enterprises continue to litter and pollute the surrounding desert with toxic tailings that can potentially seep and contaminate groundwater resources” (Stringfellow 2015). Ward Valley is called *Silyaye Ahease*, or “The Place of Screwbean Mesquite and Sand”, a place of food gathering, rest, ritual, and communication (Klasky, “The Song”). In August 2015, 3 million gallons of toxic waste spilled from the Gold King Mine into the Animas River in Colorado, polluting the San Juan and Colorado Rivers. The infrastructure of dams, pipelines and reservoirs has also damaged the nutrient supply and drastically affected native fish populations. Severe to extreme droughts (D3-D4) in these regions are linked to high levels of CO2 from

*'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. (*Postcolonial* 46)

In this linguistic synthesis of river and body, as Anishinaabe poet and member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe Kimberly Blaeser describes the unconventional suggestiveness of language in Vizenor's *Bear Island*, the "'border' between the human and the natural visually dissolves" (Blaeser, "The Language" 9). Other English translations of this endonym are "Keepers of the River", which Philip Klasky notes from his conversations with Mojave elder Llewellyn Barrackman, as the Mojave believe they were instructed by the Creator to protect the Colorado River (Klasky, "Song"); "The People By The River", which appears on the Fort Mojave Tribal website; and Sherer's literal translation, also used by the Mojave Desert Heritage & Cultural Association ("The People", *Fort Mojave*): "along or beside the water", or "people who live along the water (river)" (Sherer 2). Diaz, therefore, is claiming her own inter-relational rendering rather than a literal one, which draws on biological reciprocity, coenesthesia, and linguistically brings the original somatic synthesis into English, with her choice of "runs through the middle of our body", though it remains flawed. Diaz doesn't use *'Aha Makav* in a "marked" framework<sup>36</sup> to appeal exclusively to bilingual readers or increase the distance between non-Mojave readers and

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overproduction, and diversions of the Colorado River to serve Phoenix, Las Vegas and Los Angeles (Runyon, "Dry").

<sup>36</sup> Mendieta-Lombardo and Cintron delineate unmarked and marked choices of code-switching in Chicano poetry (566). In less marked or unmarked poems, multilingual words are familiar to those outside the bilingual community. Marked poems have words with a heightened connection to ethnic identity, creating a "representation of their shared reality" (570) while increasing the distance from "anglo monolinguals" (569).

herself. Neither does she use code-switching<sup>37</sup> or a conventional form of translanguaging, defined by Susan Gal as “a conversation strategy used to establish, cross or destroy group boundaries” (Stigter 50). In this expository language shift, Diaz insists that the Mojave language ferries more than the English translation can contain: that the river and body are synchronal. Therefore, ‘Ōiwi scholar Noelani Goodyear-Ka’ōpua’s notion of colonial “containment”, often noted politically and geographically, is highlighted here linguistically, as the language of assimilation provides a “poor translation”<sup>38</sup>. She suggests that although translations are inaccurate facsimiles, she must elucidate the Mojave endonym’s physicality. More specifically, Carrie Dyck writes regarding Cayuga, an Iroquoian language, “[...] translation is possible; however, contextualization is needed in order to promote the ability to learn novel cultural concepts or unlearn old ones” (Dyck 27). Diaz’s translation, suggesting an unlearning of the Mojave exonym and the colonial containment it embodies, provides the catalyst for the poem’s contextualisation that follows, unraveling the effects of the bifurcation of bodies in English.

Moreover, Diaz’s assertive naming echoes Osage writer Carter Revard’s explanation that any translation must be treated “with respect” as with any ancient form, “not as entertainment, but as revelation” (Muller 43). Diaz’s translation involves, similarly, an ontological revelation in English; she explains that “When our learners say, *‘Inyech ‘Aha Makavch ithuum,*’ they are becoming who the creator made them to be, who they truly are [...]” (“An Interview”, *Blast*

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<sup>37</sup> Conversational code-switching, as Myslín and Levy point out, is used for word triggers, clarification, or introducing another topic (Myslín). Translanguaging, first used by Steven Kellman (“Translanguaging and the Literary Imagination”), has been adopted to involve an assertion of personhood under settler-colonial containment (see the work of Sarah Dowling, Min-Zhan Lu, Bruce Horner).

<sup>38</sup> By using “containment”, I am building on the work of native scholars such as Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (“Settlement’s Secret” 207), Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman (“Land as Life” 72), and Kanaka ‘Ōiwi scholar Noelani Goodyear-Ka’ōpua’s elaboration on the logic of containment in her book *The Seeds We Planted: Portraits of a Native Hawaiian Charter School*. Goodyear-Ka’ōpua writes that “containment can manifest in geographic forms as reservations or small school spaces, as well as ideological forms”, in which indigeneity is maintained as marginal (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua 26).

*Furnace*), thus modifying Jed Purdy's statement that "there is no more nature that is independent of human beings" (Purdy, "Losing Nature"), suggesting that there has never been a human being that is independent of nature. Adopting her concept of language as touch, Diaz attempts to translate this revelatory "becoming" as an "intimation of the body" (Diaz, "The Pen Ten") or "more than a body" (49); in other words, consubstantial with the river. I therefore see the translation as a linguistic example pointing towards what Cherokee poet and activist Qwo-li Driskill calls "decolonial skillshares"; "indigenous rhetorics, pedagogies, and radical practices" which continue "rhetorical (visual, material, performative, linguistic, etc.) traditions [...] to transform cultural memories for both indigenous and non-indigenous people, and to create spaces for all of us to learn and teach embodied rhetorical practices as a tactic of decolonization" (Driskill 58). Firstly, Diaz reaches towards non-native readers to impart this practice of "becoming" through poetry, and invites a space for decolonial skillshares, among other modes of imagination, which "ensure that the information and knowledge making generated through scholarship do not remain within the academy or only disseminated through academic discourse" (Driskill 64). Indeed, Diaz stresses that the river "is who I am; 'Aha Makav. This is not a metaphor" (46), negating the prospect of the endonym being metaphrased as surreal rather than actual, or theorised rather than practiced. This demetaphorisation enacts Yazzie and Baldy's emphasis on the decolonisation "of waterscapes as a pathway to radical Indigenous knowledge and practices around water", following, as Diné activist Andrew Curley reminds us, Tuck and Yang's insistence that "decolonization is not a metaphor", but a "material struggle" (Curley 58)<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> In their essay "Decolonization is not a metaphor", Tuck and Wang unsettle the metaphorisation of the term "decolonization", which, they argue, has been subsumed by social sciences discourse on civil rights issues or about education (they call to "decolonize our schools", for instance). They argue this appropriation can overlook indigenous rights, sovereignty, and settler-colonialism itself (2). The authors instead frame decolonisation as bringing about "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (21).

In addition, from the poem's outset, Diaz's naming of the endonym defends both linguistic technology—ironically, she writes, “I have said the word *river* in every stanza. I don't want to waste water. [...] In future stanzas I will try to be more conservative” (poet's emphasis, 46)—and water's technology, which can “make ourselves new” (50). Likewise, Driskill writes that “If part of a learning experience is kinesthetic or somatic, another part of a learning experience is a reflection on what and how we learned. [...] I must do something over and over again until my muscles actually begin to learn it” (Driskill 72). Diaz suggests that her translation, in order to be practiced, must be repeated, shared, and explored in order to unlearn that bodies are “all that we are”, in other words, independently distinct from “water, air, land, one another” (51).

Although culturally and geographically specific, this endonym also asserts individual and collective autonomy as a linguistic technology<sup>40</sup>. As Blaeser describes in “Cannons and Canonization”, “previously autonomous literary traditions”, including the meaning of names, “underwent a colonization that involved convenient amalgamation” in which “meaning and significance was never complete” (184). Margaret Noodin's bilingual poem “Mamaangaashkaa Michigaming / The Surging Sea”, for instance, highlights the often ignored Anishinaabe origins of Lake Michigan, or Michigami, meaning “Great Sea” (Noodin, “Three Poems”). Despite this “convenient amalgamation”, Diaz's translation carries an autonomy reflecting Revard's belief that “names have their Creation Story packed inside them like software” (Muller 41). Diaz

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<sup>40</sup> Autonomy as Diaz describes, which I elaborate on in Chapter 4, is inseparable from her relationships with her parents and community, who continue to “get up in the morning” despite political and psychological containment (Diaz, “Episode 13”). This relational autonomy is self-conferred, rather than the “limited forms of political autonomy” conferred by the federal government, echoing Carol Edelman Warrior's point that “the individual and the collective are interrelated in Indigenous ontologies” (Warrior 388).

similarly states that “language [...] is one of our most physical and emotional technologies”, and is “more advanced than and out of reach of the colonial State’s technologies” (Diaz, “Ways of Becoming”) which are, as she writes in the poem, “wrecking the earth and water” (51). Indeed, Diaz is deliberate in using this appellatory technology even before her own translation—“I am a river, It is who I am: ‘Aha Makav”—a phrase which is repeated throughout the poem, each time reiterating the river’s significance differently. As Hedge Coke writes: “You have to be careful about your ideas and thoughts when you make something, because your feelings transfer into your creations. Just as in nature, there is a resonance that must be acquired and maintained to propel the motion of events surrounding us at all times. In this motion, everything is significant” (Hedge Coke, “Seeds” 98). Poetically, motion is propelled by the technology of naming, in other words, the literalisation of Diaz’s translation. Thus, given these three elements—the translation as a coenesthesia of “becoming” or a “revelation” in Revard’s words; the relationship to “decolonial skillshares”; and language as a type of technology—I argue that Diaz’s own translation of the endonym suggests that the poem itself is not an *ab ovo* enunciation, as mentioned in the introduction, but rather an answer to the river’s own technology, capacity, materiality, and relationship to the body. Diaz says: “[...] That attentiveness to the river. It’s another language, and it’s not a language I’m trying to speak, but it is speaking to me, and in whatever small ways I can, I try to speak it back out” (“Natalie Diaz Live Reading”). Her poem, then—and, I argue, other poems throughout my analysis—which is triggered by this endonym translation, is a palindrome—another re-rendered expression—of what the river has been “speaking” to the poet, part of the continuum of conversations between human and non-human interaction.



Moving on from Diaz's own translation, the poem bridges the connection between the loss of the river and language loss. She writes that the word for "tears" in Mojave refers to the word for river, which could translate to "a great weeping" or "a river of grief" in English (poet's emphasis, 47). To elucidate on grief, Diaz refers to a phrase attributed to Derrida: "a text remains in mourning until it is translated" (47)<sup>41</sup>. The quote is found in Sinan Antoon's introduction of Mahmoud Darwish's collection, *The Presence of Absence*, in which Antoon explains his aim to translate Darwish's despair by probing "how one can occupy the difficult space from which one mourns one's homeland" (qtd in Columbo, "Every Text") when it has been drastically changed, as Diaz describes the "dammed" Colorado River (46). Similarly, Diaz quotes Harjo in the first epigraph of *Postcolonial Love Poem*: "I am singing a song that can only be born after losing a country" (iii), and her second epigraph is by Darwish: "We admitted that we were human beings / and melted for love in this desert" (4). As if in response to Antoon, Diaz questions the space of mourning a river and language if they are intrinsically inseparable from the body: "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?" (48). Thus, while Antoon believes a translation "marks the end of a mourning period" (Antoon 9)—alluding to Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator", a "translation marks the stage of continued life" (Benjamin 254)—Diaz's explanation of her translation suggests the contrary; the Mojave belief is in fact jilted in the English translation, which obstructs the verbal, relationary element. It needs to be deconstructed, as the river, the "bleached desert" (47), and the body continue to be in mourning, because of the extraction facilitated by this very binary division in English.

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<sup>41</sup> On the contrary, Derrida also claimed that translation itself—in regards to his theory of "hauntology"—is "out of joint", as it can only "aggravate or seal the inaccessibility of the other language", and this gap exists as a type of spectre.

In an effort to explore the translation of “belief”, Diaz offers, in her interview with *Tin House*, an example of an adult Mojave learner in her community—part of a generation who have been “intentionally cut off from the language”—who wanted to know from the last fluent Mojave elders how to tell her son that she loved him in Mojave, to which the elders answered that there was no equivalent word for “love”. Her frustration at the shortcomings of language led to a gesture: “She held her chest, she made some gestures like where her son might be standing next to her, where there was nobody there, and like back to her chest. She was crying, because she’d reached a point where she felt failed by language [...]”. Eventually, the elders had verb-based expressions to offer in Mojave as suggestions; “I would die for you”, “you are my eye”, and “I’m going to be stingy with you” (Diaz, “Between”). Diaz’s examples of the somatically embedded translation for “tears” as “river of grief”, and this woman’s gesture in place of language, connect the ongoing loss of the river with language loss, due to colonisation, and a language’s limits—somatic relations and gestures which are understood without language, and which beg the question, in Joy Harjo’s words, “What can we say that would make us understand better than we do already?” (“Anchorage”, *She Had Some* 15). Thus, differing from conceptual trends in ecopoetics, Diaz’s translation, and the poem as an elucidation on translation, pass through language only to land in physical manifestations of loss or desire outside of language, towards the language of gesture; language itself can be approached as the kinetic artery towards the body’s futurity or back to the body itself.

Continuing to expound on her endonym, Diaz overthrows the “stasis, incorporation, and commodification” (Warrior 388) of American mythmaking, or as Heid Erdrich explains, “poetry by Native writers is not all tales of magic animal woo-woo that some non-Natives have come to

expect” (Erdrich, “Introduction: 2018”). The following lines initiate a series of myth deconstruction:

Americans prefer a magical red Indian, or a shaman, or a fake Indian in a red dress, over a real native. Even a real native carrying the dangerous and heavy blues of a river in her body.

What threatens white people is often dismissed as myth. (47)

Diaz asserts that the methodised, mythologised image of “Native American” as a monolithic culture is enmeshed with the English nature-human binary, which exacerbates ecologically destructive decisions<sup>42</sup>. To unfasten the image of a “fake Indian in a red dress”—and the threat of decolonisation which, when “dismissed as myth” as Diaz writes above, becomes the “magical practices” Frantz Fanon warns us of<sup>43</sup>—from the belief that the river and body are not “*close together or side by side*” (poet’s emphasis, 48) but are part of one other, Diaz literalises the verbal suggestion of her translation: “I mean *river* as a verb. A happening. It is moving within me right now” (48). Diaz’s active, verbal present tense ensures that her explanation resists a shamanistic, antediluvian past by insisting on a continuous fact: “we cannot live at all, without water” (50), this “we” being inclusive, troubling the notion that modernity, as if clearly delineating from chronological past, is defined by an explicit separation between humans and

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<sup>42</sup> Erdrich’s introduction to the June 2018 edition of *Poetry* magazine featuring poets of native nations echoes Diaz’s critique of “Native American” as an American myth: “There is no such thing as Native American poetry. We are poets who belong to Native Nations. There are more than 573 Native Nations”. Sappony writer Nick Martin echoes her: “Native lit is dead, because Native lit never really existed” (Martin, “Native Lit”)

<sup>43</sup> In *The Wretched of the Earth*, quoted in Tuck and Wang (“Decolonization is not a metaphor” 2), Fanon writes: “Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content” (Fanon 36).

land<sup>44</sup>. The inclusive “we” regarding water dependence again echoes Driskill’s notion of decolonial skillshares, which, for Driskill, are grounded in the image of figures linking arms together on wampus belts, “as seen in the William Penn treaty belt between Penn and the Lenape Nation” (58), which is “not only a verbal tropology but also a visual tropology” (59). Diaz similarly defines “*river* as a verb”, but chooses the textual (thus visual) form to represent shared needs, rather than the mythologised “other” of peoples of native nations, which leads to environmental racism. Quoting Malea Powell, Driskill also highlights the “indigenous insistence on shared relations and shared responsibilities between partners” (qtd in Driskill 59). Allies, Powell notes, “must share some understanding of one another’s beliefs” (59). Demythologising the American-made essentialism of the monolithic native, Diaz asks the reader to consider that they are also carrying the “heavy blues of a river” in their own bodies (47), and how this might alter their actions in denouncing pollution, drought, oil spills and injustices that indigenous nations like the Mojave community already bear.

Thus, as an inverse response to America’s “cultural bomb”<sup>45</sup>, Diaz further mythologises an emblem of America’s normalised commercialisation of the “fake Indian in a red dress” using the example of a typecast native woman on the iconic “Land O’ Lakes butter” label, holding the same butter with the picture of herself on the label, a perpetual “Droste effect” (47). Indeed, these images instil the ironic “plight of transparency” as Vine Deloria Jr. writes in *Custer Died For Your Sins*: “People can tell just by looking at us what we want, what should be done to help

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<sup>44</sup> Huang’s essay “Towards Trans-Pacific Eco-poetics” takes into consideration Latour’s deconstruction of a “double separation”: “the separation between humans and nonhumans on the one hand, and between what happens ‘above’ and what happens ‘below’ on the other” (Latour, *We Have* 13).

<sup>45</sup> In a *Connotation Press* interview, Diaz discusses how this phrase in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonizing the Mind* influenced her, writing: “America is a cultural bomb—it always has been. I don’t believe there are any real Native Americans. Indigenous peoples were here long before America was a bad seed looking to dig into some good earth” (Diaz, “Natalie Diaz: Poetry”).

us, how we feel, and what a ‘real’ Indian is really like” (Deloria, *Custer* 1). Diaz therefore deconstructs the methodised, mythologised image of indigenous communities as one monolithic “Native American” culture, which informs the connections to a capitalist nature-human binary; slipped in without explanation, her endonym would have bastardised the significance of the translation.

In the following lines, Diaz also reverses the myth of “red” native as a precursor to her more pressing questions: “Natives have been called *red* forever. I have never met a red Native [...] The only red people I’ve seen are white tourists sunburned after being out on the water too long” (46)<sup>46</sup>. This ironic reframing recalls Cherokee poet Gogisgi’s (Carroll Arnett), poem “Song of the Breed”:

Don’t offend  
the fullbloods,  
don’t offend  
the whites,  
stand there in  
the middle  
of the god-  
damned road  
and get hit. (Harris 111)

Gogisgi satirically warns that acquiescing to colonial oppression will only strike you down (physically, psychologically and culturally), and Diaz heeds this advice by reversing the racist, mythical term “red”, which more accurately describes sunburned white people; in other words, not compromising on the myth, and not getting hit in the “middle / of the god-/damned road” (Harris 111). Indeed, Diaz reiterates in an interview with *Connotation Press*, “America has

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<sup>46</sup> See the reference in Chapter 4 to Diaz’s poem “Abecedarian Requiring [...]” in which “angels” or saviours are similarly inverted as white missionary assimilationists: “Angels don’t come to the reservation [...] everyone knows angels are white”, and “Remember what happened last time / some white god came floating across the ocean?” (*WMBWAA* 5).

always been what it is today. [...] Indigenous peoples are not native to America, we are the survivors of it, we are the defenders against it (Diaz, “Natalie Diaz: Poetry”). Her “red” reversal is therefore a counter-effect of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o calls cultural “image-forming”:

Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly correspond to the actual reality of the struggles with nature and nurture which produced them in the first place. But our capacity to confront the world creatively is dependent on how those images correspond or not to that reality, how they distort or clarify the reality of our struggles. Language as culture is thus mediating between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature. (Thiong’o 15)

Diaz’s colonial contextualisation of *‘Aha Makav* is thus both a clarifying and “mediating” element between distorted, made-in-America images and the poet’s ontological self as a Mojave woman in the midst of ecological crises more severely affecting indigenous populations. Moreover, the dual image-forming of the reservation native and apodictically democratic ideal of America fabricates, or does not “correctly correspond” with, the reality of such struggles; in “The First Water is the Body”, Diaz writes “America is my myth” (47), while the “true America”, one which adheres to the ideals of democracy it purports to uphold, has never existed. Her demythologising might be seen as a form of Foucault’s parrhesia<sup>47</sup>, or in Mojave, what Diaz glosses as “talking straight” (Diaz, “The Verb”): she undergirds that neoliberal vilipending is putting everyone’s health at risk, especially indigenous communities like the Mojave who directly depend on and are ontologically, through language, concomitant with the Colorado River. By demonstrating the union of the body and water embedded in the Mojave language, Diaz dismisses the metaphorical pathetic fallacy—a convention in poetry as in pastoral elegies,

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<sup>47</sup> A Greek word Yancy borrows from Foucault meaning literally “to speak all”, or speaking the truth boldly, even when lives are on the line.

or as found in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Imagist poetry, of attributing human emotion or responses to nature, inanimate objects, or animals<sup>48</sup>—and gives agency and dimension to our bodies, in particular native bodies threatened by the loss of the Colorado River. *'Aha Makav* “is not a metaphor” (99), she writes; our bodies carry rivers, insisting on the kinetics of our shared materiality.

#### Questions of Futurity: Translating an “Unknown Yet”

Another response to this body/land fissure is found in Diaz’s series of questions which probe the reader to acknowledge one’s ubiety and potential disappearance: “If I say, *My river is disappearing*, do I also mean, *My people are disappearing?*” (48), “What does ‘Aha Makav mean if the river is emptied to the skeleton of its fish and the miniature sand dunes of its dry silten beds?” (50) and “If the river is a ghost, am I?” (50). Firstly, these interrogations act as alternative “ubi sunt” phrases<sup>49</sup>; rather than the disoriented “Where am I?” which Jim Cocola suggests poets of place are wondering today (3), Diaz asks, *what* are we becoming, in what appears to be an ecocatastrophe? Who have positioned themselves to be, as Hooley notes, “the primary agents of reform” (147) in response to these “anthropocene questions” (Purdy, *After Nature* 269)? Secondly, the questions also evoke Derrida’s hauntology (*hantologie*), over ontology (*ontologie*). In “What is Hauntology?”, Mark Fisher quotes Martin Hägglund who discerns that the theory involves the pull between the “*no longer*” and the “*not yet*”—that which hasn’t happened but is an “anticipation shaping current behavior”, Fisher adds (Fisher 19). Diaz’s

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<sup>48</sup> As defined by Encyclopaedia Britannica Online: <https://www.britannica.com/art/pathetic-fallacy>.

<sup>49</sup> Meaning “Where are they?”, the phrase is used to open several medieval poems in Latin, and was adopted in Old English, Spanish and French poetry, such as François Villon’s “Ballade des dames du temps jadis”. Often the phrase initiates a series of questions concerning life’s movements and uncertainties, and yet one’s inevitable mortality. (As defined by Encyclopaedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/art/ubi-sunt>)

focus on dematerialisation suggests that the ontological understanding supported by her endonym is inclined towards the “*not yet*”, the current vanishing of the river and body, which differs very much from Joshua Schuster’s view of conceptual ecopoetics which deconstruct and “recycle” the chemical compositions of, for instance, paper itself as the medium of writing, polymers, and plastics, the latter of which take centuries to decompose. Schuster writes that this attention to the non-dematerialisation, or cumulative build-up, of human-made components bridges a dialogue between art as materiality and art as dematerialisation, or conceptualisation. He argues that such contemporary conceptual poets, Adam Dickinson for instance, raise questions such as “What is it like to be plastic?” (223), and disclose “how we learn to live with the planet we have changed in ways we are still coming to understand, to come to terms with every landscape and every material we find, neither to dominate it nor to be dominated by it” (227), in other words, to “explore the world of plastic we are immersed in” (226) without necessarily dismissing it. This conceptual focus, however, forgoes the dematerialisation or disappearance of human bodies and the very bodies of rivers they are dependent on; Diaz insists a more pertinent question is what is it like to be a disappearing human and/or river?

And yet, similar to other questions of environmental injustice in poems written by indigenous writers, for instance in Craig Santos Perez’s, “understory”—“how will / open air / pesticide drift // affect our / unborn daughter, / whose nerve / endings are / just beginning / to root?” (Perez)—or dg nanouk okpik’s question in “If Oil Is Drilled in Bristol Bay”—“Will they crawl around her / me, sink their eyeteeth in the sea, / ravaging the ecosphere and the ore gold for fuel” —Diaz’s interrogations offer an opening of non-fatalistic potential<sup>50</sup>, while her anger is

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<sup>50</sup> Her non-fatalistic questions offer an opening, in contrast with the fact-based phrasing in Juliana Spahr’s long ecocritical prose poem, “Transitory Momentary”, for example, an investigative documentary poem revolving around Brent Crude Oil (Spahr).



in no way diminished. Her penultimate question, “[...] will we return to that first water, and in doing so return to ourselves, to each other, better and cleaner?”, asks if ecological barbarism might have the potentiality to shift, as well as our understanding of our material selves and relationships to others. In his elaboration on what he calls “Indigenous climate change studies”, Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte writes that indigenous futurities are often imagined from the standpoint of already “living *today* in post-apocalyptic situations”, rather than anticipating an initial apocalypse, as indigenous nations have already survived, in varied ways, historical ecological and colonial catastrophe (my emphasis, Whyte, “Indigenous” 160). Leanne Simpson corroborates this; whether or not, she says, we are “up against the wall”, or if her ancestors felt the same way at the onset of colonisation, “the impetus to act and to change and to transform, for me, exists whether or not this is the end of the world. If a river is threatened, it’s the end of the world for those fish. It’s been the end of the world for somebody all along. And I think the sadness and the trauma of that is reason enough for me to act” (Simpson, “Dancing”). Diaz’s recurring questions face futurity as an “experience of going *back to the future*” (156, author’s emphasis). This offers another perspective of Diaz’s being “outside of time”; protecting a river is not about theorising future catastrophe, but acting on the already inflicted and persistent colonial catastrophe and environmental change on all levels of life, navigated by linguistic and cultural ontologies on indigenous terms, dialogues and actual—not appropriated—relationships, as Diné poet Jake Skeets writes, “not from Point A to Point B, but from the feet to the head” (Skeets, “Poetry as Field”). The interrogations thus further the provocation of the endonym’s translation, the compulsion to go “Back to the body of earth, of flesh [...], back to the heart, back to our grief, back back back” (52), as she writes in the “The First Water is the Body”. In other words, Diaz’s

series of interrogations, “guided by” a reflection on her “ancestors’ perspectives” (Whyte 160), point to what Whyte calls “relational responsibilities” (not just rights) across species and their vast ecosystems (qtd in Hoover 12)<sup>51</sup>, and that while these responsibilities can be adopted by anyone, they address in particular autonomous approaches outside of colonial functions: as Whyte writes, “renewing Indigenous knowledges, such as traditional ecological knowledge, can bring together Indigenous communities to strengthen self-determined planning for climate change (“Indigenous” 154).

In this sense, I argue that Diaz’s sequences of questions themselves throughout “The First Water is the Body” are distinct from eco-apocalypticism, which Lyn Keller explores in her book *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry from the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*, citing poems by Jorie Graham and Evelyn Reilly as examples. Keller applies Ulrich Beck’s risk theory, indicating that new, uncertain technological risks pose “unintended consequences” and “endanger *all* forms of life on this planet”. In the risk scenario, our future will be inevitably imprinted with environmental disaster, even if their impact can be mollified, while according to Ursula Heise’s elaboration on the work of Frederick Buell, apocalyptic rhetoric implies that mass environmental annihilation is impending, but “can be averted and replaced by an alternative future society” (Keller 101). Keller believes that Graham and Reilly blur the distinction between apocalypse and risk (101) in that their poems are less deterministic; she rightly recognizes that apocalyptic rhetoric can produce “apocalyptic fatigue” (101) and although Graham and Reilly “anticipate or prophesy much more devastating changes to come” (107), Keller believes their poems help

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<sup>51</sup> Here I echo, as I will reiterate in Chapter Three, Gerald Vizenor (White Earth Nation)—“the problem in American society is (it’s) a rights society, not a responsibility society” (*In Light*, dir. by McLeod)—and Haunani Kay-Trask, who writes, “Rights, as such, are incomplete. There is far too little discussion of our responsibilities [...] to our nations, to our families, to our communities, and to our world” (88).

alleviate this “cataclysmic vision” (107). However, Graham’s “Sea Change” is weighed down with an eco-apocalyptic lexicon that leads us “towards the end”: “iron-gloom”, “unnegotiable drama”, “everything at once is undoing itself” (qtd in Keller 108), and “You will not believe it / when the time / comes” (qtd in Keller 110). Lines such as these are not redemptive enough to avert the “complete collapse” (118) and galvanize readers towards empowerment and social change. In addition, Nerys Williams examines Juliana Spahr’s volume *this connection of everyone with lungs*, which tries to make sense of connections between global international politics and local, personal events, but this desire is revealed as hopeless, as Williams notes in Spahr’s “Poem Written from November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003”: “I speak of how the world suddenly seems as if it is a game [...] where troops are massed on a flat map of / the world, and if one looks at the game board long enough one / can see the patterns, even as one is powerless to prevent them” (qtd in Williams 162). In contrast to Spahr and Graham’s decisive, mainly deterministic narrative which reiterates eco-apocalyptic tragedy, Diaz interrogates us, she does not determine us; her questions align with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s notion that we “shouldn’t be just striving for land-based pedagogies” (*As We Have* 160), or anticipating an “unnegotiable” apocalypse (Graham qtd. in Keller 108), but the “land must once again become the pedagogy” (*As We Have* 160).

Diaz’s series of interrogations therefore move the reader towards what she calls an “unknown yet” (Diaz, “Natalie Diaz and Nikky Finney”), pushing against the spectre of Hägglund’s “*not yet*”. The “unknown yet” is her understanding of a futurity, a potential, that is not dictated by colonial, capitalist forces and doesn’t fall into a fatalistic eco-apocalypse

narrative. This potential requires a linguistic and physical return to the “pre-verbal” or a “third place”, phrases which Diaz adopts from John Berger:

John Berger wrote, *True translation is not a binary affair between two languages but a triangular affair. [...] True translation demands a return to the pre-verbal.*  
[...]

We must go to the place before those two points—we must go to the third place that is the river. (48-49)

Diaz asserts that this “third place” can be reached through “pre-verbal” understandings, in which human corporeality itself, not only its “contact zones”, as Alamino writes, carries “more-than-human nature” (Alaimo 2). As I discuss in the second section, Bitsui also notes that bilingual writers “bring forth perspectives inherent in their endangered languages and offer new dimensions of thought to the world around them. They also bring forth a *third place*, where the edges of difference are folded back and new ways of seeing emerge [...]” (my emphasis, Bitsui, “Converging” 35). Diaz again addresses the “third place” in terms of translating universal physical experience: “The word for drought is different across many languages and lands. // The ache of thirst though, translates to all bodies along the same paths—the tongue and the throat. No matter what language you speak, no matter the color of your skin” (47). The ache that does not need a translation, the third point, or “third space”, works in tandem with Diaz’s interrogations; both reach beyond the source language endonym and beyond her English translation, towards the pre-verbal, as she decentres from herself and questions the reader in order to probe the “third place” outside of speech, towards the body. I use the term decentre, which I elaborate on in Chapter 3 in more detail, drawing on Arthur Sze’s use of the term at a 2013 forum at the New School called “Contemporary Practices of Eco-poetics”, in reference to a non-egocentric

expression of the self and a regard outwards towards ecological and biological connections (Sze, “Contemporary”). Firstly, this decentring is in congruence with Akwesasne Mohawk poet James Thomas Stevens’s thoughts on using the second person, which he believes “function(s) doubly to open the ‘you’ up to any potential reader and to keep the reader from focusing too much on the specific who of whom I write” (Stevens 186), as Diaz’s “you” in “No matter what language you speak” (47). Likewise, okpik believes that in her poetry, “there is no ‘I’ therefore or individual and, as I see it, one name in many” (okpik, “Uncoverage” 226-7). In her removal of the “I” in most of these interrogations, Diaz reiterates that “drought” will vary, while the “ache” of it will not, emphasising our materiality beyond linguistic boundaries. Secondly, the “third place” or “pre-verbal” inclines towards a somatic turn in linguistic translation, following Ortiz’s aforementioned concept of language as a way of perceiving one’s “relationships to all things” and even “a way of touching” (“Song, Poetry” 38). The translation depends not on the new outcome itself—a product or nascency—but takes into consideration the movement “Back to the body of earth, of flesh [...], back to the heart, back to our grief, back back back” (52). A touch (here the physical implications of *Aha Makav*) or a thirst, although universally translatable, have a particular connotation in Mojave belief, given the spiritual, historical, and colonial contexts, but beyond this, remains a physical experience independent from language.

Diaz does not, however, conflate universal thirst with universal cosmopolitanism which dissolves differences, or Jahan Ramazani’s “transnational poetics”, which, as Kelwyn Sole points out, tries to highlight the “inadequacies” of cultural specificity and decolonisation (Sole 182). Although the “ache of thirst” “translates to all bodies along the same paths” (47), Diaz’s “third place” of reckoning is also Mojave-specific, the “point of the lance entering the earth” (49), a

phrase grounded in the Colorado River and the Mojave creation story. Likewise, indigenous bodies and lands are more often unjustly affected by drought or thirst, each nation in distinct ways, at the expense of America's "bad math" as Diaz calls it (51)—the "American Arithmetic" (*Postcolonial* 17) which maintains the statistics that native people are more likely to be killed by police than any other group, that their presence in cities are often overlooked or diminished in a numbered footnote, and the alarmingly high statistics of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women—is a reiteration of the country's colonial inception, the same containment which "helps us disrespect water, air, land, one another" (51)<sup>52</sup>. Therefore, Diaz's investigation of ecological ontology in her questions, in particular "will we [...] return to ourselves, to each other, better and cleaner?", refuses to give in "to the demand for convenience in a country where multiculturalism goes hand in hand with monolingualism" as Gayatri Spivak writes ("Translating" 38). Diaz's questions consequently suggest that the "return to ourselves" cannot be fulfilled in a single linguistic translation; she says, for instance, "There's no word I can put on the system of enslavement in America and how that has not stopped" (Diaz, "Between the Covers"); that is to say, while the words "system of enslavement" is universally translatable, there are perhaps an infinite number of translations or linguistic iterations for the system, given the number of particular human experience of the phenomenon, in different languages and at difference periods in time. How, then, she asks in the poem, "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?" (48). Diaz's persistent questioning suggests her translation of the river-body belief is not a determinate translation, but

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<sup>52</sup> As Whyte states, the merger of colonialism and capitalism "rapidly disrupted many Indigenous peoples, including deforestation, pollution, modification of hydrological cycles, and the amplification of soil-use and terraforming for particular types of farming, grazing, transportation, and residential, commercial and government infrastructure" ("Indigenous" 154).

“something one never stops (not) translating”, as Barbara Cassin notes (*Dictionary* xvii). Cassin’s position in her introduction to *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies : Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004), translated, necessarily, as *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (2015), is in fact applicable to Diaz’s translation.

In forming this dictionary, Cassin and her collaborators established a stance distinct from the “idea of an absolute incommensurability of languages”, or the “near-sanctity of certain languages”, for instance Martin Heidegger’s claim that because the German language rivals Greek in the hierarchy of philosophical languages, “untranslatability finally becomes the criterion of truth” (Lefebvre, “Philosophie et philologie”, qtd in Cassin xviii). Insisting on a more accurate truth or cohesive unification of languages, as Cassin states, would negate the “multiplicity” of language in reality, quoting Wilhelm von Humboldt (“Über die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaues”, qtd in Cassin xix); Diaz’s own work, for instance, has been translated into Swedish and French<sup>53</sup>. Thus, Diaz’s Mojave endonym alongside her own translation does not simply present two different “designations” of the “body” and the “river”, but different “perspectives” on these two elements with historical, spiritual, and philosophical contexts, not as objects or resources but subjective ways of seeing and therefore, as Diaz implies, acting (Humboldt *Fragmente der Monographie über die Basken*, qtd in Cassin xix). Cassin agrees with Friedrich Schleiermacher that “even universals”, such as the objective concepts of body, being, and water, “are illumined and colored by the particular” (xix, “On

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<sup>53</sup> As mentioned in Diaz’s short biography following the introduction, a Swedish translation by Athena Farrokhzad and Adam Westman of *When My Brother Was an Aztec* was published in 2020 by Rámus Förlag. Béatrice Machet has translated excerpts from the same collection on the website *Recours au Poème*: <https://www.recoursapoeme.fr/natalie-diaz/>.

Different Methods of Translating”). Returning to Diaz’s question, “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?” (48), she is participating in a necessary rearticulation of “river” and “body” through the Mojave creation story, in which the two are inextricable, both conceptually and linguistically. The threat to the coloniser that Diaz pinpoints is not only her language but her body and the river, which are intertwined; she writes, “What threatens white people is often dismissed as myth. / I have never been true in America. America is my myth” (47). Truth, then, is not attained in the sacralisation of a language in a philosophical hierarchy, as in Heidegger’s claim, but in the understanding of a word’s simultaneous universality and particularity, and even more, adds Diaz, of the physical essence, being, and movement which a word refers to, its materiality before language and outside of language. The colonisation of the Mojave people and language resulted in a mystification and falsification, and therefore an extractive philosophy towards the land, negating the land-body continuum which Diaz, in order to “be true”, demystifies throughout the poem, based on her new English translation of *Aha Mavak*. Being “true” necessitates presenting this alternative material perspective embedded in the Mojave endonym, even if using the colonial language to reach towards it. Although the river-body union exists prior to words—the fact that our bodies need water is not confined to language—Diaz persists in rendering this pre-verbal understanding in a renewed linguistic translation, or as Cassin states, she “never stops (not) translating”.

Thus, these questions are linguistic technologies that activate the kinetics of the poem, which, as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson notes of story, is capable of providing theory outside the “mastery of intellectual order” (Diaz, “A Taste”); as the poem is reread, and its questions reasked, individuals can “start to apply the processes and practices of the story in their own



lives” (151). The questions instil within the poem “a sense while crossing that field – a physical or emotional experience of the space between self and other” (“A Taste”), and thus a translation from one body to another (from the Latin “to carry across”), gesturing towards praxis. Indeed, Diaz asserts that the poem is only “the practice field” for life (Diaz, “The Pen Ten”); “the least of poetry is what I wrote on the page, that’s only where it begins” (“A Celebration”), she says, aligning with Skeets’s understanding that poetry “is a field”, a way of thinking that can bring “function back to art” (Skeets, “Poetry as Field”). That is, in order to be “practitioners” of this land-body unity, we must ask Diaz’s question, “Will we remember from where we’ve come? The water” (52). Here, she gives us part of the answer to her own question—perhaps overriding Barthes’s notion that “all literature is this question (“what does the world signify”) [...] minus its answer” (Barthes, *Critical* 202). Thus, Diaz’s questions are forms of poetic translation with multiple functions: they provide a field, a “third place”, or a pre-verbal, somatic materiality in which the reader can approach the belief that the body and river are the same, and they also ask “what is the language we need to live right now?” (“A Celebration”), how can we indicate what cannot be said? Diaz’s questions translate the movement of words that touch, or as Skeets explains, words that “are moving against what is told against us” (Skeets, “Poetry as Field”).

#### Diaz’s Prosimetrum: Translating the Body

Why does Diaz insist on deconstructing translation itself, and explaining *‘Aha Makav* in a prosimetrum form? While “The First Water is the Body” appears in essay-like prose vignettes, its form seems to be a reinterpretation of prosimetrum, an ancient form of contrasting sections between verse and prose (for instance the alternating segments of “Metrum” and “Prosa” in

Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae* from the early 6th century), which relies on a numbered architectonics. It also differs in structure from the prosimetrum in Basho's *Oku no Hosomichi*, for example, in which Basho introduces separate poems into his narrative detailing his long journey on foot<sup>54</sup>. Rather, Diaz's shifts between rhythmic prose and poetic narrative are more inconspicuous and, although the poem is ostensibly narrative, the ontological and ecocritical symbolism of her form are lost if her lyrical and accentual passages are overlooked. This is why, although I will use the term "prosimetrum", I also have in mind "prosías", which Lorca used to describe the work of Pedro Salinas (whom I turn to again in Chapter 4 as an influence of Diaz). Lorca attributed Salinas's "prosías" to his address of casual pronouns which "denies the possibility of the stanza" and creates a "proscribed rhythm through a discursive amplification"<sup>55</sup> (Carreño 5). If Salinas's "prosías" sought to "live in pronouns"<sup>56</sup>, Diaz's "prosías" lives in verbs, slipping past the trappings of proscribed form and combating federal and capitalist ideological boundaries. In this section, I will discuss how this oscillating form further reflects bodily interrelationality, fluidity and mobility over fixity, and positions the poem in the present.

Firstly, similar to John Berger's notion of translation as consisting of three elements—the text, the translation, and the pre-verbal—Diaz's choice of form is also triangular: she uses short blocks of prose, including questions and citations; she uses rhythmic lyricism; and she directly addresses what exists between the poet and the reader in her dissection of *'Aha Makav*. Diaz

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<sup>54</sup> In the opening paragraph of *Oku no Hosomichi*, in Helen Craig McCullough's 1990 translation, Bashō writes: "I turned over my dwelling to others, moved to a house belonging to Sanpū, and affixed the initial page of a linked-verse sequence to one of the pillars at my cottage: 'Even my grass-thatched hut / will have new occupants now: / a display of dolls'" (McCullough 522).

<sup>55</sup> Carreño's commentary in the original Spanish: "De ahí que García Lorca calificará las poesías de Salinas, indica Vivanco, de 'prosías'; es decir, un ritmo prosificado a través de una ampliación discursiva" (Carreño 5).

<sup>56</sup> In "La voz a ti debida", Salinas writes that highest happiness would be "vivir en los pronombres!", or to "live in pronouns" (*La Voz A Ti Debida* 63-64).

alternates between narrative prose lines, such as, “Unless you know the context of a conversation, you might not know if we are speaking about our body or our land” (48), with rhythmic passages using, for instance—if one were to measure in Western meter—sets of predominantly amphibrachic feet: “The **river** runs **through** the **middle** of my **body**, the **same** way it **runs** through the **middle** of our **land**” (my emphasis), or the molossus of “silt-red-thick” (99). Even more, if we accept there is indeed a “blue river hurtling inside the slow muscles” of her “long body”, then Diaz asks us, in a loose ionic minor rhythm, “would our **brown bodies** and our **blue rivers** be **more loved** and **less ruined**?” (my emphasis, 104). By comparing Diaz’s rhythms to classical metrical measurements, I do not imply that this is the only way to approach these rhythms, or that Diaz necessarily had these fixed feet in mind—on the contrary. Rather, a reader accustomed to scanning classical Western meters will notice this rhythmic pulse which allows one to experience the kinetic complexity of the poem as a whole, without presuming that the poem fits these categories of scansion. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, Diaz exerts a palette of influence, not only of Mojave song, culture, and language, but the European poets I have mentioned, and Greek allusions as tools to reconfigure domestic and amorous realities. Thus, rhythms which occasionally evince established tropes of Western rhythm need not be effectively out of place, particularly if they are reinvented. Indeed, Diaz’s salient rhythms, however interpreted, are far from archaic, but conducted unpredictably, and complicate the poem’s structure by embracing rhythmic possibility.

These movements between blocks of prose and rhythmic pacing, alliteration, repetitions and juxtapositions of rhythmic and narrative cadences are themselves kinetic translations of the river’s complex corporeal system, as well as the poet’s own “poetography”, to uses Antoon’s

description of Darwish's work, thus further establishing her English translation. Antoon writes that Darwish's *In the Presence of Absence* is a "poetography" partly because, like Diaz's poem, it involves a "rare space in which opposites bleed and blend into each other: life and death, home and exile, but also, and most important, poetry and prose" (Antoon 8).

Diaz's rhythmic question above, "If I could convince you, would our brown bodies and our blue rivers be more loved and less ruined?" indeed suggests a poetographic blending of another set of opposites: responsibility and legality. On a scale of river rights efforts, she grades America as an ecologically and ethically underdeveloped country compared to New Zealand, where, as Diaz writes, the Whanganui River "now has the same legal rights of a human being", or in India where "the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers now have the same legal status of a human being" (51). Her position unsettles the criticism against extending rights to non-human entities by posthumanist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, who in *The Posthuman* defines this as "compensatory humanism", a well-meaning but "two-faced" position (86): "Humanism is actually being reinstated uncritically under the aegis of species egalitarianism" (79). Braidotti sees non-human rights as a paternalistic gesture that only sustains "the anthropocentric tradition" of status hierarchies, as Monika Bakke writes (117). This point fails, however, to address the urgency that Diaz inscribes—not only on her home reservation but from her involvement with other nations and at Standing Rock—to the ruin of human and non-human bodies of water. Braidotti's application of a "zoe-centred way"<sup>57</sup> states what seems obvious in our ecological crisis: that a "modicum of goodwill on the part of the dominant party" towards "non-human others" is necessary. The solution for the "interconnectedness" of body and mind, or "the

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<sup>57</sup> Braidotti proposes a "non-human definition of Life as zoe, or a dynamic and generative force" (86).

embodiment of the mind and the embrainment of the body” (86) provides less potential than Diaz’s rhythmical prose elaboration on ‘*Aha Makav*: if vast, detrimental extractivist decisions continue to be prioritised so much so that the poet questions both the river and her own body’s material continuity, then Diaz suggests that the urgency of legally ensuring the health of rivers—for human adherence of course, not non-humans whose symbiotic connections are already beneficial—is more pressing than whether or not this gesture is “under the aegis of species egalitarianism”. In this way, Diaz echoes Leanne Simpson, who, building on Manulani Aluli Meyer’s work, discusses “punctuated transformation”, which means two things: firstly that “we don’t have time to do the whole steps and time shift, it’s got to be much quicker than that”, and secondly, that in order to make “systemic change”, it means “lower standards of living, for that 1 percent and for the middle class” (Simpson, “Dancing”). Similarly, Kim Smith mentions the challenges of working with the IRB (Institutional Review Board) in her activism against harmful extraction across Dinétah: “we can’t go before the IRB because you have to be a primary investigator, you have to have all these certifications”. She didn’t have time to do “a thesis or dissertation” because “PNM (Public Service Co. of New Mexico) is filing for abandonment. We don’t have the time to go through these formalities” (Smith, “Healing”). Instead of stalling at an intellectual deadlock concerning the judicial equality for both human and non-humans, Diaz presents non-human legal rights, as long with her own Mojave lens, as potentially more constructive configurations than America’s destructive vilipending of bodies.

Secondly, these fluid transitions of prosimetrum parallel Diaz’s critique of America’s fixed image of native populations, fixed extractivism as capital, and fixed colonial cartographies. In fact, the rhythms are emphasised by double arrow symbols between each section or vignette,

pointing in alternating directions as if to signal the poet's engagement with multiple gestures of prose, rhythms, bodies and rivers, an autonomous poetography. Although Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories of visual art and its comerging "impossibles" evidently differ from Mojave belief systems, I believe it's useful here to create a dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's notion of "points of contact" (Merleau-Ponty qtd. in Angelino 291), drawing on Bernard Berenson who wrote, "movement is the energy that (naturally) dwells in a line as the movements of water inhabit a whirlpool although the movement delineates a constant figure" (qtd by Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde sensible* 166). Similarly, Diaz's double arrows indicate naturally occurring, but perhaps latent "points of contact"; "an opening through which space gathers and organises itself" as in a whirlpool of water (Wiskus, "Movement"). As a breath unites our bodies with the exterior space around us, or as our bodies in water also carry water, the intersectional symbols or breaks in the text are in fact what unites the poet's phrasing, creating "fixated movement" as Klee describes, or "movement without displacement" on the page (Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* 144)<sup>58</sup>. These shifts involve "a language puzzle, an image puzzle, a story puzzle" in which her "body is fully engaged" (my emphasis, Diaz, "An Interview", *Blue Mesa*)<sup>59</sup>. For the reader, the movement of the poem's prosimetrum in which 'Aha Makav is repeated makes something gradually happen to one's "whole being", as Borges says (Borges 6), involving a potentially uncomfortable self-reflection on ecological devastation. These openings between line breaks and the poem's fishtailing form also point to polysynthetic Mojave words and their porous verbal kinetics, extending semantic possibility; as we have seen, the "river" flowing through the body is

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<sup>58</sup> Merleau-Ponty's original French, in reference to Cézanne: "Comme elle a créé la ligne latente, la peinture s'est donné un mouvement sans déplacement, par vibration ou rayonnement" ("L'Oeil" 77).

<sup>59</sup> In her interview with *Blue Mesa Review*, Diaz expounds on the physicality of writing: "I move my hands in the air like I am actually building the words and images right there in front of me" (Diaz, "An Interview", *Blue Mesa*).

“*river* as a verb. A happening” (101), and words to describe emotions “[...] begin with the prefix *wa-*, a shortened form of *iiwa*, our word for heart and chest”<sup>60</sup> (Diaz, “If What I Mean”). Thus, her spacing, symbolised with oscillating arrows, and her prosimetry further allow for a non-colonial “poetography” of materiality.

Other rhythmic techniques within Diaz’s prosimetry include her use of parataxis, for instance, “A river is a body of water. It has a foot, an elbow, a mouth. It runs. It lies in a bed. It can make you good. It remembers everything” (103), and her contrasting polysyndeton in “we are tear-gassing and rubber-bulleting and kenneling natives” (104)<sup>61</sup>, referring to the violent responses of law enforcement towards water protectors during the demonstrations against DAPL, implying that her list could be endless. Her all-encompassing prosimetry presents the poem as a body of rhythms, sounds, repetitions, overlaps and contradictions, representing the river’s complex system, which Diaz renders into a type of body itself, with “an elbow” and “a mouth” (103). Diaz’s rhythmic prose, therefore, evokes Alutiiq (Sugpiaq), Dena’ina Athabascan and A’aniih (Gros Ventre) scholar Carol Edelman Warrior’s analysis of plasmodial slime molds, which defy phenotypes. In her essay “Indigenous Collectives: A Meditation on Fixity and Flexibility”, Warrior discusses this slug-like organism’s intelligent communication network and morphosis which subvert standard categorization tools. This transgression of categories—a kind of chimera or “monster” (Cohen qtd in Warrior 376)—creates a suspended tension, as does Diaz’s mobile form and probing questions. Such a transgression can “garner violent push-back”

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<sup>60</sup> Diaz writes that the expression “I love you” in English wasn’t used by Mojave parents, and the Mojave equivalent had been stripped from them in boarding schools. Yet, the word *wakaver* captures the sentiment, uses the prefix *wa-* for heart (Diaz, “If What I Mean”).

<sup>61</sup> Diaz’s political attention to racial injustices and the agency she gives to the river are strikingly more politically charged than ecocritical poetry in Carol Ann Duffy’s curation published in *The Guardian* in 2015. The poets in this all-British selection are only suggestive of the quotidian worries the future holds and less dedicated than Diaz in exposing undeniable eco-injustices (“Our melting, shifting”).

(376) from those who feel their hierarchical statuses are threatened. Indeed, Diaz's kinetic slippage from "the classificatory 'order of things'" in terms of predictable poetic form also evades the federal "order of things", and the decision processes regarding whose bodies, communities, and money are prioritised. For instance, the DAPL, which crosses underneath the Missouri River within 800 meters of the Standing Rock Reservation, was redirected from its original trajectory through Bismark as it threatened municipal water sources. Jesse Jackson labeled this decision "the ripest case of environmental racism" (Rickert). The DAPL's colonial mapping was also "fast-tracked": it used the Nationwide Permit 12 process, creating small construction sites so it could be "exempt from the environmental review required by the Clean Water Act and the National Environmental Policy Act" (Ablow, "What You Need"). A similar decision, among many others, was made by the Australian government in Victoria to "cut down a tree that was culturally significant to Australia's Indigenous Djab Wurrung women" in order to build a highway, and fifty people were arrested among the protesters<sup>62</sup>. The non-consensual and colonial "order of things" is thus disregarded in Diaz's unified streaming and undulation between prose and poetry, which similarly reflects the body-land unity at the poem's root.

These correlations I have made between text and river is in contrast, however, with Scott Knickerbocker's "organic formalism", poems as "natural systems" that do not merely "echo" the rest of nature but "*are* nature" (my emphasis) (162)<sup>63</sup>. In fact, Diaz argues against this notion in her poem "*exhibits from The American Water Museum*", examined in Chapter 4, stating that "You cannot drink poetry" (69). Her interchanging form is therefore a textual parallel of the

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<sup>62</sup> The government's defense was that "the tree was not one of those listed as requiring protection in an agreement with the Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation" (Wahlquist and Bucci, "Chainsaws").

<sup>63</sup> Joshua Schuster's focus on ecocritical poetry as a mode of data analysis rather than meaning, and how poetic forms are "made out of" environmental forms, parallels Scott Knickerbocker's approach that poems are nature, and not simply echoes. This concept is in contrast to what I highlight here.



synchronicity between “‘*iimat*, for body and ‘*amat* meaning land (48)”, which, Diaz writes in “The First Water is the Body”, can both be abbreviated as ‘*mat*, so that “unless you know the context of a conversation, you might not know [...] which is alive, which was dreamed, which needs care. You might not know we mean both” (48). Indeed, Diaz’s shift from prose to rhythmic anaphora in these lines reiterates land/body pluralities and synchronicity, reflecting Tongan writer Epeli Hau’ofa’s understanding that the Pacific Ocean, which “shaped” his cultural identity, inspires “new sounds, new rhythms, new choreographies, and new songs and verses about how wonderful and terrible the sea is, and how we cannot live without it...The sea is our pathway to each other [...] the ocean is in us” (“The Ocean in Us” 408–9). Therefore, Diaz, who similarly writes, “We cannot live good, we cannot live at all, without water” (50), creates a textual “third place” by alternating rhythms and choreographies to suggest both the natural, yet exploited, movements of rivers as essential to ecosystems, which are likewise inseparable from our bodies.

Finally, we can also see Diaz’s prosimetrum as a cartographic “wondering” across linguistic and human/non-human bodily landscapes, in contrast to the extractivist maps of the rerouted Colorado and DAPL. As Diaz writes: “In my Mojave culture, many of our songs are maps, but not in the sense of an American map [...] our maps use language to tell about our movements and wonderings (not wanderings) across a space [...]” (“New Poetry”). While British poet Alice Oswald also calls *Dart*—her book-length poem from the perspective of the river Dart in Devon using the voices of people who live along it—a ‘map poem’, which as Peter Howarth iterates, “represents a geography as concurrent flows of water, history and feeling” (192), Diaz’s prosimetrum relies just as much on the river’s cartographical movement within the body.

## Mojave Expressions of Female Eco-Embodiment

Despite their significance, Mojave words in Diaz's two collections are used with precaution. Diaz explains that she is more guarded with Mojave because of forced colonial assimilation: "[Not writing in Mojave] feels like a pretty political choice, it belongs with my people first, for a while. It was taken, in a way. [...] It feels like a private, intimate thing, that I'm not in a space to share" (Diaz, "A Celebration"). She therefore uses Mojave words sparingly in her poetry to guard it within the community after decades of language suppression efforts by the federal government, such as boarding schools. Poet Abigail Chabitnoy<sup>64</sup>, member of the Tangirnaq Native Village in Kodiak, Alaska, also says the decision to incorporate the Alutiiq language comes with the question of access<sup>65</sup>. She asks, "how much do I want to provide that access? If you're willing to look up the languages in the *Cantos*, why not be willing to look up Alutiiq online? [...] Sometimes the phrase is enough, and I want there to be a gap, the unknown meaning. Other times the meaning is so important that I want to give the English translation, but I don't want to make it easy for you" (Chabitnoy, Personal Interview). Both poets, as well as Bitsui, Long Soldier and Hedge Coke, often make the political choice to withhold from translating phrases in indigenous languages to English. In fact, Diaz inserts Spanish words much more frequently in *WMBWAA*<sup>66</sup>: *zócalo* (2), *novena* (2), *como porros* (17) and sometimes full lines, "*porque nuestras madres nos dijeron que viven allí—*" (17). In her poem "Dome Riddle", an

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<sup>64</sup> Chabitnoy's poetry was chosen for a series published in *Literary Hub* curated by Natalie Diaz ("New Poetry by Indigenous Women").

<sup>65</sup> Her collection *How to Dress a Fish* is a reflection on her native Alutiiq heritage. She was limited to the resources on The Alutiiq Museum's website. Ironically, the current revitalisation of the Alutiiq language came from the compensation from the Exxon-Valdez oil spill which helped fund the Alutiiq Museum. It now provides regular access to the language, evolving with today's technology.

<sup>66</sup> I will be referring to this collection as *WMBWAA* henceforth.

all-encompassing ode to the mind's complexity, she names her brain the "*cabeza locada, calavera azucarada, claco jodido, cenote of Mnemosyne*" (79). The first collection also begins with the Spanish proverb, "*No hay mal que dure cien años, ni cuerpo que la resista*"; "there is no evil that lasts a hundred years, nor a body that could endure it" (*WMBWAA* x), evoking bodies that have endured hundreds of years of colonialism. In her piece "The Red Blues" about her menstrual cycle, however, she includes both Mojave and Spanish, often without direct translations. In contrast to Lucille Clifton's ode "poem in praise of menstruation", celebrating the faithfulness of the period and the bravery of women for enduring it, Diaz's periphrastic "The Red Blues" parallels the menstrual cycle with tradition, trauma, and alienation, while incarnating mass ecological industrialisation, confirming the Mojave belief that '*iimat*, land and '*amat*, body are unified, simultaneous movements. Rarely addressed in detail, this poem's intricacy deserves more attention. Though Kathryn Mendez mentions the double marginalisation of this poem—Diaz is both female and indigenous—in her dissertation (Mendez), she neglects the crucial element that anthropocentric impact on the environment since colonisation is inherited and manifests in the body, particularly the female body, which experiences a recrudescing, cyclical pain, a purging congruent to the menstrual cycle. Diaz points precisely to what the body has not been given permission to suffer; colonial violence and ecological crises, like periods, are overlooked and yet physically manifest.

The menstrual blood described in the poem reflects the poet's own bloodline; her Mexican, hispanophone background—"There are bulls between my legs, / a *torera* / stabbing her *banderillas*", which Diaz stresses through repeated assonance—but also her Mojave heritage:

There is a war between my legs,  
'*ahway nyavay*, a wager, a fight, a losing  
that cramps my fists, a battle on eroding banks

of muddy creeks, the stench of metal,  
purple-gray clotting the air  
in the grass the bodies  
dim, cracked pomegranates, stone fruit,  
this orchard stains  
like a cemetery. (12)

Colonial and ecological violence, re-experienced in tandem with the menstrual cycle, are highlighted by Diaz's alliteration, consonance and anaphora (the repeated 'there is' or 'there are' at the beginning of each stanza) throughout the poem. For instance, the 'w' sounds in 'war,' 'wager', and "ahway nyaway" (Diaz pronounces this 'əhwai njəvai')<sup>67</sup>, a traditional bark skirt (Hill et al. forthcoming), as well as the latter's assonance with "fight" and its association with the previous lines describing a bull fight in which "the crowd's throats open, / shining like new scars" (11), all accentuate the confrontational list between Mojave tradition and colonial images of wounds and war. The same soundscape occurs in Spanish, for example, in Diaz's phonestheme in 'splintered cherry tree, manzano, / this métis Mary's heart, / guitarra acerezada, red race mestiza' (13). The 'z', 's' and 'i' cluster provides an auditory iconicity, representing simultaneously the body's splitting pain, the cracking or chopping down of a tree, but also the split duality of her 'mestiza' heritage. Similarly, the continued "c" and "a" sounds in "*guitarra acerezada*" both induce an accelerated rhythm ("*acerezada*") and embed the word for cherry tree in Spanish, *cereza*, an echo from the beginning of the line. Her overflow of translingual sounds, both logopoeia—words that evoke indirect meanings—and phanopoeia—casting images on the imagination—contributes to a language that "allows us to carry the body" (Diaz, "Natalie Diaz and Nikky Finney"). Her anaphora at the beginning of each stanza also contributes to the recrudescing pain of both womanhood and colonial trauma, increasingly visceral with each

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<sup>67</sup> See "Natalie Diaz: Saving a Language". Reading at Smith College. 9 October 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYGLyqdhO4k>.

stanza; “There is a dawn between my legs,” “There are bulls between my legs,” “There are car wrecks between my legs,” “There is a war between my legs,” (11) “There is a martyr between my legs,” until finally a return to the tangible: “There are broken baskets between my legs,” (12). Thus, regardless of the translation, her poetic technique and auditory iconicity point to the body’s experience of eco-colonialism through sound and ‘touch’. Examining the poem this way, as Blaeser suggests, at the “level of language and poetic syntax” (“The Language of Borders” 9)—its translingual movement ‘between physical difference’ and ‘multiple realities’ (9)—erodes the boundaries between the land and human, and in particular a female somatic experience.

To contextualise the Mojave phrases, according to Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok scholar Dr Cutcha Risling Baldy, the preparation and wearing of *‘ahway nyavay* encompassed the “botany, horticulture, mathematics, engineering, art, spirituality, and philosophy” of many native Californian communities who make the skirts for coming of age ceremonies (Baldy). Baldy quotes Mary J. Risling who describes stripping tree bark, Big Leaf Maple in northern California and willow in the south, and separating it into thin ribbons, generally in the spring. Bark gatherers “rub dirt on the exposed part of the tree and make an offering of tobacco” to protect the tree’s health, a mindful way of not over-harvesting and ensuring the tree’s continued growth (Baldy). Although these ceremonies may be imagined in the past, there are contemporary reiterations of this cyclical tradition, with respectful reciprocity at its core. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson says of the many retellings of the Anishinaabe sugarbush story, “critical to avoid the assumption that this story takes place in precolonial times”; conceptualisations, such as Diaz’s understanding of being “outside of time” provide an “ongoing intervention to linear thinking”, as land “is both context and process” (Simpson, “Decolonial”). Likewise, Diaz’s “The Red Blues” seems to recur

in “various incarnations”, for instance, every month during menstruation, which for Diaz also evokes ancestral human and non-human relationships (Simpson, “Decolonial Love”). If *Aha Makav* is a locus of the body’s kinship with water, then *’ahway nyavay* seems to encompass the recurring story of care towards trees as bodies. Here, the poet helps “retrieve the body from the dimension of discourse”, which, as Serenella Iovino points out, is a prescient point of female materiality (Iovino, “Material” 53).

Mojave is integrated again to describe a “*’ahvay chuchqer*” (12), or “a sacred ribbon dress”, and again in the line “this slug in the mouth / this *’av’unye ’ahwaatm*”, “*’Av’unye*” meaning road, and “*’ahwat*” meaning blood as well as red (Hill, “Languages”), which Diaz echoes in Spanish, “*via roja dolorosa*”, painful red road (13). Diaz’s use of Mojave again evokes inherited violence, and here, a martyr between her legs “stubbornly sews” the ribbon dress whose “carmine threads pull the Colorado River” (12). Thus, the blood of her ancestors, the ribbon dress, and menstrual bleeding are threaded together, recalling Ross Gay’s concern that we cultivate within us, and not outside of us, the capability of being both violent and tender—a tense reality prevalent throughout Diaz’s work (Gay 144).

Finally, her lines “this dark hut, this mud house, this dirty bed, / this period of exile” reflect a banishment—both geographically in terms of the federal relegation of the reservation and regarding exile from sexual activity. Indeed, sexual exile also evokes the suppression of female eroticism, sexuality, and violence against indigenous women’s bodies. As Deborah Miranda states, the “living history of Native women’s bodies reveal that the mythic foundation of the United States is not a bedrock of democracy and freedom, but a shameful nightmare of unstable and treacherous sandstone, crumbling with each true vision of a Native woman’s erotic existence”

(Miranda 145). The use of both Spanish and Mojave heightens the poem as a planctus to emphasise “this period of exile”, denoting the poet’s body and the body of the land. As Diaz confirms on the *Best American Poetry* anthology blog: “Our bodies have been broken into and scarred again and again by history, just as the land has been” (Diaz, “Body as Land”). Environmental destruction and injustice are in fact, as Kandi Mosset-White of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara nations asserts, inseparable from violence against women: “[...] environmental injustice is a tangled web, it’s about so much more than pollution. Whenever there’s a new megaproject, the area is overwhelmed by men, there’s an influx of money, and a rise in organized crime. After the oil boom in 2007, the number of missing and murdered indigenous women increased, and so did drugs” (Lakhani, “Racism”). The oil boom is suggested in Diaz’s lines “There is a car wreck between my legs” and “a gas tanker in flames”, evoking incidents such as the Keystone XL oil spill on October 31st, 2019 that released an estimated 383,000 gallons of oil in northeastern North Dakota, the second severe spill since 2017 (Rueb)<sup>68</sup>. Diaz’s outpouring parallels more recent environmental crises and their effect on women’s bodies in particular. The desire for exemption from this pain—even if “necessarily temporary”, in Berger’s view—is experienced in the inclusion of the words *’ahway nyavay*, which seems to embody, according to Baldy, a reciprocal relationship with non-human life. The menstrual cycle, in turn, is one of nature’s many cycles, which entangles desire with pain. Not far from desire, however, is possession: “The social content of desire is indeed possession, which is why in the theater unchecked desire is never far from conflict and tragedy”, Berger writes (Berger, *Hold Everything*

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<sup>68</sup> The pipeline extension, approved in January 2017 and set to run through The Fort Belknap Indian Community of Montana and the Rosebud Sioux Tribe of South Dakota territories, has been the subject of protests for years. Both nations sued the Trump administration in 2018 for its failure to conduct an environmental impact analysis on the nearby water and sacred lands (Romo, “Native”).

129). Possession of land in colonial America, which eventually begot our present overconsumption despite ecological “conflict and tragedy”, has resulted in “the stench of metal”, “purple-gray clotting the air” and the bodies of murdered ancestors stained on the land like rotten “stone fruits” in Diaz’s “The Red Blues”. The stained fruit evokes her own cyclical period stains reflecting the inheritance and reproduction of trauma; a collision of the biological fertility of the land and non-humans, shared female struggles, and the threat of ecological and cultural infertility.

While Diaz’s explanation of the Mojave endonym in “The First Water is the Body” informs us of the English translation, and even attempts to translate beyond language, “The Red Blues” does not provide direct access to English translations. Thus, Diaz implicitly suggests that an effort is needed to explore both languages and their converging chiasmi, while guarding certain nuances and pre-verbal meanings for Mojave speakers. This challenges Andrew Wiget’s notion that anything the Native American writer creates “will emerge or be inserted into the larger Anglo-American discourse” (261). Instead, her synchronicity between Spanish, Mojave and English challenges a predictable soundscape, and rather than using translanguaging as a “dialogic interaction between the hegemonic Euro-American and First Nations cultures” (Stigter 49), which as Stigter shows is a possible translanguaging approach, Diaz withholds definitions and simultaneously illuminates connections that cannot be fully dialogically addressed in English, such as the inseparability of bodies from natural phenomena and inherited trauma, while denouncing the web of ecological disruption affecting women in particular.

These gestures or ways that language can “touch” embody material and linguistic retrieval—the verb-based river/body unity of Diaz’s prosimetrum in “The First Water is the Body” and the interwoven and “out of time” cycles in “The Red Blues”—and avoid neat



categorisation. Diaz's use of Mojave as an inclination towards untranslatability, belief and practice; her translation of the Mojave endonym as a nominal, somatic technology; her affiliation between river loss and language loss, and between the menstrual cycle, ritual, and inherited trauma, indicate the "pre-verbal" inseparability of our bodies and non-human bodies. As previously mentioned, Buell writes that environmental humanists would benefit from negotiating linguistic differences (107), yet Diaz goes beyond negotiating these lacunae in translation by probing the possibilities of both body and language together, to denounce ecological self-destruction.

#### A Continuum: Sherwin Bitsui's Kinetic Poetry

Diné<sup>69</sup> poet Sherwin Bitsui, of the "Todich'ii'nii (Bitter Water Clan), born for the Tl'izilani (Many Goats Clan)", from Baa'oogeedí or White Cone, Arizona<sup>70</sup>, overlays the sounds and shifts of the southwestern desert landscape, which, although vast and cavernous, is "always full of music", contrasted with the dominating presence of America's neoliberal structures, colonial confines, and decades-long dependencies on extraction from the Diné land. Having grown up with Diné traditions, climbing up the butte next to his grandmother's house as a shepherd, and later living in cities such as Tucson and Flagstaff, Bitsui translates the continuous interaction and coexistence between diesel-fuelled, urban homogenization and the canyoned

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<sup>69</sup> Like Diné scholar Andrew Curley, I use the term Diné, which is the endonym of the colonial name for Navajo people. Curley's explanation is as follows: "[Navajo] is misunderstood and mispronounced Tewa that was first used by the Spanish in the seventeenth century to refer to the Diné people. It is still the official name for the 'Navajo Nation,' the political authority, created in 1937, to oversee 1868 treaty rights between the Diné people and the United States" ("Our Winters' Rights" 57). I use the term "Diné" to refer to the people and language, and "Navajo" when referring to the tribal nation.

<sup>70</sup> Biographical information from the MFA program website at IAIA:  
<https://iaia.edu/explore-programs/creative-writing-mfa/mfa-mentors/>.

southwest landscape into densely woven oscillations. Sometimes materialising and dissolving snapshots, other times a continuous song of interrelationality, Bitsui's poetry is informed by Diné thought, practices and language, in which phrases may have "several different words", but "you can't isolate them" (Bitsui, PI), reflecting the poet's intensely transfused images. These compressed forms of expression, "dynamic in terms of their geometries" as Bitsui also says of Navajo rug making (Bitsui, PI), form a symmetry with the compression of the landscape. This constitutes, in part, Bitsui's poetic backdrop of the threatened southwestern landscape, and frees the possibility for imagistic fluctuations on the edge of expression.

In this second part of the chapter, I first examine Bitsui's translanguaging in his poetry, including elements of Diné recreated in English, which forms what Bitsui calls a "continuum", through sound symbolism, a verb-centred sense of place, and iconicity, building on Anthony Webster's work. Bitsui notes that these aesthetics engage in "pulling the colonizer's language into our own ways of knowing" (Bitsui, "A Conversation", *Indian Country*). In the same vein, Minnesota Chippewa poet-scholar Kimberley Blaeser quotes Louis Owens who wrote: "We can use the colonizer's language [...] to articulate our own worlds and find ourselves whole. This has been the project of Native Writers for a long time" (qtd. in Blaeser, "Language, Tents" 35). I focus on Bitsui's italicised anthimeria<sup>71</sup> which generates a sense of active topophilia on both the reservation and a city setting, and contributes to a kinetic poetics which shares qualities with Simon Ortiz's notion of poetry and song as perception, Gerald Vizenor's notions of transmotion<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Used to describe nouns acting as verbs, though it can also pertain to adjectives, as in Simon Ortiz's use of "canyon" in "the canyon darkness" (*Out There Somewhere* 103).

<sup>72</sup> Transmotion, in Vizenor's definition, is a "spirited and visionary sense of natural motion", a component of survivance which renounces "dominance, tragedy and victimry" (*Manifest Matters* vii), involving scenes such as the "migration of birds [...] shadows in the snow, shimmer of light on a wet spider web, [...] traces of the seasons [...]", appearing in "native creation stories, visionary dream songs, and literature" (*Native Provenance* 37). King, Guebel and Anderson note that "in terms of indigenous rhetorics, survivance can

, as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "movement without displacement" (*Eye and Mind* 77) and Robert Delaunay's aesthetics of "rhythmic simultaneities" (Delauney 81). I then discuss Bitsui's references to Diné narratives fused into scenes of extractivist urbanism and its metonymies, and how Bitsui perforates an aphotic subconsciousness in which colonial containment and urban development are superimposed. As a result, human and non-human life are often depicted as choked—the animals ingest and discharge scraps of industrialism—fragmented, lacking physicality altogether, or only present as commercial ideas. This haunting dislocation or "non-place", in Marc Augé's terms, coexists with Bitsui's contrasting place-based meditations. Perceived physical and psychological borders between the human and non-human body dissolve into an all-inclusive environment which is life-giving and yet also sacrificed to urban comforts. In the final section, differing from Hooley's focus on eco-poetic efforts to thwart the politics of enclosure, I highlight Bitsui's translingual inundation and focus on somatic gestures as offering an element of lightness or "flight" (Vizenor, *Shrouds* 5), as Vizenor puts it, "a way out", as Bitsui writes in *Dissolve* (29), or a "third place" as he describes in his essay "Converging Wor[l]ds: Nizhoni Bridges and Southwest Native Communities"—a parallel to Diaz's use of Berger's triangular understanding of translation—in order "to hear "a new birth cry", even in the cacophony of urban, "steel-rimmed America" (*Shapeshift* 26). Because of the intricate linguistic densities in his poetry beyond Western taxonomies, Bitsui doesn't frame himself as an environmental or eco-justice poet; "I write out of another kind of space", he notes (Bitsui, PI). Yet, his poems, as I will discuss, often "reveal some aspect" of his "thoughts on the subject of

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[...] refer to the survival and perpetuation of indigenous communities' own rhetorical practices, it can refer to indigenous individuals' and communities' usage of Euro-American rhetorical practices, and it can refer to all the variations and nuances in between. It has to do with the spoken word, the written text, material rhetorics, and contemporary technology" (King et al. 7).

ecology and our collective response (or lack of?) to shifts in our relationship with the land and environment”, as he writes (Bitsui, interviewed by Scheid). His dissonant multiverses throughout his work produce “cave paintings” (*Dissolve* 35) or etchings on the mind’s wall, denouncing the increasingly pernicious abuse of industrialisation and its effect on human and non-human interrelationships.

Despite Bitsui’s awards and substantial literary readings in the United States and internationally, the sphere of critical analysis of his poetry is limited.<sup>73</sup> Kenneth Lincoln—known for coining the term “Native American Renaissance” in his 1983 book of the same title, referring to the surge of native writers in the 1970s and 80s following Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* in 1968—considers Bitsui’s *Shapeshift* in his book *Speak Like Singing: Classics of Native American Literature*. In his chapter “Diné Shapeshifter”, he riffs on what he calls Bitsui’s “radically sequenced” unstable “fractals”, insisting on the sense of fragmented “radioactive poetic meltdown” that either sparks a “fractal firestorm” or “catatonia” (302). Rather than probing, as Lincoln notes the reader must do, “the webs of time, energy, and Native identity in a world of nuclear fission and fractal art” in response to Bitsui’s poetry, Lincoln neglects much of Bitsui’s diffusive imagery, translanguaging, and stratifications of Diné worldviews. Lincoln’s critique, an experimental set of disjointed images, echoing what he calls Bitsui’s “unlineated romp” (310), rather revolves around framing *Shapeshift* as a postmodern, post-formalist classic—suggesting Bitsui as the progeny of the Whitman, Ginsberg and Alexie lineage—whose images are “surds” that shatter “ideation” (298). However, I argue that Lincoln does not fully address Bitsui’s patterns that appear when any line is “examined closely (or magnified)” as

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<sup>73</sup> As mentioned in the poet’s biography, Bitsui has been awarded the 2011 Lannan Foundation Literary Fellowship, a 2011 Native Arts & Culture Foundation Arts Fellowship, a 2010 PEN Open Book Award, an American Book Award, and a 2006 Whiting Award in Poetry.

Lincoln himself writes, quoting Alice Fulton. These forms of kinetics in Bitsui's images—compressed and controlled yet startlingly unbound—in a colonial, extractivist context make his work distinct from other poets, such as Whitman, Ginsberg, Alexie, Tapahonso, Welch and Momaday, whom Lincoln likens him to (304).

An attention to translingualism has become increasingly pertinent in poetics, but nevertheless, anglophone studies continue to dominate the way poetry is accessed and understood<sup>74</sup>. Adeline Johns-Putra explains that her own reason for focusing on anglophone literature in climate fiction in particular, is because “the field of literary studies tends to be language-sensitive, with university departments, and hence research, usually developing along linguistic lines” (“Climate Change” 186). This is why I find it important to pursue Bitsui's translingualism and examine how his use of Diné words and their associations, within a predominantly English oeuvre, innovatively contributes to contemporary poetic sensibilities. For instance, Bitsui notes Diné songs are imagistic, but he had trouble seeing the images and hearing the song at the same time. When writing his second collection, *Flood Song*, he deliberated on the form they would take: “how do I have it make sense on all these levels, how can they also work sonically, how can they also be driven, how can they also drive the imagination, how can they also be an engine in a sense, how can they be kinetic, how can they move things, how can they just exist?” (Bitsui, PI). In order to approach these questions, I will integrate concepts about language use and cultural poetics from Diné scholars and poets, such as Larry Emerson, Esther Belin, Luci Tapahonso and Laura Tohe, and build on examples of Webster's analysis of “feelingful iconicity” (*Explorations* 221) and ideophony, which Webster credits to Martha

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<sup>74</sup> See Dowling (2018), Jordan (2015), Eppelsheimer, Küchler and Melin (2014), Canagarajah (2013), Lu and Horner (2013).

Austin-Garrison's work on "hodiits'a'" (sound symbolism). However, rather than expanding on ethnopoetic approaches, I will closely read how Bitsui's innovations in sound symbolism and verb-centred language animate a haunting perspective of the present by superimposing "extractive legacies" (Powell 29) and industrial urbanity onto the wild and vice-versa.

My analysis of Bitsui's work in this section shares cross-sectional discourse with recent ecocritical subgenres such as, most evidently, postcolonial ecocriticism ("development" and "entitlement" outlined in Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*), as well as themes of affective ecocriticism (such as Yi-Fu Tuan's "topophilia"), especially outlined in the recent publication *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*<sup>75</sup>, e

ditioned by Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, and material ecocriticism, in its focus on how material forms "intra-act" with each other and the non-human. As Kate Rigby asserts, for instance, new materialism "challenges the prevalent view of matter as passive, mute and mindlessly mechanistic that came to prominence with Cartesian dualism" (Rigby 61). The reductive ideology of dualism, which seems to guide the postcolonial moral compass, turns nature into resources "to be mined, manipulated and disposed of" (Rigby 61). Greta Gaard writes that material ecocriticism's spiritual element emphasises "the interconnectedness of life-forms" that, in broad terms, "resonates with some Native American cultural narratives" (Gaard 292)<sup>76</sup>, and Iovino and Oppermann explore how this material framework informs "possible ways to analyze language and reality" (2).

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<sup>75</sup> Jobb Arnold's contribution for instance demonstrates the centrality of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in the pursuit of scholarship allied to decolonization and environmental justice (95-116).

<sup>76</sup> Although I also reflect on these connections, Gaard's phrase "the interconnectedness of life-forms" is very broad and risks a "general appeal to indigenous environmental consciousness" rather than "distinct tribal histories and traditions" (Teves et al. 63).

I add, however, that Bitsui's descriptions of human and non-human interaction reflect linguistic nuances and ways of seeing which are in conversation with Diné cultural and linguistic specificities outside of Western taxonomies. Ecocritical frameworks can more overtly acknowledge this agency and specific indigenous understandings of "matter as meaningful"<sup>77</sup>. Bitsui's kinetic entryways between internal and external are in some ways moving against both the institutionalised discourse around colonial, ecological threats, as well as projections on native people "from the outside", such as spiritual tropes regarding relationships to the land: "how do I share," he asks, "but also maintain some kind of control, or some kind of agency? How do I offer this but not fall into these trappings where I'm dehumanised, objectified?" (Bitsui, PI).

In order to "sit with" this work, and not simply "see everything else around it"—the desire to fit it into trending conversations—it's necessary to acknowledge the importance of pre-existing indigenous thought, far from simply promoting a mythical sense of "sustainability", a word often used as a marketing tool to bolster capitalistic schemes as scholar Stacy Alaimo points out (Alaimo, "Sustainable" 559). Bitsui's poems, in their search for elements of "people who've gone before us" in order to "resonate with that history, that continuum" (Harjo, "Sherwin Bitsui by Joy Harjo"), create borderless interactions in their imagery, translanguaging and syntax, aspects of what he calls "spatial-poetics", which "give us an alignment, a dynamic affiliation, to the place, space, and nature of our environment that bring the poetry and place to a balanced harmony" (Bitsui, "Ecopoetic Structures" 1). This approach seems to suggest that *hózhó*, or *sa'ah naaghai bik'eh hozhoon* (often abbreviated as SNBH), a Diné philosophy which

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<sup>77</sup> Steve Pavlik reminds us of Christopher Stone's 1972 essay proposing legal rights for non-humans, which was praised by Vine Deloria Jr. as it welcomed a "somewhat belated show of support by Western thinkers for a concept that had long been accepted by tribal societies" (Pavlik 7).

“emphasizes a life lived in beauty, balance, and harmony with one’s world” (O’Brien 26)<sup>78</sup>, influences his own linguistic spatial-poetics. Indeed, he writes: “We (indigenous people) have always harmonised our languages with our environments [...]. We’ve been able to live in places that are probably deemed very difficult but we can somehow survive in those spaces” (Bitsui, “Considering”). In fact, Bitsui’s verb-based expression leads to a nuanced perspective; the reservation, he says, is “federal property essentially, and we’re [Diné people] federal property”, but he reminds us that “we [people in general] don’t really ever *own* the land. We’re just hovering above it” (Bitsui, PI), which more drastically repositions our relationships to urbanity, federal extraction, and the sense of ownership that fuels it. Certainly, twenty-first century networks of technological activity can lead to unpredictable “daunting side effects” in our biospheres (Clark 116), but Bitsui’s anthimeria, sound symbolism and iconicity show the continuity in much older Diné understandings of complex, porous entryways between internal and external, despite the constantly shifting prisms of postcolonialism and its many “capitalisms” (Iovino, “The Reverse”).

#### Linguistic Iconicity and Sound Symbolism

Bitsui’s poetry is translingual, using Diné words and phrases and infusing elements inherent to the Diné language in English. One effect of this translingualism is an assertion of cultural understanding over the colonial cartography of oil rigs and rerouted rivers, which often exacerbate the distances between ourselves and the land we should be protecting, not merely

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<sup>78</sup> Diné scholars, thinkers and writers have their own ways of describing this philosophy. Lloyd L. Lee for instance defines these terms as “epistemological understandings of how a Diné person must live life. Both teach how human beings are to interact with others, the animals, the plants, the Earth, and the universe” (Lee, “Reclaiming” 101).



receiving as guests<sup>79</sup>. Similarly, one of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's elders redefined "sustainable development" as the contrary; rather than developing only as much as the planet can "handle", we should think of how much we "can give up to promote more life" (Simpson, "Dancing"). "Feelingful iconicity" (Webster, *Explorations* 221-222)—"attachments that accrue to expressive forms" (9) beyond mere references and play with contact languages—anthimeria, ideophony, or "hodiits'a'" (sound symbolism) (56), are all present in Bitsui's work. As Webster notes, musician and poet Blackhorse Mitchell underlines the validity of Diné *sounds*, challenging the Western "semantico-referentialist" inspired criticism of words as *things*, rather than a phonic attention to their echoes (Webster, "The Validity" 137). Elaborating on these modes of expression, Bitsui's understanding is that "Diné is thought in motion, a very verb-driven language. Everything is tactile; everything is about moving within the world or having the world move within you" (Bitsui, "The Motion").

To elaborate on this tactility, I will first briefly examine Bitsui's vocal performance of *Flood Song*, which Bitsui reads with particular care and energy, before providing textual examples of sound symbolism and linguistic iconicity in *Flood Song* as well as *Shapeshift* and *Dissolve*<sup>80</sup>. In a mostly memorised recitation of parts of *Flood Song* in 2014, alongside Joan Kane, Bitsui orchestrates varying volumes and paces, as if passing through distinct movements, intensities and lulls, like a flood itself (Bitsui, Lannan). For instance, his reading of page 35, with the phrase "here again" repeated at the end of each of his seven lines, is posed and stressed each

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<sup>79</sup> Natalie Diaz notes that people are starting to acknowledge they are a "guest" on lands that are hosting them, but she asks "how can I participate in receiving my land, in caretaking the land so that the power structure has been shifted?" (Diaz, "Borderlands").

<sup>80</sup> I refer here to Bitsui's reading in 2014 during the Lannan series at Georgetown University, but this can be compared with other performances of *Flood Song* with similar effects: the 2015 reading at the University of Arizona, (accessible here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6XCKcXDhTQ>) and the Poetry Center at the University of Arizona (accessible here: <https://vimeo.com/294439225>).

time like a dactyl<sup>81</sup>. Speaking about this alternating cadence when read aloud, Bitsui says that *Flood Song* was so powerful that he had to learn to “keep up with it”: “[...] sometimes I would go inside a kind of trance when I was reading it, because I’m inside the poem too. That was a big part of the experience; trying to go back into the poem or have the poem give me this sort of metric, the rhythm, and then try to replicate that” (Bitsui, PI). Yet, his tone, especially in the sections of fast-paced reading—for instance the section which begins “What land have you cast from the blotted-out region of our face” (13)—rests on the same plane of intonation, only slightly descending before he pauses, although he doesn’t necessarily pause between each page, reflecting the continuity of the book as “one long song” (Bitsui, Lannan).

The fact that Bitsui reads with a sustained intensity and pitch, or very little stress, even in sections when he slows down, leads to the argument that his manipulation of English orality is also indicative of the lack of stress in Diné: McDonough, Webster and Kidder have agreed that the Navajo language does not have stress (McDonough 2003; Kidder 2008; Webster 2016) but rather a prominence—“generally some combination of the amplification of duration, intensity, and local pitch perturbations such as pitch range expansion” (McDonough 204). Navajo uses “contrastive pitch and contrastive duration” (66) and “perceptual cues that are already put to use phonemically” (65), but, as Kidder asserts, “a stress system itself is not present” (64). This comes across in Bitsui’s sustained tone when reading *Flood Song*, as well as a hypnotic sustained pitch; all sections carry an equally important weight but varied pace, as in symphonic movements. Indeed, a Diné poet once told him that the way he gave a reading of *Shapeshift*, when he first started reading in this particular style, or “that space”, recalled how she used to

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<sup>81</sup> His echoed “here again” recalls Diné poet Emerson Blackhorse Mitchell’s “Miracle Hill”, which repeats “I stand upon my miracle hill” at the beginning of each of the six stanzas (Mitchell 285).

hear her elders speak when she was a child, who were similarly “making language like this” (Bitsui, PI).

Bitsui’s attention to speech in his readings not only engages a carefully orchestrated, integral experience, but also reflects a family tradition: “strong leaders usually are good speakers. So if you have the ability to speak well, if you’re articulate, then you’re seen as a leader. And my aunt was a counsel woman and her speeches are beautiful” (Bitsui, PI). These values seem to align with Diné scholar Lloyd L. Lee’s understanding of Diné ideologies regarding air, the environment, and language:

Speech and sound occur with air. Diné people view speech as a sacred and powerful act, and one must properly and appropriately speak well. [...] Air is the ultimate source of hózhó, because it is the source of life and motion. Since air is the ultimate source of life and connects all things, humans participate in this power and order through breath, thought, and speech. Humans harmonize the blessedness of the environment and restore this blessedness through language. (Lee, *Diné Identity* 52)

Lee’s outline of this epistemology is therefore another aspect to take into account in Bitsui’s reading, which reflects the “source of life and motion” of language in its varied, coordinated cadences, rhythms and intensities. The oral delivery of a poem is the moment “when it exists”, Bitsui clarifies: “You can put it on the page and it moves around the world, but for me there was always this idea that when I give a reading, then the poem is alive and the poem is a space that we share” (Bitsui, PI). In fact, the poet composed *Flood Song* “by hearing it”, and intended for the reader to “begin anywhere” without being fixed to standard linearity, and to “weave” one’s way through it: “I wanted people to feel it. There are also blurs in the book [...] like a smearing. It probably makes people crazy but I wanted that aspect of it too [...] some of the poems sort of burst out and some of them are meandering, that’s what the flood is doing” (Bitsui, Lannan).

This blurring effect allows the listener to be more attuned to movement and the sonic translation of a flood's impact, to contrast the increasingly threatening, industrial-induced droughts and the metamorphosis and plurality of the natural world in and outside of the body reiterated by sound relationships.

With this attention to Bitsui's orality in mind, I will move on to his textual representations of sounds symbolism, iconicity and verbal kinetics. In *Flood Song*, Bitsui draws our attention to the word "*Nilchi*", elsewhere spelled "nilch'i" or "nilchi'i", meaning "air" or "wind" in Diné, in one of the more formally compact sections in the collection:

*Nilchi*  
is wind breath  
the wave of stars  
pulled into a satchel  
scattered on the lake's slate surface. (61)

Perhaps because, as Tapahonso notes, some phrases are better left in Diné, as the "English translation falls short of conveying the true meaning", in which case, the poet allows the context "to convey the connotative meaning" ("They Moved Over the Mountain" 348-90, quoted in Blaeser, "Cannons" 250). Here, the brightness of the vowels in "*Nilchi*" and the compact sibilance that follows provide a luminous ideophony and iconicity; its italics trigger the rest of the poem to drift further across the page, like the "scattered" stars glistening on the lake. The word provides a "phonosonic nexus" associating the "sound and sense" of Diné, which Webster believes is ultimately lost in translation ("The Art" 12). The italics thus imply not a shift to a marginalised language but a verbal kinetics; the poem's form mirroring the wind's velocity also synthesises Vizenor's transmotion with what Merleau-Ponty called "movement without displacement, by vibration or radiation" (*Eye and Mind* 77). While the poem reflects the air's

borderless force, which created the “wind-carved rocks” of Dinétah (Bitsui, “Converging” 28), wind is also an “invisibility that led us to take the air for granted”, as David Abram notes, particularly in a city (301). Yet, in Diné thought, as Lee writes above, it is the source of life and motion (Lee, *Diné Identity* 52), and is also represented on the body itself, in the “whorls” on our fingertips (Zolbrod 51), a present trace wherever the body moves along its path, urban or not. Indeed, Diné poet Esther Belin references this trace in her essay “In the Cycle of the Whirl”: “I am in the cycle of the whirl. The circle to complete my journey” (71). She refers to her origins in New Mexico, then being “raised urban among Los Angeles skyscrapers”, and her journey back to New Mexico to enrol at the Institute of American Indian Arts, never neglecting instructions she learned at an early age, “s l o w d o w n a n d b r e a t h e e a s i l y”, her spacing mirroring the verbal quality of breath through the body, as in the wind’s movement across the page in Bitsui’s poem (66). In Goeman’s “Notes toward a Native Feminism’s Spatial Practice”, she also cites lines from Belin’s poem “On Relocation”, “Navajos say no word exists / establishing form to the air we breathe”, noting that the act of breath “leads to speech”, which can defy “spatial policies set in place to dislocate Diné relationships to each other” (*Mark My Words* 105). Bitsui’s rendering of the wind and its effect on the lake in a tightly compressed mobile form similarly highlights a bilingual, ontological experience; the gift of speech; the migrations of wind; and our shared dependency on clean air, creating as Ortiz says, “no division between that within you and that without you” (Ortiz, “Song, Poetry” 37). We can also compare the decentred quality of the poem, its lack of a lyric or narrative “I”, to dg nanok okpik’s description of breath:

The storyteller is consciousness speaking through what Inuit might call *Sila*, the breath soul in the wind, the inspired, expiring voice of the spirit who moves in all things. [...] So when I come to writing poetry it is not “I” speaking/writing the words on the page. It is all those I share breath with,

all of the spirits who have stories rising up within them. I am just a hollow bone, a vessel through which the images and music blow. (okpik 226)

Okpik's poetic freedom as a vessel parallels Bitsui's "absolute freedom" to imagine his more surprising images as in the "the wave of stars" in a satchel above. Likewise, he has a similar accession, or way of describing poetry as a means of arrival: "when I come to an image, when I discover, when I come into or when I come up to an image, that is particularly intense or beautiful, that's kind of a search. It's always a search" (Bitsui, PI). Wind, therefore, and its dual evocation of "breath" as the ultimate life source, provides the setting in Bitsui's poem for a meditation on the wind's motion, in an otherwise still image of the lake, as well as the perpetual motion of poetic nearing or progressing towards the imagination, which, as Bitsui writes offers "something in return" (Bitsui, PI).

On the other hand, Bitsui's iconicity, sound symbolism, and verb-centred language expresses the soundscape of extraction, pollution, and landscapes occupied by toxic air. Firstly, the unusual verb choices highlight harm that is not necessarily seen, or that has been invisibilised, for instance, "Hammering the liquid night / to the lake's final skeleton", and in the same segment, "Strangers to our breath / we wheeze in dying trees" (10). The reader hears rather than simply sees the lake's fragility and industrialised atmosphere, a sound-based movement attuned with Diaz's unsettling of "ocularcentrism" in poetry<sup>82</sup>, and exemplifying Bitsui's technique as outlined in a poem in *Dissolve*, to "replace what I see with what I heard" (14). Similarly, in the first section of his poem "Halo" in *Shapeshift*, Bitsui writes, "The sound of rain /

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<sup>82</sup> To avoid engaging in the text as a visual vacuum, Diaz asks her students to close their eyes, or wear blindfolds to engage in conversation and reading: "sometimes we put our pens down, and we put the paper away, and read the poem out loud and try to experience it. There is something about reading that is so connected to knowing, that it really shuts you down in a way. How can we read for experience and read for wonder?" (Diaz, "A Celebration").

drops / against the drooping bones of /                      arthritic HUD houses” (original spacing, 42), transforming the image of rain drops into the verb-centred sound of rain *dropping*. Bitsui’s reconducted verb-based sonority channels the sounds and movement of Diné affected by colonially induced poverty and architectural impediments to traditional rituals<sup>83</sup>.

To use Webster’s example of how phonics can further challenge these long-term effects of territorial possession, the word for “yellow dirt” in Diné is *leetso*, which also means “ochre and uranium”. Phonetically resembling *leetso* is *Yé’iitsoh*, the giant monster who the Twin Warriors fight in the Diné creation story (Webster, *The Sounds* 5), thus correlating monsters with uranium mining on the Navajo Nation. Kim Smith confirms that on the Journey for Existence, a 1400-mile-long walk to the six sacred mountains she took with other Diné women, she was scouting the region with the question, “what type of monsters are on our land?” (Smith, “Healing”). For decades, as Dana Powell points out in *Landscapes of Power*, “The urban development and consumption of the ‘Sunbelt’ cities in the American Southwest directly depended on the extraction of energy and water resources from rural, largely indigenous territories, primarily the Navajo Nation” (34). The development in this area is also the result of an expansive federal project, along with the urban relocation program beginning in the 1950s, to “modernize” native populations through “industry, infrastructure, and distribution of technologies such as the U.S. electrical grid” (34). Uranium mining was imposed by the U.S.

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<sup>83</sup> HUD houses, Navajo Housing Authority (NHA) homes, and manufactured trailers have replaced most traditional hogans, constructions that are central to ceremonies such as the Blessing Way, and which are not only a home but a “learning tool”, as Geraldene Blackgoat, Diné architectural researcher, writes, as “Navajo language and traditions flourished” in this space “because of the constant practice and exposure” (Blackgoat, “Navajo Ritual”). The hogan represents the universe, its entrance provides a view to the east and the ritual participants circulate clockwise under the hogan’s dome. Blackgoat predicts that “more and more families are likely to have their Navajo rituals in their NHA homes in the future” and will continue to adapt the space for ceremonies.

military's "Manhattan Project" for nuclear weapon production in 1944 and continued until 2005, causing decades of widespread cancer and other health concerns on the reservation due to radon exposure (Fettus 18), and large-scale water contamination in an already low-access region. In addition, many of these extractivist projects left abandoned, uncleaned mines, a crisis that former President of the Navajo Nation, Joe Shirley, has labeled genocide (Shirley, "Navajo Nation")<sup>84</sup>. In *Dissolve*, Bitsui's snapshot lines, "Ladders follow us from mines" (*Dissolve* 38) and "this address wears the fog's yellow ankles / toward the floor plan / of a reservation spiraling / back from the aftermath" (10), have a trailing sibilance enacting the consequences of colonial uranium exploitation on the psyche and body. These shifts in direction ("follow", "toward", "spiraling back from the aftermath") pull the reader "in one direction" and then "suddenly veer back to the right, and then be pulled to that direction, and then veer again", a line which is "erasing itself" as it is simultaneously "moving forward" (Bitsui, PI), an unpredictable magnetism reflecting, in this instance, the irreversible aftermath of mining; it is hauntingly ubiquitous, without stopping to settle in one evident place, inhabiting the moving body. Bitsui uses "yellow" as a verb in his poem "Asterisk" in *Shapeshift*: "Pioneers wanted in, / and the ends of our feet yellowed to uranium at the edge of fear" (4). Given the above word play with *leetso*, a Diné reader might correlate the encroaching uranium, as well as the "Pioneers", with the monster image.

Other lines such as "captured cranes secrete radon in the epoxied toolshed" and "leopard spots" that are "ripe for drilling" (*Flood Song* 46) embody fluid-like, uncontainable

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<sup>84</sup> As Diné activist Kim Smith recounts, The San Juan Generating Station, a coal-fired plant near Farmington, New Mexico, is set to close in 2022, they've filed for abandonment. In addition, "New Mexico is allowing them to collect profits that they would be missing out on because they're closing early. That comes out to 380 million dollars of lost profits that they're getting". Smith adds that the profits will not be benefiting the Diné community, and the details surrounding its closing haven't been properly outlined to community members (Smith, "Healing").



consequences of mining on both humans and non-humans. The monster takes the form of the colonial map made of “leopard spots”—blotches left on the land which is “ripe for drilling”—which are mirrored onto the map of the human body: “*What land have you cast from the blotted out region of your face*” (poet’s emphasis, 13). Bitsui parallels the sounds of “spots” and “blotted”, emphasising the often ignored threads connecting our bodies to the effects of hyper-extraction; the body, as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, is used to “maintain, and uphold the extraction-assimilation system” (“Dancing”). Here, movement occurs in the often obscured continuity of the normalised cycles of consumption and discharge at the expense of indigenous communities which are “ripe” to exploit.

On the same page, Bitsui writes, “‘*calling*’ became ‘*culling*’” (poet’s emphasis, 13); “calling” echoes Diné poet Laura Tohe’s introduction to *Tséyi’/Deep in the Rock: Reflections on Canyon De Chelly*, in which she writes that the canyon was “calling” to her and revealed its stories embedded there, which inspired her writing (Tohe, *Tséyi’* xiii). Simultaneously, the closely juxtaposed “culling” is an allusion to the slaughter of Navajo livestock by Kit Carson and his troops before the forced Long Walk to *Hweeldi*, or Bosque Redondo, from 1863 and internment there until 1868 (Haake, “Resistance and Removal” 248)<sup>85</sup>, as well as the Livestock Reduction scheme beginning in 1933, put in place to prioritise eroded grazing areas. The slaughters, enforced by the BIA, killed thousands of herds of livestock, many of which were managed by women, leaving Diné families in economic and psychological distress, worsening the relationship between the federal government and harming Diné autonomy<sup>86</sup>. Bitsui’s

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<sup>85</sup> The first known photograph of Navajo people, in fact, was taken on the Long Walk, showing guards standing with guns surrounding the seated Diné people on their forced exodus.

<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Inuit environmental activist Sheila Watt-Coultier notes that self-harming and addictions in her Inuit community, as they are also evoked in *Flood Song*, are the result of “unchecked traumas” on indigenous land and relationships with non-humans: “The dog slaughters, our men buried deep inside

succession of sonoric imagery, using “calling” and “culling”, akin to “killing”, ends with an echo: “*What, what, what—is how that song chimed in the wilderness*” (13). The calling returns with a rebounding “*what*”, an existential reverberation which is hauntingly without a question mark, as if the wilderness, due to this “culling”, begins an unaskable or unanswerable question, or that the wilderness echoes the poet’s own questions regarding colonial violence back at him.

Bitsui’s ideophony also achieves sound symbolism and verbal kinetics in his introduction to *Flood Song*<sup>87</sup>. The introduction includes only the word “tó”, the Diné word for water and one of the four sacred elements—Diné activist Kim Smith explains that for Diné people, “the elements are our deities, water is a deity, air is a deity” (Smith, “Healing”)—which appears seven times as a vertical drip down the centre of the first page (3). This spatial iconicity in its descending droplets implies that the word is a tactile verb. Bitsui explains that the word itself, *tó*, *sounds* like water (“Sherwin Bitsui”, *Guernica*), thus producing auditory iconicity as well as visual. In fact, in Bitsui’s reading of the *Flood Song* at a Lannan Reading Series in 2014, the word becomes softer with each pronunciation, adding to the resemblance of a diminishing drip<sup>88</sup>. Poet Li-Young Lee’s “Water” uses his own family’s relationship to water, the water he crossed to come to America, water that can kill, and water that contains us in the womb: “the sound / of water, which is the oldest sound, / the first sound we forgot”, he writes (Lee, *Rose* 25). Water is both cherished like a “hymn” and a pneumatic trigger of trauma, drowning, or a dangerous

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them and didn’t talk about it for years” she says, referring to the slaughter of thousands of Qikiqtani Inuit sled dogs and the forced relocations by the Canadian government which occurred from 1950 to 1975 (Watt-Coultier).

<sup>87</sup> During the event “saad éí Na”iilná with Sareya Taylor, Rowie Shebala, Jake Skeets & Sherwin Bitsui” in which Bitsui read some selected poems on June 26th, 2020, organised by Saad Bee Hózhó: Diné Writers” Collective for Navajo Covid Relief, Diné poet Jake Skeets said that Bitsui’s poem “tó” is always referenced: “we always refer to it, it’s a staple”, he said.

<sup>88</sup> The reading took place on April 8, 2014 at the Lannan Center for Poetics and Social Practice at Georgetown University, with an introduction by Carolyn Forché, and can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/93272921>.

crossing. Likewise, Bitsui's "tó" produces a discord. Water is a lifesource and this minimalist poem is, as he says, "a celebration", especially for desert dwellers, "to get to that moment, that glimmer" of gratitude for rain and river (Bitsui, PI). At the same time, its verbal, spatial and auditory iconicity implies a darkness as well; not the abundance of water but the thematic *lack* of water, an allusion to severe droughts exacerbated by rerouted rivers in the southwest in order to accommodate urban hubs. In the first half of 2019, almost 60% of New Mexican land has been determined D3, exceptional drought ("Drought in New Mexico"), which is worsened by wildfires, high levels of CO2 linked to overproduction, and diversions of the Colorado River which serves millions in Phoenix, Tucson, Los Angeles, and San Diego (Runyon, "Dry"). The Navajo Nation also faces the systematic extraction of the Navajo aquifer to power Peabody Energy's Kayenta mine; the mine sent coal to the Navajo Generating Station, which shut down in November 2019 (Curley, "What is a Resource Curse"). The energy provided electricity to growing urban hubs such as Phoenix, Arizona, resulting in air pollution and coal ash in the water. Leonard Selestawa (Diné) recalls that he would ask his grandfather what the slurry pipeline which ran through the rangeland was; "[...] he'd say, 'put your ear to it'. And sure enough there it was. Shh, shh, shh", imitating the noise of the pipeline (Boudart, "Power Paths"). Similarly, Bitsui's iconicity and sound symbolism in "tó" propose simultaneous facets of celebration, the colonial control over water rights on Diné land, and even evoke the word for plastic, "tó doo bináká nílíní", meaning "Water Doesn't Flow Through It"<sup>89</sup>. Bitsui furthers this fusion by writing "[this night] licks dry—/ rain-moistened teeth /            steaming in plastic bags" (original spacing,

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<sup>89</sup> "Navajo Word of the Day-Plastic", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0nA29BDgn0&t=5s>.

*Dissolve* 9). As Diné geographer Andrew Curley explains, the colonial power in water legislation results in “the inherent sense of injustice that water settlements reproduce” (Curley 59).

Bitsui likewise criticises an urban “hotel garden” boasting a gushing fountain with water sourced from “the slashed wrists of the Colorado” (*Dissolve* 21), using the same “shh” sound of water in “slashed”. Typically seen as an aesthetic to enchant a cityscape, the fountain here embodies poet Chris Cheek’s definition of “improvement” in *Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing Within the Anthropocene*—“to settler-colonize and resource-dispossess, [...] for the purpose of advocacy when justifying territorial seizure, in the sense that we will use the resources better than those who currently have use of them”—for which he evokes the Latin term *rus in urbs*, “creating illusions of countryside in the city” (Russo et al. 41). Even more, Bitsui’s parallel to suicide here is not a metaphor: the exploitation of water Diné communities face shares the same colonial roots as high suicide rates in Navajo youth on and off the reservation<sup>90</sup>.

Therefore, while the celebratory, appreciative nature of the poem unlocks the flood that follows, it also has darker contours related to the inverse—a reckless overuse of water—as Diné activist Kim Smith confirms:

Do we really need to have lawns, do we have to waste our water on things like that, do we have to have a city in the middle of the desert that just keeps growing and growing? Because that all ties into the energy grid and that ties into the exploitation of indigenous communities for their resources. Where we come from [...] you’re really pushed into the corner and held as economic hostages, because 85 percent of your tribal revenue comes from these industries, and people don’t want to talk about the health impacts because [...] you know don’t bite the hand that feeds you, you know it’s so complex, we really have to dig deeper into going back to our original selves and [...] only taking what we need. (Smith, “Healing”)

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<sup>90</sup> According to a 2003 study of indigenous teenagers in British Columbia, a reduction in suicide rates were attributed to cultural vitality and “seeing oneself as part of a continuum”. The study concluded that “counting oneself as continuous in time”, engaged a concern for one’s well-being (O’Brien 171).

Bitsui's overture embodies these complexities that Smith refers to; the exploitation that leads to the feeling of being a modern hostage—a colonial dependence on the government whose extraction is suggested in the poem's minimal, scarce drop—and the tradition of being resourceful, waiting for rain and celebrating its life-giving essentiality.

The phrase *Tó éí ííná át'é*, or “water is life”, became a slogan during the protests at Standing Rock, but three years earlier, the phrase was the title of a 2013 documentary made by Diné filmmakers, Deidra Peaches and Jake Hoyungowa, to address the repercussions of the Peabody Coal Mine<sup>91</sup>. While the word “tó” may have become more visible to non-Diné circles, Bitsui's omission of an English translation leads us towards cultural specificity; the writer's decision not to grant easy access to the non-Diné reader. Audra Simpson (Kahnawake Mohawk) explains that the refusal of members of the Hudanashone community to be anything other than Hudanashone (not voting, denying Canadian citizenship or trying not to pay Canadian taxes) can also transfer to a “refusal at the level of the text”: “there is stuff I just don't write in. I don't think everything is people's business, we are still vulnerable, this is a white supremacist state whether we like it or not” (Simpson, “Indigenous Women”). Bitsui's sound symbolism in this introduction in fact releases the verbal inundation that follows, a chain of untitled pieces which together form a song of lived experience.

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<sup>91</sup> For over 40 years, the mine used 1.4 billion gallons a year of potable water to slurry coal from Arizona to Nevada, resulting in droughts, and untreated or no running water on the Navajo reservations (Peaches, *Tó éí ííná át'é* website). The phrase *Tó éí ííná át'é* was also used in early August of 2015, when about 3 million gallons of toxic waste spilled from the Gold King Mine into the Animas River in Colorado, contaminating the San Juan river, which impacted Navajo reservation (Begay, Resource Media).

## Verbal Anthimeria: “Moving Through Life and Through Time”

For a reader of the anglophone poetry canon, verbal anthimeria comes to mind as a literary *modus operandi* from Shakespeare’s “portcullised” as pointed out by David Crystal (Crystal) to Ginsberg’s “purgatoried” (Ginsberg 10). However, Bitsui’s denominal verbs, as seen previously in Diaz’s work, and as Noodin notes of the Anishinaabe language, animate thought and challenge the non-Diné reader to become more acquainted with Diné sounds, allusions, stories, and ways of perceiving. Noodin writes in *Bawaajimo: A Dialect of Dreams in Anishinaabe Language and Literature*, that “often, it is the case that an English noun is an Anishinaabe verb” (9-10), for instance when addressing identity, as Diaz explains regarding Mojave in “The First Water is the Body”. She continues, “The term Anishinaabe is a verb in the language and becomes a sentence when conjugated: Nd’Anishinaabe / I am Anishinaabe” (6-7). The “slip of definition between seeing language as a noun and having a way to peel it back to a common verb is the difference between cultures” (7). As a comparison, Cree poet Louise Halfe writes, “Cree-ing loud into my night” (31) in her book *Blue Marrow*, a recognition of identity larger than herself. This present tense, verbal emphasis is partly in conversation with other native syntactical experimentation, such as Ortiz’s use of “canyon” as an adjective in his poem “Culture and the Universe”, “Two nights ago / in the canyon darkness” (Ortiz, *Out There Somewhere* 104). In this section, I will examine how Bitsui’s verbal anthimeria enhances a linguistic and ontological connection to place as kinetically occurring within and outside the body.

Native scholars such as Mishuana Goeman (Seneca), Gerald Vizenor (Ojibwe), Riley-Mukavetz (Chippewa of Thames) and Powell (Eastern Shawnee), Niigaanwewidom James

Sinclair (Anishinaabe), have underscored the concept of a “storied” place<sup>92</sup>. Cristina Bacchilega echoes this based on her understanding of Anne Kapulani Landgraf’s collection of black and white photographs of the island of O‘ahu in Hawai‘i, *Nā Wahi Pana O Ko‘olau Poko: Legendary Places of Ko‘olau Poko*. The phrase *nā wahi pana*, literally meaning “legendary places”—thus effectuating a “storied” “sense of place”—unsettles the term “landscape” which refers to a perspective introduced in the painting medium, “primarily achieved through a distancing of the eye from its object to ensure that the eye could take in some expanse of land” (31). This more objective gaze is in contrast to the *kanaka maoli* view of humans as part of the land (Bacchilega 36)<sup>93</sup>. Even more, Robert Dale Parker rightly points to Heid Erdrich’s rewriting of Frost’s poem “The Gift Outright”. Published in her collection *National Monuments*, Erdrich’s “The Theft Outright” inverts Frost’s line “The land was ours before we were the land’s” as “We were the land’s before we were”. Erdrich also changes his lines “To the land vaguely realizing westward, / But still *unstoried*, artless, unenhanced” to “The land, not the least vaguely, realizing in all four directions, / still *storied*, art-filled, fully enhanced” (my emphasis, Erdrich 31–32, qtd in Parker, “Another Indian” 71).

Bitsui’s work similarly achieves a “storied” sense of place through his kinetic anathimeria. For instance, the sibilance and verb use in this line in *Flood Song* creates multiple dynamics: “The song spilling seeds into your mouth / *sunflowers* a Yield sign” (author’s emphasis, 60). In this example, while the sibilance provides ideophony, mirroring the spilling seeds, the song itself

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<sup>92</sup> See Goeman’s “Land as Life” in *Native Studies Keywords* (72), Vizenor’s *Native Liberty* (131), Riley-Mukavetz and Powell’s “Making Native Space for Graduate Students” (140), and Sinclair’s “Responsible and Ethical Criticisms in Indigenous Literatures” (306).

<sup>93</sup> Bacchilega describes external “landscape” as “an oxymoron in that land, ocean, fire, humans, many-shaped ancestors, wind and all share the porous nature of lava rocks or the tender culture of kalo plants. The kalo, or taro, was the first sibling of human beings in Hawaiian legendary tradition” (36).

germinates and “*sunflowers*” into a traffic sign—a measurement of urban comings and goings—from a person’s mouth, both wilding and urbanising the sound of a song. The song performs simultaneous actions here, and a song can have a causal effect in Diné; poet Luci Tapahonso reminds us that one of the sacred mountains, the San Francisco Peaks, whose significance in Bitsui’s work I explain in more detail shortly, rose up in response to the holy people singing (“A World Carved”). Even more, the word “Yield” here is triple fold; to produce a crop, to acquiesce, and to give way in traffic. According to Bitsui, a song “attempts to create harmony, enact change, and metaphorically transform time and space [...]. Through this activity, the lineage between past, present, and future is ‘reconnected’—replanted, watered, grown, and harvested to counter what is considered inharmonious” (“Converging” 29). “Yield” accentuates this growth and regeneration, and the possibility to transform time and quotidian space: the song spills into, rather than from, the body—similar to Bitsui’s line “the corn field inside you” (*Flood Song* 57)—and it surprisingly “*sunflowers*” the traffic sign, a measurement of everyday urban movements. The verb also translates to Diné clean-up efforts: after a week-long clean-up of an illegal, half-acre trash dump, one of the toxic sites and landfills left unchecked in Dinétah, Kim Smith and her group planted sunflowers, known for their detoxification effects<sup>94</sup>. Bitsui’s verbal effect, therefore, suggests another kinetic layer: decolonial communal healing practices. This effect, as Bitsui says, also engages in “pulling the colonizer’s language into our own ways of knowing” (Bitsui, “A Conversation”). Belin similarly plays with the Dinéification, if you will, of English: “As a writer, the pleasure is definitely in the play among vocabulary and embracement

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<sup>94</sup> Smith asserts: “People throw their trash in illegal landfills, or they’re burning their trash. That is a type of abuse that is contaminating our watershed. [...] We were forced to figure out how to defend our water, because the state of Arizona was trying to make us settle our claims to the Little Colorado River” (Smith, “Healing”).



of the English language. I confidently say that English is a tribal language. I give it the power to be Indian, Navajo, Diné, urban, rez, beat up, knocked down, and never dead” (Belin, “Morning Offerings” 40). Bitsui’s entanglement of urban, biological and wild challenges English to engage in the diversity and pluralities of Diné. The line’s shape-shifting “continuum” (Bitsui, PI) is strung together in a complete image, also reflecting Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz’s notion of a song or poem as an act of perceiving: “[...] you perceive by expressing yourself”, through an entire song as a whole, not a breakdown of its parts (Ortiz, “Song” 39). Therefore, if song and perception are simultaneous, then Bitsui’s condensed anthimeria and sound symbolism merge both sound and ways of seeing or understanding, “this all-inclusiveness” of “context, meaning, purpose” as Ortiz writes (39).

Even more, the “seeds” spilling in and germinating out of the mouth disrupt the perception that there is a separate “nature” exterior to the body, reiterated by Bénédicte Meillon in her opening remarks to the ecopoetics conference “Re-enchanting Urban Wildness”. She mentions a 2018 survey in which city dwellers were asked about their experiences with nature; they noted “[...] their outings outside of the city”, sharing the misconception that they exist “outside of nature”. Meillon continued, “No one thought to answer, ‘but I am nature [...]’” (Meillon, “Reenchanting”). Bitsui achieves this tactility through sound symbolism and verb use which emphasise the possibilities of song and the daily synergic movements of non-human life within and outside our bodies, even in urban settings.

Another example of Bitsui’s verbal anthimeria comes at the onset of his poem “River”:

When we river,  
blood fills cracks in bullet shells,  
oars become fingers scratching windows into dawn,  
and faces are stirred from mounds of mica.  
I notice the back isn’t as smooth anymore,

the river crests at the moment of blinking;  
its blood vessels stiffen and spear the drenched coat of flies  
collecting outside the jaw.

Night slows here,  
the first breath held back,  
clenched like a tight fist in the arroyo under shattered glass.  
But we still want to shake the oxygen loose from flypaper,  
hack its veins,  
divert its course,  
and reveal its broken back,

*the illusion of a broken back.* (34)

The poem's form itself enacts a river's mobile topography—and, as we discover, its misaligned, rerouted spine—and Bitsui's "river" as a verb in the opening line represents an experience or action implying a reciprocal relationship, rather than objectifying the river as a tool to dam. As Diaz notes, companies have made incredible efforts to understand water systems in order to exploit them, but not to comprehend our more vital relationships with them (Diaz, "Borderlands"). Bitsui's anthermia perhaps alludes to the Diné word for river, *tooh nílíní*, integrating the verbal *níłí* meaning "it flows"<sup>95</sup> and a conjugation of the verb "to be", and found in 'áánígígíí, "that which is occurring; the happening; the event" (Geller, "Annotating"). This verbal use of "river" also recalls Gerald Vizenor's haiku influence. In her collection of essays, *The Poetry and Poetics of Gerald Vizenor*, Kimberley Blaeser writes in her chapter "The Language of Borders, the Borders of Language in Gerald Vizenor's Poetry", that Vizenor's *Bear Island* suggests immateriality, or a movement between physical realities in which the "border" between the human and the natural visually dissolves" (Blaeser, "The Language" 9). Like Bitsui's "When we river", Vizenor's lines "the boy river turned / slowly to the leaves", allows for

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<sup>95</sup> "Tooh nílíní" – WordSense Online Dictionary. [https://www.wordsense.eu/tooh\\_nílíní/](https://www.wordsense.eu/tooh_nílíní/).

a polysemy that, as Blaeser suggests, transcends denoted borders of language: “If we understand the character’s name to be Boy River Warrior as introduced in the previous stanza, then the deliberate addition of the article “the” before boy river implies a different reality: “the boy river” might be the young river, the boy who is like a river, and so on” (10). Bitsui’s verbal “When we river” similarly surpasses the “strict denotation” of language in its multiplicity, or kinetic “eco-architecture” (Bitsui, “Ecopoetic Structures”); the act of rowing on a river, the act of contemplating one’s reflection, the river’s elements, or how it has been affected by industrialisation. Thus, his verbal use describes his experience as unbound, just as Diné is a “continuum [...] constantly adding new words” and choosing “what to keep in” (Bitsui, PI). If we apply Bitsui’s notion that language and song can provide an imagistic “portal” where a certain “momentum” is accessible through verbs (Bitsui, PI), and Ortiz’s theory that song is both perception and expression, then the verbal river can be read as facilitating the “road” from inside to outside and vice versa.

As the oars glide through the water, “faces are stirred from mounds of mica”, perhaps of those who have rivered before, superimposed on the narrator’s own luminous reflection. Firstly, ontological overlap again coincides with Ortiz’s notion of expression as perception, the latter being “the road from outside” the body “to inside”, and vice versa. Song or poetry is not only a way of perceiving one’s “relationships to all things” but “a way of touching” or doing, as Bitsui’s verb “river” implies (“Song” 38). Similarly, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, the biological rhythms of the river and “the rhythms that lie inside and move our body” create a reciprocity that emerges from a “point of contact” between “our body and the flesh of the world” (Angelino 291)<sup>96</sup>. As the

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<sup>96</sup> This approach allows for a poet-reader reciprocity, differing from Schuster’s view of conceptual ecocritical poets, which sees language as “matter” and “data” rather than content and emphasises the “execution of ideas rather than expression” (209).

river is an unmeasured act or relationship, Bitsui creates a blurring of boundaries in which “transition and duration” are paradoxically separate and intertwined (*Eye and Mind* 145). Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of Cézanne’s “vibration of appearances”<sup>97</sup> (“Cézanne’s Doubt” 77) along with Delaunay’s “rhythmic simultaneity” (“Light” 81) reveal a merging field previously separated by apparent contours (Angelino 290-291), as in the reciprocity between the river and the “riverer”<sup>98</sup>.

Secondly, this act of “rivering” constitutes Bitsui’s reaching, as I have examined in Diaz, beyond language to insinuate the kinetic simultaneity of, as described by Ortiz, our expression and perception. Indeed, John Berger writes:

We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, [...] constituting what is present. Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. [...] The reciprocal nature of vision is more fundamental than that of spoken dialogue. And often dialogue is an attempt to verbalize this ...” (9)

Thus, this reciprocity between river and one who “rivers” is a translation, or verbalisation, of active thought and vision. The verbal anthimeria holds together these colliding movements—the movement of the river itself, the oars stirring up faces in the riverbed, the rippled reflection of the narrator and other “faces”—reflecting the poet’s understanding, as mentioned above, that “Diné is thought in motion, a very verb-driven language. Everything is tactile; everything is about moving within the world or having the world move within you” (Bitsui, “The Motion”). Alternatively, the poem in its entirety is perception itself, as Ortiz says, “an act of consciousness”

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<sup>97</sup> Original French: “Vibration des apparences” (*Le doute de Cézanne* 32).

<sup>98</sup> Delaunay’s original French: « La Lumière dans la Nature crée le mouvement des couleurs. Le mouvement est donné par les rapports *des mesures impaires*, des contrastes des couleurs entre elles qui constituent la Réalité. Cette réalité est douée de la *Profondeur* (nous voyons jusqu’aux étoiles), et devient alors la *Simultanéité rythmique* » (Delaunay’s emphasis, “La Lumière” 146).

(“Interview with Simon Ortiz” 367): Bitsui’s anthimeria provides “the road” from outside of the poet “to inside—which is perception—and from inside of himself to outside—which is expression” (Ortiz, “*Song*” 40).

As the poem evolves, however, the narrator perceives that the river’s “back isn’t as smooth anymore”, “its blood vessels stiffen” because we “hack its veins” and “divert its course”<sup>99</sup>. Bitsui’s italicized final line “*the illusion of a broken back*”, however, also indicates a divergent speaking voice which suggests a potential for, as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, “the fertility of ideas” and “the fertility of alternatives” (“Dancing”). In this way, the poet allows for a simultaneity of present possibility and futurity, driven by the kinetics of this italicised phrase, recalling Diné poet Rex Lee Jim’s poem, “Voice”: “In the beginning I am / Yesterday I am / Tomorrow I am / Forever I am” (*When the Light* 319). Other indigenous poets also integrate their understanding of non-linear time and multiple chronologies into their poetics, a few of which I will briefly outline. For instance, poet dg nanouk okpik applies her concept of time as an “ever-changing and ever-present, past and ever-future” (okpik 226), so that writing is grounded in a multi-faceted “trajectories” (228). Karmen Crey (Cheam) perceives linear time as one of the “great acts of violence of Western history”, and encourages a shift towards thinking of “history as a palimpsest: the idea of the document, the material, that is written on over and over”, layers that “the colonial state continues to try to erase” but which writers can “re-illuminate” (Chariandy 77). Similarly, Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko explains that the retelling of oral narratives is “a communal process”, not fixed to one timeframe, which manifests in her poem “Where the Mountain Lion Lay Down with Deer” (“Returning / up the gray stone cliff / where I

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<sup>99</sup> In 2019, Pumped Hydro Storage proposed to build two hydroelectric projects, including four dams on the Little Colorado River to serve Phoenix (Carr, “Damming”).

descended / a thousand years ago”) (*When the Light* 294). Joy Harjo’s impression is that poems are “beyond, within and alongside time” (Harjo, *When the Light* 3) and Heid Erdrich notes the ability to “hold and express a distinct sense of time”, in reference to Ojibwe poets and those from the “Plains and Mountains” regions<sup>100</sup> (102). Kimberly Blaeser writes that Steve Pacheco’s poem “History” is a call “for history to surround us”, rather than dissolve behind us (Blaeser, “Writing a Poetry” 15). Bitsui’s italicised line similarly destabilises the reader’s desire to fix the poem chronologically; is the river broken, or is this an illusion? Is it we, humanity who is broken, rather than the river itself? What futurity materialises in the present? Indeed, Diaz also explains the possibility of non-linear perceptions:

The Western idea of time is a necessary pressure point for me because as a Native I exist outside of time – I’m now, of course, and also part of a future that is made of the past, or a past that demands the future. To be outside of time is a way of being unpinnable, and so it is dangerous. As are poems. They refuse to be pinned down. The poem is a happening, neither the verb nor the action, but the energy that might yet become action. (Diaz, “A Taste”)

Diaz’s understanding of a “happening” here is harmonious with Bitsui’s italicised suggestion of what “might yet become”; he notes that in Diné ideology, “words have the power to transform or create a situation” (“Sherwin Bitsui”, *Guernica*). The italicisation suggests a possible transition towards alternative relationships with rivers and it typographically exemplifies a kinetic, linguistic continuum, rendering the Diné quality of “moving within the world or having the

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<sup>100</sup> In the newly released anthology *When the Light of the World was Subdued Our Songs Came Through*, edited by Harjo, the “Plains and Mountains” section includes indigenous nations of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada and parts of Utah and Colorado.

world move within you” into English, while asking us to consider our roles against the ecological injustices on the Diné reservation off the page<sup>101</sup>.

Using “river” in a verbal form also suggests that, as Iovino writes drawing on Wood and Clark, the “mere idea of externality” is “no longer possible” (Iovino 5); we cannot maintain the “illusions” of an utter distinction between extracted Diné aquifers and urban electricity, “the distant waste dump and the housing estate” (Clark, “Nature, Post Nature” 82), or the body and external life. Neglecting the injustice these distinctions engender is an attempt to be relieved of guilt when we are complicit, an aspect of what Natalie Diaz calls the “white ecstatic” (Diaz, “Between”). In “River”, for instance, the water’s migrations and reflections of light coexist with the city lights it helps generate. As Ortiz suggests that pieces of experience are inseparable (“Song” 34), and as Bitsui says that “several different words” in a Diné phrase cannot be isolated, Bitsui’s act of “rivering” is an experience inseparable from the many diversions which serve city consumption. While the vast systems of tributaries defy the bifurcation of urban versus wild, Bitsui’s kinetic poetics asks readers to acknowledge how, and from which diverted course, their privileges are extracted. In contrast to Jonathan Schuster’s proposal to observe experimental contemporary poetry as a literal means of data-based, conceptual ruminations that mirror material forms, Bitsui uses verbal language as a physical loci where meaning and action begin.

Another nominal verb in *Dissolve* describes a night that “*abalones*” (author’s emphasis, 8), referring to the one of the sacred mountains in Diné cosmology, Doko’oosliid or the San

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<sup>101</sup> Bitsui may be alluding to the Little Colorado River, a tributary of the Colorado River, an important source for the Diné nation. As Abrahm Lustgarten describes in his essay “End of the Miracle Machines”: “Parts of the river were even reversed [...] Each project was like a small surgery, [...] the more people who rely on the river, the more bandages and appendages engineers attached to it” (Lustgarten). Although the Navajo Nation claims reserved rights (see United States Supreme Court in *Winters v. United States* 1908) to the use of all the water necessary for the reservation, hydro-companies still propose damming the Little Colorado River on the Navajo Reservation.

Francisco Peaks, which is said to have been adorned with abalone by the holy people. Frank Goldtooth Sr. said the mountain has “[...] Apache teardrops and abalone” and is “sitting there with life”, using a verb to describe it in the present (Zolbrod 346). Abalone, along with white shell, turquoise and jet, was also given to each of the four clans created by Changing Woman from her own body (Lee, *Diné Identity* 82). Silko’s essay “Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories” also offers insight on Bitsui’s verbal use of “*abalones*” in terms of an “interior” landscape; Pueblo hunting narratives contain information about migration patterns, behavior, and geographical markers that would help lost hunters and travelers. Exact locations or geographical sites—cliff formations or mesas, for instance—are more important than “the precise date of the incident” (Silko, “Interior” 10) or a chronological set of incidents, so that is “impossible to determine which came first, the incident or the geographical feature” (11). These stories are markers that safeguard Pueblo relationships to continually used routes, and connect the “ritual-mythic world” to the “actual, everyday world” (13). Micheal Zimmerman, Pokagon band of Potawatomi, similarly asserted after Margaret Noodin’s presentation at the MLA International Symposium in Lisbon (2019) that “there has never been one place that a breadth of knowledge is kept; knowledge still exists, because of diaspora and people moved and shared, so the knowledge is still there” (Zimmerman). In her essay “Land Speaking”, Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong, who, like Bitsui, attempts to “construct a similar sense of movement and rhythm through sound patterns” in English, writes that Okanagan root syllables and emotive qualities allow for a “constant replay of tiny selected pieces of movement and action that solicit a larger active movement somehow connected to you [...]” (Armstrong 190). Verb use, therefore, occurs “very much like a story”, in that reality “becomes very potent with animation and life”



(191). Bitsui's verbal underpinnings such as "*abalones*" similarly express subtle observations—the night's colour palette—as well as personal or cultural animations and continuums. This synesthetic anthimeria therefore allows for a heightened "electrical conductor", as Christopher Caudwell wrote: "clusters of associations impinging on each other [...] form an organised mass of emotion. The affective colouring of one word takes reflected shadow and light from the colours of the other words", creating an "affective significance" (Caudwell 242). Thus, although Eve Clark asserts that denominal verbs can be quickly computed on the basis of the speaker and listener's mutual knowledge (Clark et al., "When Nouns" 767), Bitsui's denominal verbs siphon a deep understanding of place, an "affective significance", which may exceed the "mutual knowledge" of the non-Diné reader.

Finally, along with the anthimeria already discussed in "*sunflowers*", "river", and "*abalones*", whose "affective significance"—song, political, ecological and existential reflection, and cultural/interior landscape palettes—complexifies the effects of linguistic movement in poetry, Bitsui also applies verbs in their present continuous tense which tends to, as Bitsui says, emphasise "going and [...] moving through life and through time", a perceptivity central to Diné expression, which reshapes itself into Bitsui's poetic diction (Bitsui, PI). Additionally, according to Kidder, Diné verb stems "are the most semantically prominent morphemes", and they "tend to be longer in duration, have more phonetic contrast", which reflects Bitsui's italic emphasis and effective phonic elongation of these verbs in the present continuous (Kidder 64). As Bitsui wrote in a tweet on August 6, 2019 about *Dissolve*: "I composed it for the ear as well as the page. It's a song that moves through the body and mind" (Bitsui, @SherwinBitsui). The poem "Japanese Garden" written in Diné and translated into

English by Laura Tohé, the second poet Laureate of the Navajo Nation, is exemplary of the continuous movement Bitsui describes above: “A man is leading the animals. / A man is leading the ones that float on water. / A man is leading the winged ones. / A man is leading the ones that swim”, and later, “Where are they going?” (Tohe, “Japanese Garden”). Similarly, Bitsui explains continuous verbs in relation to conversations with his family: “I just remember calling my grandmother or even my parents and always asking, ‘what are you doing, where are you going?’ The ‘ing’ is really important in the Navajo language. So [...] ‘what are you doing’, I usually ask that to my mom, which translates to ‘what’s the gossip out there’” (Bitsui, PI). The natural inclination to converse through ongoing or unbroken time parallels Diaz’s notion of continuous “receiving” and “caretaking” for the land, a shift in power of human-over-land discourse, which “allows you to have a memory of where you’ve been as well as an *imagining* of where you are *arriving*”, Diaz suggests (my emphasis, Diaz, “Borderlands”). Late linguistic anthropologist Keith Basso’s study of Western Apache storytellers as “place-makers” (Bryson 8) explores topophilia, what Yi-Fu Tuan calls “the affective bond between people and place” (Tuan 4), and which results in “interanimation”: “[...] When places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind [...]” (Bryson 10)<sup>102</sup>. Bitsui’s interanimation in verbs such as “*sunlighting*”—“hearth sounds *sunlighting* / the hallway back to then” (*Dissolve* 58) and “*mountaining*”—“This mountain stands near us *mountaining*” (*Dissolve* 16, poet’s emphasis)—affirms a place-based qualia perceptive to active presence—that is, not the place itself but the act, or “happening” as Diaz says, of physically, psychologically, and culturally

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<sup>102</sup> Western Apache is a language spoken in Arizona, neighbouring the Navajo Nation, and like Diné, is an Athabaskan language.

moving through and receiving an ongoing, storied place, as well as its relation to inherited movements.

Firstly, regarding the latter example, Bitsui noted that while the verb “*mountaining*” is poetically evocative, it has some geological truth: as tectonic plates shift, mountains “are moving, they are growing” (Bitsui, PI). The mountain here is “near” the viewer, but, differing from Belinda Cannone’s idea of “defamiliarising”—fixating on the insularity and humility of, for instance, a tree, by becoming the “wonderee”, capturing its slowness (Cannone 15)<sup>103</sup>—Bitsui’s immersion in place is complexified by the aforementioned narrative of the San Francisco Peaks; the verb “*mountaining*” is not fixed to one moment, but attached to the many possible reiterations of personal and cultural linguistic expression, similar to Vizenor’s explanation of transmotion—not a “captured scene” but a continued “visionary motion of memory” (Vizenor, *Native Provenance* 40). Diné poet Laura Tohe writes in “In Dinétah” that the four directions of the sacred mountains of Dinétah are “sis naajini rising to the east, / Tsoodził rising to the south, / Dook’o’osliíd rising to the west, / DibéNítsaa rising to the north (100)<sup>104</sup>. Bitsui references these directions in *Dissolve*: “We shake ground deer hooves, / on the four directions of *forgive*”, inverting the anthimeria here from verb to noun in “*forgive*” (38). His italicised “*mountaining*” is similarly directional; it indicates or gestures towards the mountain’s culturally significant continuum, as well as the animate life that exists there, with an italicised, verbally-infused shift. If Diné conversation involves questions of “going and [...] moving, through life and through

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<sup>103</sup> From *S’émerveller*, read by Cannone at the “Reenchanting Urban Wilderness” conference in 2019: “Si pour l’enfant ou le jeune homme aucun aspect de la vie n’est émoussé, c’est qu’habitant pleinement l’instant [...] que rien ne lui est ‘familier’. Cependant chacun peut, [...] réussir à “défamiliariser” le réel à le voir “en nouveauté”, et ainsi devient-il l’émervillé—le néologisme est nécessaire pour désigner celui qui est saisi momentanément par cette émotion” (Cannone 15).

<sup>104</sup> While it is common to refer to the four sacred mountains and the cardinal directions, many narratives and references, including the Diné Natural Law, include six (McNalley 54).

time” in a literal and figurative sense, Bitsui grants the mountain the same momentum, representing an attention to the agency of the landscape as well as, as Simpson writes, “the ongoing life and actions of Indigenous people” (“Settlement’s Secret” 212), an approach which Audra Simpson so adamantly calls for in order to demystify the spectacle of settler colonialism. As in Tapahonso’s poem “This Is How They Were Placed for Us”<sup>105</sup>, in which she writes, “By Sisnaajini we set our standards for living (*Blue Horses Rush In* 39)<sup>106</sup>, Bitsui exemplifies these active cartographies—exterior and interior through memory perception—exercising kinetically ongoing indigenous knowledge through song and reflection.

Continuous verbs also reflect the poet’s sensitivity to the movements of the natural world, having grown up as a shepherd, and serve as textual recreations of shifts such as clouds that would “blow over” (Bitsui, Lannan) in a desert waiting for rain:

[...] We have a bute next to my grandmother’s house and there’s another huge mesa behind it, and I would have to hike this mountain [...] in the morning and then be up on this sort of sky island with the sheep, and then coming back for lunch and going up again. [...] You can get a beautiful bird’s eye view. And I think the world was always alive at that particular moment, and even though it seems quiet, it would always be full of birds and insects and the sheep, the collar bell, and dogs yipping, it just was always full of music. Then the planes would scratch across the sky also and that was a constant thing, you know, because the air was so clear and so dry that when the planes would go overhead, [...] so all of the colors and all of the sounds. (Bitsui, PI)

These verbs therefore reiterate the movement of both thought and landscape as having an internal relationship in the body, not just visibly exterior to it, as well as nonhuman movement and migrations in a politically charged landscape.

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<sup>105</sup> Webster quotes both poems to show the “fourfold repetition of actions, actors, and objects” as rhetorical devices in Diné poetry (Webster, “Ałk’idáá’ Mą’ii Jooldlosh, Jini” 247).

<sup>106</sup> Sisnaajini is Mount Blanca or Blanca Peak in Colorado, the sacred mountain at the eastern boundary of Dinétah.

In the same vein, Bitsui writes, “and owls, [...] / carrying the night between them: a wet blanket designed by a woman who dreams of / lightning, / saying that we have finally become mountains [...]” (*Shapeshift* 64). Here, the humans have become mountains, and thus the mountain is not stagnant but continues to act in the mind and body. Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson’s concept of “*self as relationship*” is enlightening here: “Rather than viewing ourselves as being in relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of” (Wilson 80, author’s emphasis). In fact the bird symbolism in this poem recalls Leanne Howe’s line in “The Story of America: A Tribalography” (which Daniel Heath Justice quotes as an epigraph to his book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*): “[...] if worse comes to the worst and our people forget where we left our stories, the birds will remember and bring them back to us” (Howe 38). In Bitsui’s line, the owls remind humans of their place-based ontology, as if the owls also carry knowledge of movements, or transmotion, against colonial, extractivist severing from land. While Knickerbocker focuses on the “distinction” between humans and nature, which he believes “provides the space necessary in which to make art of nature”<sup>107</sup> (169), I argue that Bitsui’s kinetics—his experience on the bute and part of its continuum, or that “we have finally become mountains”, for instance—emphasises our place within, and not separate from, exterior happenings.

These examples of verbal dynamism implicitly express, as Lloyd L. Lee outlines, a regeneration of Diné self-governance, tribal sovereignty, worldviews and value systems adapted to modern conditions, and grounded in the “philosophical principles” governing *hózhó* (101). Building on native writers Alfred and Corntassel, Vine Deloria Jr., David E. Wilkins, and Simon

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<sup>107</sup> In this citation, Knickerbocker refers to Marilyn Nelson’s sequence of fifteen sonnets in “A Wreath for Emmett Till” which elegises Till’s unnatural death with the symbol of the wreath, the sonnets being linked together as wildflowers are to make a wreath (167).

Ortiz, Lee considers models such as nationhood or “peoplehood” (99)—recalling Bitsui’s expression “peopled land”, as place names in Diné often reflect the community that lives there (Bitsui, PI)—to ensure “the health and prosperity of the people using historical Native ways of governing”, and the reclamation of Diné self-determination beyond the governing system in place (98), acknowledging Kahnawake Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred’s warning against forms of the “colonization of the mind”, the replacing of indigenous thought with the status quo of America’s individualism (101). Bitsui’s toponymia and kinetic “place-making” in italicised, continuous verbs are in conversation with Lee’s outline of these appeals to forge a renewed self-determination. “*Sunlighting*” (58), “*mountaining*” (55), and the owls with a message that people have “finally become mountains [...]” reflect the relationships “based on hadine’e baa haajinizin (having compassion for your people)” (103) as Lee writes, as well as Kathryn Manuelito’s suggestion that self-determination can be grounded in a respect for “both animate and inanimate” life (Manuelito 22, qtd Lee 103).

#### “We’re Federal Property”: Placelessness and Dislocation

In conversation with Diaz’s “The First Water is the Body”, Bitsui’s place-making verbs as discussed above are accompanied by the dispossession of land, and in effect, place is simultaneously phantomised, dislocated and severed. In fact, Bitsui writes, “Everywhere is dreamed: arranged” (29). In this section, I will first outline how Bitsui’s anonymous, anthimeric substitutes for place names instil this sense of dislocation, particularly in reference to urbanity, before discussing three main embodiments of placeless fragmentation: physical and linguistic violence, the latter of which Bitsui illustrates with the names of punctuation marks in their word form; non-humans depicted as ghostly, dying, fragmented in the mind or as products; and a sense

of colonial myopia. The effects of this haunting displacement are captured in the same cinemagraphic frame, in which their movements are equally impeded, dissolving or displaced by colonial development. Referring to Dinétah, Bitsui writes: “[...] in the most sacred sense it’s also home, but it’s also political, and it’s also a reservation and we also don’t own anything really, I mean we’re still landless [...] it’s federal property essentially, and we’re federal property” (Bitsui, PI), a close parallel with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s opinion, “We have not had the right to say no to development, because indigenous communities are not seen as people. They are seen as resources” (Simpson, “Dancing”).

While Tohe lists the directions of the sacred mountains as cited above, Diné activist Kim Smith—who participated in the aforementioned year-long Journey for Existence to the six sacred mountains beginning in the winter to honor their ancestors who were forced on the Long Walk in the dead of winter—notes that federal, extractivist landmarks are also present in each direction: “There is a coal mine 5 miles away to the east of me, to the south of me there is a transfer station for natural gas” (Smith, “Healing”). It confirmed for Smith that, “this is how the earth is being broken, this is how I’m broken essentially” (Smith, “Healing”). Bitsui translates this rupture textually: a “sunlit sandstone wall” (*Dissolve* 12), coexists with “cartilage *pincered* from a digital cloud” (19) or an “arbor of mesh and steel” (32). Likewise, “mountaining” is just as present as the mountaining of cities: “cisterns of smog” (32) and “buildings / weaving upright where bayonets / stab the sea for warmth” (59). These urban metonymies—hyper-digitalised as in the “digital clouds” replacing actual clouds above—appear and dissolve again into placelessness, not unlike Marc Augé’s notion of “non-place”; anonymous spaces of transience such as an escalator, airport, or shopping mall (Fisher 19). In his third collection *Dissolve*, for example, Bitsui writes,

“*Nowhere* streams in blips and beeps” (32), paralleling a stream of water with the internet stream. In this unclassifiable place he calls “*the somewhere parts*” (20), urban light pollution creates a ghostly “sheath of starlight” covered by “cisterns of smog” (32). In fact, these interstitial zones parallel author David Heska Wanbli Weiden’s (Sicangu Lakota) challenge of the overly simplistic split between an “urban and reservation” experience: “[...] many reservation Natives often move between the rez and nearby cities”, and, coupled with both federal and tribal citizenship, he suggests “Natives exist in a liminal space [...], we belong everywhere and nowhere” (Weiden, “A PEN Ten”). While the aforementioned verbal place-making defies fixed frames, urban infrastructures and reservation borders are federal attempts to contain and bifurcate, and thus ironically, as a result, marked zones and border towns become a disturbing “*Nowhere*” (*Dissolve* 32)<sup>108</sup>.

If, in Bitsui’s work, a sense of topophilia and kinetic symmetry with place is inhabited by continuous verbs and sound symbolism, then these dislocations tend to be occupied by a sense of disturbing disarticulation, here with a noun shifting into an adjective:

These hands *glocked*  
in a hive of red ants  
swan through children  
grunting at the bank  
of one language  
while the other  
tethers moonlight to firelight. (*Dissolve* 17)

Images are being “etched” and distilled “in mid-movement” as if filmed or in a chain of snapshots, then fade out, “dissolving as they’re uttered into form”, as the poet describes (Bitsui, PI). Bitsui’s use of “etched” images aligns with poet Jake Skeets’s suggestion for a Diné

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<sup>108</sup> According to Estes, border towns are “white-dominated settlements that ring Indian reservations, where persistent patterns of anti-Indian exploitation, discrimination, violence and criminalization define everyday life” (Estes, “Anti-Indian Common Sense” 50).



equivalent for “poet”, “Saad Naa’ach’aah”, which Skeets translates to “drawing words” (Skeets, “What is”), a modification of Webster’s note that the closest word a Diné poet had offered him for “poetry” was *hane’* meaning “story” (Webster, “Coyote” 70)<sup>109</sup>. Escorting language to its freest realms in which words take on a physicality akin to “etching”, Bitsui produces an unpunctuated succession of images in the citation above which blur and shift into one another, echoing film techniques as seen in Chinook filmmaker Sky Hopinka’s work: simultaneities of sound and image are superimposed, distilled, dissolved and tempos shifted to reveal often unseen superimpositions<sup>110</sup>. Firstly, “these hands *glocked*” in the citation above might relate to the violence experienced in the aftermath of colonial intervention, as scholar Larry Emerson describes:

Diné men seem to be affected in a very raw and vulnerable manner. Yet as many know, males in general tend not to exhibit vulnerability and intimacy. But when we drink too much alcohol, the anger and rage too often explode into violence. Navajo versus Navajo violence often turns to physical abuse and sometimes murder. [...] Statistics regarding violence, abuse, and addiction are rampant. We fear one another. This happens despite our traditional knowledge that urges us to live in harmony, beauty, and balance. (“Diné Culture” 55)

Perhaps, then, “*glocked* / in a hive of red ants” is an evocation of this fear—the embedded word “locked” emphasising containment within cycles of violence—as a result of the extreme colonial upheaval, despite ceremonies and lifestyles which aim to restore *hózhó* (“harmony, beauty and balance”) as Emerson describes. Simultaneously, Bitsui’s passage also evokes the collective

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<sup>109</sup> One can also compare these descriptions with Sicangu Lakota Whirlwind Soldier’s assertion that there is no word for poetry in Lakota, but “memory songs” (Whirlwind Soldier, #NativeReads).

<sup>110</sup> See in particular of Hopinka’s short films “Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary”, “I’ll Remember You as You Were, not as What You’ll Become” and “Visions from an Island”, in which Hopinka’s shifting landscapes and cityscapes, often either close up or panoramically traversed, materialise and dematerialise, superimposing each other. Their successive and often rapid presentation and refraction provide a sense of wandering not unlike Bitsui’s dissolving and etching images.

memory of the aforementioned forced march at gunpoint to Bosque Redondo as well as smaller scale evictions. In “Converging Wor(l)ds”, Bitsui recounts what Phil Hall, director of Nizhoni Bridges, a non-profit foundation in the Arizona and Utah regions of the Navajo Nation, told him as they stood on the banks of the San Juan River: in the early 20th century, “white ranchers had forced a Navajo family, at gunpoint, back across this same river to the Navajo side because their livestock were grazing on what once had been their winter camp. This history, Phil said, is loaded with the true story of this land, its people’s conflicts and resilience” (28). Bitsui’s lines “these hands *glocked*” therefore evokes both violence and intergenerational trauma of forced dislocations at gunpoint. Also present in “*glocked*” is the threat of violence towards natives by non-native residents, including armed policemen, in border towns; Bitsui, whose cousin died in Flagstaff after being beaten by white boys in the street, also notes his own fraught relationship with the police, and mentions Diné/Hopi poet Venaya Yazzie whose father was killed by policemen (Bitsui, PI). Because each line is presented as a “dissolution” effacing itself, these layered allusions of “*glocked*” become kinetically ephemeral, and thus all the more haunting.

The lines which follow, furthermore, couple this dissolution with a disarticulation: “children / grunting at the bank / of one language / while the other / tethers moonlight to firelight” (17). The former language described here appears to be English, which fails to articulate and translate cultural specificity and is a marker of colonial assimilation. Bitsui asks, for instance, “How can you dissolve one’s language, or the gravity of one’s language? How can you do that in English? I don’t know” (Bitsui, PI). Although Bitsui believes he “was privileged to resist” English rhetoric confining indigenous literature to Western tropes partly because he grew up speaking Diné, Belin writes of her “piercing blade of random anger” after her father

died; he, like her mother, “decided not to teach us [Belin and her siblings] the Navajo language” (“In the Cycle” 54). Domestic and inherited frustrations, along with not being fluent in Diné, gave Belin “no time to heal”, as her “English voice and Western thoughts” rivaled her “small Navajo vocabulary” (54). Belin’s anger parallels Bitsui’s “grunting” language of disarticulation, or as Belin writes, “gagging on oppressors’ tongues” (71). On the other hand, the former language in this line, which “tethers moonlight to firelight” is presumably Diné, an umbilical cord of the elements. Belin remembers listening to her relatives speaking Diné words which would “flow over” her body, instructions such as “Wave your arms over the fire and talk to it” (52), echoing Bitsui’s “firelight”. Language, despite its forced silences, bridges the cosmos (moonlight) to a precise place of perceiving and communality (firelight). Though “tether” by definition typically restricts movement, here language creates a kinetic throughway, linking these two forces of illumination, and contrasting the disturbing sheen of “*glocked*”. Children are metaphorically “grunting at the bank” of English, recreating the actual bank of the San Juan River which Bitsui recounts above, but are also tethered to “a hope chest treasured with stories”, as Belin writes, so that from the “point of trauma” of the binary banks, “our rage will transform” (71). Bitsui exemplifies his own technique of “pulling the colonizer’s language into our ways of knowing” (Bitsui, “A Conversation”); his anthimeria in “*glocked*” blurs and superimposes the movements of a “storied place” and a “peopled land” embedded in the language, with the movements of forced assimilation and dislocation (Bitsui, PI).

Bitsui’s collection *Dissolve* in particular frames the English language as a tool of American capitalism and possession, most prominently through punctuation, represented by the words themselves rather than their symbols: “Hyphens slash the tree line’s dashes (31)”,

“semicolons” are “coughed out by the final raven” (25) and goat foals are “dripping out of hollowed-out dictionaries” (21). Punctuation as a word rather than a symbol implies that language is not simply metaphorical, but has material and ecological consequences. This materiality intensifies the gravity of displacement: nature is disorientated and even poisoned by metonyms of English—one is reminded of Javier Zamora’s “Saguaros” in which the bats in the botanical gardens say “*speak English only*”<sup>111</sup>—broken treaties, boarding schools, the current post-colonial homogenisation of the language, upon which Bitsui reflects, “You stop to wonder [...] how Ná ho kos feels / under the weight of all that loss”<sup>112</sup> (*Flood Song* 11). As Joy Harjo says, “My frustration with the language, particularly the English language, stems from anger with the colonization process in which the English language was a vicious tool” (Bryson 52). Bitsui’s “hyphens” and “semi-colons” act as vicious tools, almost parasitically towards nature, reflecting forced efforts to erase the Diné language as well as dictate extractivism<sup>113</sup>.

Disarticulation and “non-place” of language itself extends to the non-human in Bitsui’s work, as even the animals are ghosts in *Dissolve*: “their secret conversations / thatching howls to whimpers exhaled / from an isthmus of drowned wolves” (32). The image of dead wolves

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<sup>111</sup> Zamora, Javier. *Unaccompanied*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2017.

<sup>112</sup> This Diné phrase is repeated three times in the epigraph of *Dissolve*, a poem by Rex Lee Jim. A very similar poem of Jim’s, with a different Diné orthography, is “náhookqs / ndi / náhookqs”, which Webster discusses in “The Art of Failure of Translating a Navajo Poem”. The word “náhookqs” can literally be translated to “a slender solid object revolves” (“The Art” 27), but it is often used to refer to the Big Dipper asterism revolving around the north star. As Webster notes, associated Diné beliefs can be lost in translation, for instance, the north is related to death and old age, reflection and assurance (32). The word “ndi” in this particular poem can be translated as “even”, though Webster notes it can also be heard as “ni ‘di” which means “on earth”. In Jim’s unpublished manuscript, *spirit echoes spirit*, a version of the poem is translated as “even big dipper turns, turns, turns on earth” (29).

<sup>113</sup> While there are many programs in support of the Diné language, including renewed federal funding until 2024 under the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Programs Reauthorization Act, Diné is still threatened because of this prolonged and continued erasure. In a study published in 2008, Diné youth are often stigmatized as “limited English proficient (LEP)” (McCarty et al. 162) and “ridiculed” (165) by their English teachers. Youth may “possess greater Native language proficiency than they manifest, “hiding” it out of shame or embarrassment” (167).

forming an “isthmus” accentuates the gravity of biodiversity depletion, in particular the Mexican wolf, which was hunted and poisoned in Arizona and New Mexico to near extinction by federal programs in order to accommodate new settlers and bolster the agricultural boom (Robinson, “Wildfire Service”). Animals are likewise perceived as cut off from necessities or left to die: “lawns / caked with dying birds cooing”, the songbird’s tune becomes a “gray amnesia” (48) and “anchors of swans / coughing dune sand on the dry riverbed” (29). The suffocation and impediment of birds here is reciprocated in the body: “the mind’s muddy swan (22)” suggests that, in “steel-rimmed America” (26), the physicality of animals is replaced with muddled facsimiles in the imagination. In another piece in *Dissolve*, he writes, “What crows above a city’s em-dash / doused in whale oil, / hangs here—named: *nameless*” (12). Not only does he enlist the em-dash, another punctuation as previously discussed, but again animals are only referenced in fragmented ways; “crow” is used as a verb, eliciting not the physical bird, only its sound and namelessness. In the same line, whales exist in an absent presence, only an idea existing in their commercial product. Later in the poem, he writes “I imagine a canyon floor, / cornstalks growing in rows / along sunlit sandstone wall / in the far corner of a room                      late in life” (12). An idyllic setting only exists in the imagination and the spatial iconicity before “late in life” emphasises the image as distant or fissured, presently unattainable. These interstitial relationships with non-humans, often fragmented or imbricated with urban energy systems, provide an exchange of movement inside and outside the body and mind which questions the daily detachment from neoliberal exploitation and the colonial powers by which it is maintained.

Similarly, in *Flood Song*, the poem is “held out to the wind” and “speaks *juniper* to the wilderness / as August slithers into September’s copper pipes / searching for a paw print of a

waterfall on the mind's lunar surface" (68). Firstly, the poem itself speaks to the wilderness, another gesture similar to transmotion<sup>114</sup>, and a synergic communication which Linda Hogan evokes in her essay "Ways of the Cranes". Regarding the sandhill cranes, Hogan writes: "Tribes have told stories about them, told stories to them, for centuries, and they have told the tribes the stories of their own entwined journeys" (Hogan, "International Ecopoetics"). Similarly, in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's recorded song/poem "How to Steal a Canoe", she says: "kwe sings the song / and She sings back", the "she" signifying the canoe. This again can be understood as a continuum of call and response, or a palindrome, as I used above with Diaz's "The First Water is the Body"; in chiasmic conversation, the poem responds to the motions of our experiences with the non-human. The sibilance in Bitsui's line ("speaks", "wilderness", "slithers", "September") suggests a response to the more elusive, hidden shift; the "paw print of a waterfall on the mind's lunar surface" is an apparitional trace in the memory, and the change of seasons is obscured within industrial copper pipes, rather than in the exterior world.

Secondly, the mention of juniper, or "gad" in Diné, is significant to Diné tradition, but also evokes the postcolonial collective memory and the current climate crises. According to Navajo historian Wally Brown, juniper, a tree whose bark is traditionally burnt and eaten for calcium, is also boiled and drunk during the Enemy Way ceremony, performed for veterans who suffer from PTSD after fighting in American wars. Juniper berries were also historically used as a medicinal treatment for diseases, such as smallpox, contracted from colonists. Today, however, many relate juniper to "ghost beads", necklaces made with juniper berries to ward off evil spirits (Brown). Even more, a 2018 study from New Mexico State University suggests that

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<sup>114</sup> Vizenor cites an Anishinaabe dream song in which the singer "listens to the turnout of the seasons, then directs the words of his song to the natural motion or the wind and sky" (*Native Provenance* 38).

“overgrazing, fire suppression, and climatic change have been identified as potential causes of juniper invasion” in some regions of the desert (“Selected Plants of Navajo Rangelands”). Although still associated with its healing properties, juniper has become invasive due to overheating climates. Bitsui is careful not to tempt the reader into falling into a purity narrative, which, as Erin Marie Konsmo (Métis/Cree) warns, risks perpetuating white normative views of Indigenous purity of “returning to the land”, while in fact many indigenous people like Konsmo “pick medicines in cities or at bus stops” but are shamed for it being inauthentic: “In the face of massive land theft, dispossession and destruction, Indigenous people should be encouraged to nurture whatever medicines we can find, wherever we can find them” (Smith et al. 239). Bitsui dismantles the “purity narrative” by juxtaposing the multiple evocations of “juniper”—its altered habitat colonial overproduction, its healing properties for veterans of American wars and thus colonial wars, and its association with spirits.

This hauntology bears similarities to Serenella Iovino’s exploration of artist Tamiko Thiel’s app-based installation, *Gardens of the Anthropocene*, made of virtual mutant “neospecies” of plants (Iovino 8). For Iovino, Thiel’s virtual plants suggest we are already “populated by eerily manifold denizens, including absent beings and unwanted presences: these are the ghosts and monsters of the Anthropocene” (5)<sup>115</sup>. In fact, these shifting images where nature meets industry embody America’s “historical myopia” of colonisation (Vedantam, “An American”)—Bitsui’s “gray amnesia” as cited above or “dog-eared in amnesia” (*Dissolve* 26). One doesn’t have to go far to find it; the rhetoric of the gold-ridden apparently uninhabited “9

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<sup>115</sup> From an essay based on Iovino’s keynote address, “The Invisible Wild: Dilemmas and Resources of the Anthropocene Gardens”, at the “Reenchanting Urban Wildness” conference in Perpignan, 13 June, 2019.

million square miles of vast American wilderness” in *The History Channel’s* series called “America: The Story of Us”, for instance, implies that this “us” equates to the first “trailblazers in search of freedom”<sup>116</sup> who colonised North America. The first episode glosses over the web of colonial violence, from land theft<sup>117</sup>, to genocide, to reservations, and swiftly transitions into the history of the Revolution and chattel slavery (“America: The Story of Us”). Bitsui’s poetry maps this blatant myopia, which the government refuses to articulate, and thus the poet widens the “spatio-legal imaginaries”, as Antonio Fernandez describes, between urban and rural, our land and yours. For instance, in *Flood Song*, Bitsui writes about dawn’s “scalp *scalpeled* alongside what is ‘ours’ (10), “We spoke a wing pattern on the wall that was raised to keep ‘us’ out” (13) and “[...] there is no tongue to smooth away the hairline fracture between *us* and *them*” (24, author’s emphasis). These delineations enact a cartography of placelessness, and in turn a blurred facelessness: “I arrive at a map of a face buried in spring snow”, Bitsui writes (*Flood Song* 67). The map of experience, or “shifting atlas” (*Flood Song* 35), of non-imperial, decolonial perspectives is coeval with the colonial “map’s stiff pulse” (*Flood Song* 68), the psychological and physical boundaries forced upon the Navajo Nation—whose “peopled” language (Bitsui, PI) designates tribal territories which have been occupied or “*scalpeled*” for development.

Matt Hooley describes Bitsui’s outline of these colonial cartographies as “throwing the structures of settler enclosure into relief” (Hooley 149). As other analyses of literature under

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<sup>116</sup> The episode can be found on YouTube, where comments from high school students in 2019 indicate they have to watch the series for homework, suggesting that the monolithic, colonial “us” persists in American education.

<sup>117</sup> By using “theft”, I do not imply that there is an equivalent indigenous sense of human ownership of land, but rather echo Leanne Simpson’s distinction, of theft as stealing from the land itself: “[...] extracting is stealing—it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment” (Simpson, “Dancing”).



settler colonialism,<sup>118</sup> Hooley turns to the rejection in Bitsui's poetry of colonial maps which, as Cocola writes, "tends to be defined and shaped" by the coloniser's imposition of territory (188). However, while Hooley believes that the "enclosures of ecological violence" are "always social", I argue that in Bitsui's work, colonial enclosures and how he challenges them are very much linguistic. His unfixed continuum reflects Bitsui's own realisation that, when translating a Li Po poem into Diné, he "couldn't find a way to translate the word 'wall'": "I thought about how and where I grew up: in a vast open landscape. There were barbwire fences, but no conception of walled-in spaces" (Harjo, "Sherwin Bitsui by Joy Harjo"). Bitsui's punctuation marks (hyphens, dashes) etched by dominant English, the interactions between Diné notions of place, exiled non-place separating "us" and "them", "unsettle" colonial language and territories that are believed to be "settled" (Simpson, "Settlement's Secret" 209). Bitsui's clashing multiverse therefore names and disturbs the tacit but evident "settler systems, states, imaginaries", while claiming verb-based songs, actions and relationships "to territory that we care for and still care for despite its theft from us", in Simpson's words ("The Sovereignty of Critique"). Whereas the story of "us" and "them" mimics hegemonic essentialism, Bitsui's "We" ("When we river", "We spoke a wing pattern") is not only decentred from the first person, it is also a counter-language pinpointing ecological extraction and colonial amnesia while subverting the persistent rhetoric, or as Joy Harjo writes, "the daily deluge of language from our devices", that those who don't fit into America's "us" are "evil". In fact, in Bitsui's words, these kinetic superimpositions are ways

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<sup>118</sup> Other research underlining imperial cartography and strategies for remapping are Goeman's *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, Howe's "Embodied Tribalography: Mound Building, Ball Games, and Native Endurance in the Southeast", Stirrup's *Picturing Worlds: Visuality and Visual Sovereignty in Contemporary Anishinaabe Literature*, Cocola's *Places in the Making: A Cultural Geography of American Poetry*, Johnson's "Writing Deeper Maps: Mapmaking, Local Indigenous Knowledges, and Literary Nationalism in Native Women's Writing", among others.

to “reorganize” abusive language (Harjo, “Sherwin Bitsui by Joy Harjo”), patterning the movements between place-based wonder and disturbing, violent erasure.

### Diné Narratives

Bitsui invites us to perceive simultaneities beyond cause and effect, not only through verb-based expression as I have explored, but also in his references to Diné narratives and their interactions with urbanity. Diné orality is, as Lloyd L. Lee asserts, an essential tool in pedagogical, cultural and decolonial efforts, and, quoting Dr. AnCita Benally, oral narratives are a “record” providing “historical information that could not be found elsewhere [...] as seen through the eyes of the people themselves, as they understood it, in a way that had meaning for them” (Benally, “Finding History” qtd in Lee, “Navajo” 41). Lee also cites Laura Tohe who notes that stories of more recent events such as the Long Walk are crucial in countering the “exalted American imperialism and nationalism” she was taught (Tohe, “Hwéeldi” 78, qtd in Lee, “Navajo” 39). In this section, I discuss *Flood Song*’s cultural references to sunbeams and birth—the implications of which, Bitsui says, are not always premeditated, yet likely part of a “deep symbolism” and possibly an “intentional desire for something new”—and the reference to Coyote in *Shapeshift*. I discuss how Bitsui’s traditional allusions coalesce with chemical liquids, urban machinery as a tool to feed the myth of ownership, and light pollution, articulating the often unseen and unnamed colonial effects on animals.

In *Flood Song*, Bitsui’s line “A stoplight dangling from the sunbeam of a birth song” (38) recalls the Diné narrative in which a strand of sunbeam was given by the gods to Changing Woman, who pulled on it for pain relief during labour (Zolbrod 183). The word similar to “sunbeam” in Diné is “shá bitł’óól”, translating literally as “rope of sun” (Field 279) and the

Diné word for rainbow, “nááts’íilid”, is related to the word sunbeam in that the verb stem -déél, connotes a ropelike or rapid movement, as Holy Beings were also said to have traveled on rainbows and sunbeams as bridges between the human and spiritual worlds (Lee 31). Similarly, as Chumash, Tohono O’odham and Pima poet Georgiana Valoyce-Sanchez writes in “The Dolphin Walking Stick” about her father telling a story: “Kakunupmawa the sun / the Great Mystery / according to the men’s ideas / said don’t worry / I will make you a bridge / the rainbow / will be your bridge” (original spacing, Valoyce-Sanchez 278). Regarding Diné thought, Lee writes that rainbows have their own songs, they guard sacred places, and represent an understanding of sovereignty: “Ask the Navajo person ‘what is Navajo sovereignty’, and expect the response to be, ‘Nááts’íilid nihinz’íí’ (It’s the sacred rainbow that surrounds us)” (31). The divergent elements of luminosity in this line—the stoplight and the “sunbeam of a birth song”—compress a sense of urbanism with connotations to the Changing Women narrative, creating a type of modern Diné idiom, which again pulls the “colonizer’s language” into a kinetic “way of knowing”, re-rendering a cultural continuum.

However, in Bitsui’s line in *Shapeshift*, “[...] Two birds spit oil: sunbeam, soot, sunbeam” (53), he marries an implied rainbow effect on oil with the birds’ toxic ingestion. Here, birds spit out oil which, in its light refraction, creates a thin-film interference in the form of a rainbow. These complex connections of fuel-driven urban life are therefore entangled with non-humans and Diné associations to reflect the often destructive relationships that go unseen, a way to articulate “what’s not there” as Bitsui says (Bitsui, PI). Bitsui’s other references to birth, as seen in “birth song” above, often coexist with industrial metonyms. In *Flood Song*, for instance, he writes, “amniotic cloud of car exhaust” (34) and “the birth sac’s metallic fumes” (62), a striking

resonance with Margo Tamez's (Lipan Apache) description in her poem "My Mother Returns to Calaboz": "The air is still heavy with heat and damp, / but smells like diesel and herbicides. / The scene reminds me of failed gestations. / My reproduction, the plants', and the water's, / each struggling in the same web of survival" (*When the Light* 322). Fetal fluids cohabiting with toxic fluids suggest an industry-induced stillbirth, which replicates in our permeable bodies, both made infertile where the extraction of fossil fuels is most rife, primarily on indigenous reservations.

Another Diné association is introduced in the poem "Atlas" in the same collection: *ma'ii* or Coyote, a notorious trickster and transformer in Diné stories. In this poem, during the "rush hour traffic", Coyote is seen in a machine which feeds metropolitan megaliths: he is "biting his tail in the forklift / shaped like another reservation" (6). While Vizenor's trickster characters "luxuriate in the challenges posed in the modern world" as one reviewer notes (qtd. in Schwenger 166), Bitsui's coyote is the one who is tricked, and the forklift shapeshifts into what Goeman calls "the logics of containment", perpetuating the "too easy collapsing of land as property" (2). The poet describes a materialised version of Coyote, faced with real threats posed by dependencies on urban development.

Traffic is again used by Bitsui to describe a present-day colonial version of "the glittering world", which in the Diné creation story, recounted by Diné writer Irvin Morris, is the present world or fifth world, which the humans and animals accessed by climbing through a reed to escape a flood in the Fourth World, caused by Coyote (Morris 12). In the Glittering World, the "people lived in accordance with the daily cycles of the four changing colors of the sky", and to ensure more light, the sun and moon were also created. In his poem "The Northern Sun" in *Shapeshift*, Bitsui ironically reframes the story's significance: "The glittering world, this place

that we fly into where traffic lights play tag with / our eyes when we lay back singeing our faces with the light of passing freight trains” (18). Morris does the same mythological reframing in his book *From the Glittering World: A Navajo Story*, which combines traditional Diné narratives with contemporary settings: “At dusk and into night, thousands of headlights come on and fuse into long glittering strings that follow the rise and fall of the hills, skirting allotted lands and leaping over steep arroyos in steel bridges” (Morris 208). In Bitsui’s line, natural “glittering” light is replaced by blinding traffic and freight trains, the latter suggesting suicides on train tracks as well as the thousands of Navajo men who served as rail workers in the construction of the trans-continental network<sup>119</sup>.

Coyote resurfaces in *Shapeshift* in the line, “Coyote scattering headlights instead of stars” (6); in the Diné creation story, First Man was arranging the stars—pieces of mica—to light up the night sky, until Coyote impatiently scoops them up and scatters them across space (Zolbrod 93). Here, the poet is the trickster, replacing headlights with stars and reframing this myth in our present reality, where overwhelming urban light pollution usurps the luminescence of the cosmos. Adeline Johns-Putra reminds us that Hiltner, in his parallels with 17<sup>th</sup>-century London coal burning, warns that “it is easier at both rhetorical and emotional levels to blame industry than to acknowledge the public’s fuel consumption to be largely responsible for the problem, particularly given the difficulties in reducing this consumption” (Johns-Putra 195). Indeed, Bitsui seems to be pointing again to this very lack of attention to urbanised, normalised livelihoods whose implicant reliance on extraction is detrimental. Whereas Barthes’s *Mythologies* warns

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<sup>119</sup> For more about Navajo rail workers, refer to the 2017 documentary *Metal Road* by Diné filmmaker Sarah Del Seronde.

against the dominant myths of consumerism, Bitsui's shapeshifting actualises traditional Diné myths, which become forklifted and hijacked by the normalised narrative of industrial progress.

"A Third Place": Linguistic Liberation

*Shapeshift*, *Flood Song* and *Dissolve* are all distinct from one another in form, aesthetics and focus, yet they share a continuous movement driven by Diné narratives, phrases, moving surroundings—dissolving or overflowing, extractivist or harmonising—as well as interior mindscapes, only some of which have been mentioned here, and other nuances which likely go unnoticed by a non-Diné reader like myself. I would finally like to underscore Bitsui's visionary impulse of flight and agency in distinction from his disquieting scenes of fragmentation. Vizenor's transmotion involves yet another aesthetic: it works on evading "the tiresome politics of native victimry" with "visionary characters in magical flight, native scenes in the bright colors of survivance [...]" (*Shrouds* 5). Bitsui parallels this vision by offering a type of gateway, a "place of exiting", "a place of moving out" (Bitsui, "The Song Within")<sup>120</sup>, or "a way out" (*Dissolve* 29), with a lyricism that doesn't descend into what has been called Anthropocene Anxiety Disorder<sup>121</sup>. Yet, Vizenor's use of the word "magical" risks a misinterpretation towards an essentialised shamanism, which is why Bitsui notes that the "English language fails to describe work that is doing something in between" (Bitsui, PI):

It's not ceremony; I wouldn't call my work ceremonial, I wouldn't call my poems ritual, because there's already a lineage, and there's already a dimension for that. And I can't call it spiritual because I already have that here, or it's all around us [...]. Or sometimes I try to say to my audience,

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<sup>120</sup> In a talk given at Harvard Divinity school, Bitsui describes reconfiguring the anglicised word "Chinati", as in the Chinati Foundation which he passed while driving through Marfa, Texas, into a Diné phrase which means a "place of exiting", "a place of moving out" (Bitsui, "The Song Within").

<sup>121</sup> Allison Cobb defines this as "a feeling of hopelessness about the future from within the Anthropocene, and a sense of helplessness about doing anything to change the trajectory of the era" (Russo et al. 21).

we're going to be in a kind of dream together and this is the script in a way. But that's kind of cheesy too right? (Laughs) [...] I guess there's that resistance in *Dissolve*, because everything is projected on native people, from the outside. Everything has to be spiritual or all of these other tropes, so [...] how do I share, but also maintain some kind of control, or some kind of agency? How do I offer this but not fall into these trappings where I'm dehumanised, objectified? (Bitsui, PI).

In Bitsui's poem "Caravan", the first and only titled poem in *Dissolve*, signals that the collection is pushing against non-native tropes that define indigenous poetry. In "Caravan"—which is presented as an experimental narrative that destabilises the nonlinear, imagistic flux and wane in *Flood Song* and most of *Dissolve*—an inebriated native man is freezing on an Albuquerque street, and this poem's narration Bitsui reminds us that while Albuquerque and other border cities and towns are "Native land", they can be brutal for native people: "you see so many of our relatives out on the streets. The violence here against Native people is really prevalent and painful", he says (Harjo, "Sherwin Bitsui"). As Jennifer Nez Denetdale asserts, border towns are in fact settler towns, established to exploit Native lands to the advantage of settlers. These towns encircling the colonial reservation frontiers were originally established for mining resources; in the cases of Gallup and Winslow, coal seduced more settlers and traders along the Santa Fe railroad where saloons served intruding ranchers and "bootlegged liquor to the Natives" (Denetdale, "Colonial"). A culmination of land grabbing, pollutive mining, and the introduction of liquor to Native peoples comprises the constellation of continued exploitative practices, poor infrastructure, high poverty rates, and violence against Native people: "the Coalition for Navajo Liberation and Indians Against Exploitation denounced the widespread discrimination where townspeople and tourists only wanted to view Indians who danced and made jewelry, while ignoring the numbers of liquor stores and bars that keep Indians perpetually inebriated on the

streets where they were beaten, murdered, and arrested at much higher rates than any other population in these spaces” (Denetdale, “Colonial”)<sup>122</sup>. This reality embodies Diné poet Jake Skeets’s “Drunktown”: “Men around here only touch when they fuck in a backseat / go for the foul with thirty seconds left / hug their son after high school graduation / open a keg / stab my uncle forty-seven times behind a liquor store” (“Drunktown” 352). Skeets’ lines recall the murder of Kee “Rabbit Thompson and Allison “Cowboy” Gorman by three teenagers in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2015, while the two victims slept in an empty lot. This crime triggered the formation of The Red Nation, a coalition co-founded by Melanie Yazzie, Nick Estes and Sam Gardipe, which denounces historical land theft and current settler-colonialism, violence against indigenous people and, as outlined in their publication “The Red Deal”, which calls for anti-capitalistic environmental justice movements and ecological policies that include and support indigenous knowledges and communities (Marley et al, “The Red Deal”). Border town violence is inseparable from the exploitative frontier projects established with the intention to “eliminate all life—water, bodies, subterranean elements, plants, or animals; in other words, all that Indigenous life is dependent upon—for the benefit of settlers” (Denetdale, “Colonial”). Even more, journalist Amy Linn was told by homeless advocates that “every year, people freeze to death in Gallup because they get intoxicated and sleep in fields and ditches” (Linn).

In Bitsui’s “Caravan”, the man’s body itself is mined: he is drunk and shivering in front of the Caravan pub, his turquoise bracelet has been “snatched for pawn, / by the same ghost who traded his jacket / for a robe of snow and ice”, and he is asking for “one more” drink. Natural non-human elements in this cityscape are condensed and fragmented in the body of this

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<sup>122</sup> 170 Native people were killed in Gallup, New Mexico between 2013-2015 (Denetdale “Colonial”).



character; a “shallow pond” in the man’s mouth is a stagnant embodiment of addiction, and his knees are “thorning against his chest” (4). The comfort of the narrator, however, helps the brother shapeshift from his drunken state to a more recognisable self: “he thaws back into the shape of *nihitsili*”, meaning “our younger brother” in Diné (4). The recaptured “shape” may indicate the active roles of “K’é”, or the family structure, which Bitsui says is “the web”; “everything follows that kind of symmetry” and “deep love. This is what we do. We sacrifice for other people, and we pray that things will be OK again” (Bitsui, PI). Thus, toxic extraction and fragmentation are contrasted with a dynamic agency: the italicised linguistic shift, or textual dynamism<sup>123</sup>, is accompanied by a somatic shift, the brother’s reshaping into this structure of care. The moment and gesture of “sacrifice”, to use Bitsui’s word—saving the young man from the violent, freezing street—is kinetically represented in the poem’s expression of kinship, and thus directly opposed to the federal government’s treatment of the Navajo Nation and Four Corners Area as a “sacrifice zone”, a trade-off for fracking and mining, and a violation of bodies and lands which have been treated as dispensable (Marley et al. 55)<sup>124</sup>.

After the narrator rescues the man, they drive away from the bar: “We steal away, / our wheels moan / through sleet and ash. / Death places second, third, / and fourth behind us” (4). The car’s progressive gear shifts accelerate their escape from the violence of this world and into another, recalling Bitsui’s line in *Flood Song*, “the reed we climb in from” (5), which could be an allusion to the reed that the Diné Holy People climbed through to reach the Fourth World (Levy

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<sup>123</sup> Angelino describes Merleau-Ponty’s observations of “figural dynamism” in painting (290).

<sup>124</sup> In the 1983 film *The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?*, the late renewable energy activist Harris Arthur, who also held positions in the Navajo Nation government, clearly outlines the implications of land and community sacrifice over consumer comforts: “As far as sacrificing a culture, sacrificing land, [...] that question should be posed to the end user [...] to people in California, Phoenix, Tucson, and I would be interested to find out if they’re willing to sacrifice me for their air conditioning” (*The Four Corners*, dir. McLeod).

49). In this poem, the car seems to replace the reed as a liberating mechanism, towards a somatic “third place” beyond the text, and beyond this racist, border-town violence.

Many images in Bitsui’s work, as I have highlighted, involve cars, headlights, roads and their interaction with movement of everyday life forces, but in this poem, the car is further complexified as a vessel towards safety. The narrator sends a text message—the last eight lines indented to resemble a mobile text—that he’s rescued “only a sliver of the man” whose turquoise bracelet was “snatched for pawn, / by the same ghost who traded his jacket / for a robe of snow and ice, / before inviting him /back into the Caravan / *for one more, just one more*” (original emphasis and spacing, 5). Bitsui reminds the reader of the bar’s name and the poem’s title, which conjures up the image of late 18th and 19<sup>th</sup>-century American settlers migrating west in caravans of covered wagons on trails such as the Sante Fe trail<sup>125</sup>. The ghosts of these settler-colonists are still at work; they left the man on the street, robbed him, then enticed him back into the bar for another drink—an allusion to the colonial introduction of alcoholic drinks, with a higher content and outside ceremonial purposes. In this reading, we can see that the capitalist myth that drove the caravans towards miles of presumed available property and territory to claim, is juxtaposed with “*nihitsil*” and a subtle allusion to the creation story. The reality of liberation is again juxtaposed: the ecological harm of cars and oil production are evident in this collection, yet the car provides a space for storytelling when travelling through the reservation: “The nearest town is 40 miles off the reservation. [...] So a lot of time is spent in a car, what do you do in a car? You tell stories”, the poet says. The story of sacrificing, protecting, and recovering the suffering brother in “Caravan” often prompts Bitsui’s native audience to

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<sup>125</sup> A map of the Sante Fe Trail can be found here: <https://www.nps.gov/safe/planyourvisit/directions.htm>.

approach him afterwards and say, ““that’s my uncle, that’s my brother, that’s my father”” (Bitsui, PI). Therefore, the car is an unlikely capsule of story and care, providing tenderness, humanity and kinship while unsettling the easy association—as in Konsmo’s critique of the purity narrative—of an unequivocal evil, despite colonial extraction, of the car itself, and rather funneling our attention to the violent associations of the “caravan”.

While Barthes believes tragedy induces a perverse pleasure in reading the text because although one knows the narrative’s ending, we are attached to the story nevertheless, Bitsui’s characters are fuelled by the desire to defy tragedy and change the poem’s expected outcome (Barthes, *Plaisir* 76)<sup>126</sup>. Rather, he drives us towards a space for relationality. Jeffrey Jermone Cohen asserts, “resignation to calamity is far less demanding than an embrace of the ethics of relationality that bind us to living creatures [...]. Despair is easy. Composing with hope requires work” (Cohen x). “Hope”, however, Diaz explains, carries a certain stagnancy and potential impossibility:

The word and practice of hope is a shape that remains within the structure of settler colonialism and colonialism, within what is America or the Americas, within what is Christian or white. What if I can find something beyond hope—a place, a space, a body, or a love that is real, instead of always having to find ways to catapult our imaginations toward a future in which we are waiting to be real? What if instead of hope there is always the next best thing? I feel like hope is something we wait on, and I am exhausted by waiting—on whiteness, on the state, on men with money. [...] Right now hope is not a word that can hold me or my desires. [...] I am wondering if I have the language and body that can be a part of what needs to happen before I get to that next place, the place that is beyond hope maybe. (Diaz, “Energy” 33)

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<sup>126</sup> In the original French of *Le plaisir du texte*, Barthes writes: “De toutes les lectures, c’est la lecture tragique qui est la plus perverse : je prends plaisir à m’entendre raconter une histoire dont je connais la fin : je sais et je ne sais pas, je fais vis-à-vis de moi-même comme si je ne savais pas : je sais bien qu’Œdipe sera démasqué, que Danton sera guillotiné, *mais tout de même...*” (author’s emphasis, 76).

Diaz avoids the delayed anticipation of “hope” by acting on the desire of the present through the body, which is more immediate than hope’s projective uncertainty. Bitsui, in turn, shows the immediate transition of the drunk brother being saved from the freezing, hostile streets, and the car’s actual—not imagined or hoped—deliverance towards safety and care. In fact, perhaps the intersection between Vizenor’s transmotion and Joy Harjo’s thought in reference to Bitsui’s work, that “if this world dissolves, because it is dissolving and always has been, another will emerge” (Harjo), is that the poem is the continuous moment—though typographically fixed—between dissolution and reemergence.

A final example of this “place of exiting” occurs in the end sequence of *Flood Song* as an act of “reimagining and re-practicing” relations, to quote Audra Simpson (Simpson, “The Sovereignty of Critique”). What begins with the precious drip of water (“tó”) in this book-length poem reappears as a cloud bursting open: “The cloud wanted to slip through the coal mines and unleash its horses [...] It wanted to crack open bulldozers [...] so that a new birth cry would awaken the people who had fallen asleep” (71). This linguistic deluge is an incantatory climax—“I sang, sang until the sun rose” (71)—which embraces cultural significance, so that no one “wandered the streets without / knowing their clans [...]” (71). According to Lee, clan affiliations are significant in the grounding of Diné identity; Lee cites Dr. AnCita Benally’s article asserting that teaching children to introduce themselves traditionally, with their clan affiliations, teaches “self-esteem, self-identity”, and cultural relationships (Lee, *Diné Identity* 42). As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson echoes, in the context of Anishinaabe introductions, after saying their clan names, where they live, and their own name, they acknowledge the lands they are visiting, and “invoke a political relationship, or a diplomatic relationship that lines my

actions with the ethics and the values of those indigenous nations that I'm visiting". This "ancient acknowledgement of the authority of their governing structures" initiates "an ongoing relationship based on the very best practices of both our nations", but also asserts good human and non-human intentions; that "I'm not going to steal your land, and colonize you, although I will certainly help you steal it back, and I will do my best while I'm here to do no harm" (Simpson, "Decolonial Love"). While the city eventually "drags its bridges behind it" and collapses "in a supermarket" (70-71), non-human life synergises in and out of the body again: "Everyone planted corn in their bellies and became sunlight washing down plateaus / with deer running out of them" (71). The urgency in this incantation harmonises with Aja Couchois Duncan's meditation on the Anishinaabemowin adverb *azhigwa*, indicating "now"; "now is not a time for grief or silence. The earth spits forth its seeds; new life germinates in even the narrowest crevices. The waters surface and rush" (Russo et al. 22). It incites physical boundaries to dissolve in a feelingful reassociation and restoration, while the presumed naturalness of colonial, neoliberal structures collapses. Countering the common narratives of eco-catastrophe, one of Bitsui's desires in *Flood Song* was, as he says, to make "my own song, because the song wasn't given to me in the same way" as it was growing up surrounded by familiar songs. While Bitsui's *Flood Song* decries the dehumanising injustices and ecological disruptions Diné people in particular experience, his final intent is not to compose an apocalyptic dirge. As Ortiz for instance writes: "Don't fret now. // Songs are useless / to exculpate sorrow. / That's not their intent anyway" (*From Sand Creek* 33). I recall here, regarding Bitsui's phrasing "given to me" above, the notion of reading a poem as something received and given, as a call and response or palindromic continuum; the song or poem can itself be not an absolute beginning but a response,

literally a “pledge back”, to another song that was once received—whether human or in some non-human form—and the pattern continues.

In his essay “Toxic Recognition”, Matt Hooley enlists the same sequence in *Flood Song* to explain that Bitsui’s “opposition to ecological harm” is not “narrowly environmentalist” (167) but aims to thwart what Hooley calls the “politics of enclosure”, in which settler colonial powers sanction what is harmful or not, and deem themselves the main actors of “reform” (147). Hooley therefore sees Bitsui’s poetry as “ideally positioned” (168) to advance the work of contemporary eco-poetics, whose priorities should be to “rethink the role of state power in environmentalism” and emphasise “dismantling empire” (167), to join forces with discourse privileging marginalised voices, and to reflect Moten and Harney’s term “the surround”: “any living or thinking outside the terms of harmful compliance” (168). His reading of Bitsui groups him with avant-garde poets—“including Santee Frazier, Joan Kane, Orlando White, Ofelia Zepeda, Layli Long Soldier, dg nanouk okpik, and others [...]”, whose work is “[...] characterized by an unsettling kinetic imagism that uses ecology as a theater for anticolonial invention” (147). While I agree that Bitsui suggests “the surround” of dismantling of state power, and the position of the “settler state and its citizens both as beings innocent of responsibility and as the primary agents of reform”, this reading narrowly demarcates aesthetically disparate poets together whose scope extends far beyond ecology and “anticolonial invention”, and overlooks Bitsui’s literary contributions in favour of how “contemporary eco-poetics” can “challenge the politics of recognition as it inflects the methods and goals of ecocriticism” (147). There is no doubt, as I have shown, that Bitsui, from his own experience, denounces ecological injustices fuelled by colonial othering, essentialisation, and most prominently, the profit of land extraction which has

caused detrimental health effects and ecological disruption for the Diné population, whose livelihoods have, as part of the trappings of colonial development, been dependent on these very systems. However, framing Bitsui's work as a flagbearer for what ecopoetics should probe neglects his poetic reaching towards a "third place", not simply as an anticolonial stance beyond environmentalism, but a physical gesture of language both in and beyond the text itself. Bitsui asserts:

Language fails in a sense. [...] In the Western context, you're coming into an institution, an academic institution and you're expecting literature, poetry. But the English language fails to describe work that is doing something in between. [...] How can you dissolve one's language, or the gravity of one's language? How can you do that in English? I don't know. Navajo is this continuum, and it's constantly adding new words, and then it chooses what to keep in. [...] How do you really come to it? How do I just create tone? How do I just create feeling in the space, so that people feel the deepness and heaviness of the moment? [...] Being native [...] we can't be vulnerable in a sense. The history is so heavy and everything that's happened is so dark, but we also have this energy and quest for beauty, beautifying things all the time. But how do we just own that? [...] I don't know if "own" is the right word but I wanted to present it, not in a defeatist way but in a human way. Just to make people feel again. To make them feel it. (Bitsui, PI)

Bitsui re-envisioned poetic expression as somatic agency to affirm this "third place"—the gesture of saving a relative, the song that incites a continuity of kinship and relation existing long before America's capitalist myths—declaring a non-institutionalised "quest" for beauty and desire, which might falsely be conceived as vulnerability, yet it is no less political or anti-colonial in the face of chemical toxicity, water mongering and the archeology of extraction. Furthermore, the poet notes the "humanness" of the Diné language which, during his upbringing, "just *was*" (Bitsui, PI); in other words, the purpose of his poetics is not directly to resist "apocalyptic and Edenic closures" (166) as Hooley suggests, but to reiterate ways Diné exists prior to and outside

of the influence of Western ideologies as a pre-enclosure language with its own complexities. Because English fails, the rush and urgency of this final sequence becomes a “tone” and gesture of “human intentionality” (Russo et al. 30) to be felt beyond the discourse or political rhetoric innovative poetics should or should not present in a given framework.

With these notions of ecological, ontological, and relational clan significance, Bitsui’s poem signals a vitality and self-identity so central that an entire city “drags its bridges” and “collapses”. How does this cultural context of clan naming, as discussed in Diaz’s naming of the Mojave endonym ‘*Aha Makav*, affect the *Flood Song*’s overall composition and musicality due to this climactic final scene? Bitsui’s sonority is the key to appreciating this orchestration; the overture of “tó”—the delicate, haunting drip of water, underscoring colonial-induced drought—evaporates throughout the collection as scenes of Diné orality, relationships to the land in the southwest, colonial control, urban cacophony, and life-threatening industrial sludge collide, until the molecules of the droplet gather in a storm cloud to clear the earth with rain in these last few pages. Sonoric minimalism accrues to a heightened kinetics of sound as cited above. Bitsui’s own song, in return, is gifted to the readers as a textual enactment of continued determination and thriving indigenous futurities, an alternative to the “Anthropocene anxiety”—“melancholy, anger, and resignation” in response to future environmental unease—which Nicole Merola highlights in Juliana Spahr’s work (Bladow and Ladino 11).

In Bitsui’s kinetic language and personal perception of place, non-human and human relationships are enmeshed with colonial, urban-driven extraction such as mining, water rerouting, toxicity, and the violence they induce. Hooley therefore suggests that Bitsui “thwarts the way American ecocriticism asks us to look at environmental health” (148). I have argued,



however, that Bitsui's verb-based iconicity and shapeshifting symbolism not only suggest the dismantling and "disarticulation of colonial power" (148) but gesture towards perception as expression, and community relations in which these celebratory and dissonant snapshots might resonate. Bitsui's chronotope is grounded in the present; "Poetry allows me to speak to the present as honestly and truthfully as I can", he confirms. "I think (in terms of ecology), we're not considering the present enough", Bitsui writes ("Considering"). In order to more critically consider the present, Bitsui creates a linguistic pull between a "flowing" inundation and a "stalling" density (Bitsui, PI) to express a place-based topophilia, often disrupted by the chiasmic relationship of industry ingesting nature and nature ingesting industry.

Nevertheless, as I have finally outlined, Bitsui continuously veers us towards a space for living, outside the "trappings" of dehumanisation. Bitsui seeks, like Diaz, a reality "beyond hope—a place, a space, a body, or a love that is real", instead of catapulting "our imaginations toward a future in which we are waiting to be real [...]" ("Energy" 33). Bitsui dissolves the anticipation of hope by textually enacting care and kinship associations—in "The Caravan", he overrides the "shape" of hope ("Energy" 33), with the "shape of *nihitsili*" (*Dissolve* 4). Likewise, his densely woven imagery acknowledges the bilateral movements of non-human life within us and outside of us, and, as an echo of this interrelationality, speaks to the ever-emerging present.

## Chapter Two: Layli Long Soldier's Somatic Transference

*"There is no word in the Lakota language which can be translated literally into the word 'justice'; nevertheless, there was the certain practice of it as evidenced in the phrase, Wowa un sila, 'A heart full of pity for all.'"*

-Chief Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*

### An Introduction to *WHEREAS*

Layli Long Soldier's praised debut collection of poetry, *WHEREAS*, was written in part as a reaction to the allusive S.J.Res.14, the 2009 Congressional Apology to Native Peoples of the United States—a resolution inserted into the National Defense Reauthorization act, a 1000-page tome. It was officially signed into law in 2010 by President Obama, about the same time that he reversed the U.S. decision against the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people<sup>127</sup>,

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<sup>127</sup> The United Nations states that "The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the General Assembly on Thursday, 13 September 2007, by a majority of 144 states in favour, 4 votes against (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States)". These four countries later reversed their decisions. For more information, see

accepting it on the condition that it was non-binding, which, as historian Nick Estes asserts, is why there is a non-binding aspect in the apology itself (Long Soldier, Radcliffe). This apology, which attempted to address centuries of physical and psychological colonial violence towards indigenous nations, was barely known to the wider public; among the few publications about its release, the *New York Times* only published an 8-line brief with the headline “A Symbolic Apology to Indians” in October 2009 (“A Symbolic”, *NYT*). Long Soldier’s second section of the collection, “Part II: Whereas”, counters the lofty, elusive language of the 2009 apology and its “non-delivery”, as Long Soldier calls it (“The Freedom”). Each section mirrors the document’s three legislative sections: twenty “Whereas Statements”, seven “Resolutions” and a two-part “Disclaimer”. Likewise, she mimics the apology’s semicolons at the end of each poem in “Part II: Whereas”, a formality within the resolution’s non-binding legalese, which she repurposes as a binding element to each of her personal statements. Each poem in this section also opens with the word “Whereas”, subverting the government’s indirect preamble and undermining its systematic rhetorical exploitation perpetuated since colonial treaties, here salvaged as a vehicle for unraveling the poet’s own virtues and personal truths. This “Whereas” section in her collection has been primarily discussed as a rebuttal to the elusive federal language which utterly fails to acknowledge the extent of colonisation—for instance, its euphemism that settlers “opened up a new chapter” for native populations, and insistence that “Native peoples” also “took innocent lives” (*WHEREAS* 74)—its apathetic conventions, and its “non-delivery” (“Long Soldier, “The Freedom”). Little attention, however, has been given to Long Soldier’s poems which translate her experience of motherhood and her visual representations throughout the

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<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>.

collection, in particular their kinetic qualities. I focus on her poems which approach somatic transference (for instance, from mother to daughter, from father to daughter, and from a family or community member to another), relationships with non-humans, including the Black Hills, and the her meditation on how the language of the apology manifests in the poet, physically and mentally. My argument is that these less frequently discussed poems in Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* introduce a reinvention of lyrical prose and shape poetry which I call thought-music—the poet's mode of accessing and translating her inner dialogue using inventive form, spatial dimensions, and punctuation—orchestrated by her interrogations on the kinetics of motherhood, community, and learning the Lakota language.

Thought-music is not to be confused with what composer Anthony Braxton, as quoted by Fred Moten, calls “language music”<sup>128</sup>—a breaking down of parts to deconstruct the possibilities of improvisation (Moten 133)—nor with David Antin's postmodernist “talk poems”<sup>129</sup>, or simply a rumination or “ratiocination”<sup>130</sup> (Bidart 22). It is rather a form of “necessary thought”, to use Bidart's terms, in which the poem is “the mind in action”, as well as what the mind resists (Bidart 22)<sup>131</sup>. I focus on how the poet translates her subjective somatic experience using form,

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<sup>128</sup> Moten describes Braxton's “language music” as a “structural planning”, “a kind of technical drawing that is that sound's and that sonic space's prefigurative condition”: “I began” Braxton says, “to break down phrase construction variables with regard to material properties, functional properties, language properties; to use this as a basis to create improvised music and then rechannel that into the compositional process” (Moten 133). While Long Soldier's poetry also imparts “self-analytic listening, the hermetic, audio-visual attunement to the shape and color of sound and its internal relations” (133), her process differs in that she orbits around the many facets of both hegemonic and poetic expressions through language and the body, from harmful to healing.

<sup>129</sup> Recorded at poetry readings in the early 1970s, during which Antin would “think out loud” in front of an audience without a prepared text, often a free discourse on the event itself with a smattering of literary critique. Antin's recordings were transcribed into “unpunctuated units of utterance—separated by spaces and without justified margins—that graphed the movement of his thinking”, yet the text is otherwise a “disavowal” for form (Fredman 2), unlike Long Soldier's poems, which formally graph thought in motion, as well as the transferred exchanges between bodies.

<sup>130</sup> The process of exact thinking, or a reasoned train of thought, definition from *Merriam-Webster*.

<sup>131</sup> Bidart notes that the practice of “confronting the dilemmas” is central to the force of his poems: “my poem must seem to embody not merely ‘thought,’ but necessary thought. And necessary thought (rather

lineation, punctuation, and spatial iconicity in relation to her “necessary thought” on the Lakota language. Her adherence to converting thought’s syntax and spontaneity to the page disrupts Walter Ong’s notion, cited by Vizenor, that writing, unlike speech, does not “well up out of the unconscious”; he believes for instance that “writing is governed by consciously contrived, articulable rules [...] Thought is nested in speech, not in texts [...] The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word [...]” (Vizenor, *The People* 8). However, while poetry is no doubt written to be spoken, I intend to show that Long Soldier breaks the “articulable rules” one often is aware of in writing, and nestles thought and the unconscious in the text; because of the connection to the entire body and physio-emotional associations of thought and speech, her mobile text evades the “thing-like repose” Ong defines. In doing so, she creates an intimacy which counters the lack of physical presence in the federal apology’s delivery, and thus its feigned sincerity.

In Long Soldier’s case, “necessary thought” or thought-music has been triggered by what James Wright calls a poetic occasion; both the federal “apology”—which itself evokes historical violence against the Lakota and Dakota nations—and her physical experiences as a Lakota woman, mother and citizen, which allows the text to be in “multiple musics” (*WHEREAS* 75). It is also grounded in her use of Lakota, around which her ruminations eddy. Her Lakota words interrogate her physical reactions, ontology, and personal values against the settled demarcations of the apology. I will also demonstrate that in these matrifocal poems, Long Soldier’s translation of thought is kinetic, both within her lyrical prose and beyond the text.

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than mere rumination, ratiocination) expresses or acknowledges what has resisted thought, what has forced or irritated it into being” (Bidart 22).

I have explored how Diaz and Bitsui's kinetic iconicity and translingualism are loci for confronting ecological injustices, as well as modes of pushing language beyond English expression, beyond the poem's textual presentation itself, and towards physical relationships. While Long Soldier's forms of movement in *WHEREAS* are less overtly inclined towards an ecocritical framework, I would like to briefly highlight some of the poet's other writing which is more directly anti-extractivist, to contextualise the volume under study. She introduces, for instance, a collection of poetry and photography published in *Orion Magazine*, called "Women and Standing Rock". The poems were read aloud by the authors at an event at the Whitney Museum, "Words for Water", on March 5, 2017, six weeks after former President Trump approved the construction of the DAPL and Keystone XL projects. Her introduction is grounded in the Diné proclamation "Tó éí íín'á!" and the Lakota phrase "Mni Wiconi", both translated as "Water is life", in support of the protestors against these extractivist projects<sup>132</sup>. Likewise, her sixth statement in the "Resolutions" section of *WHEREAS* addresses the mistreatment of the water protectors at Standing Rock, weaving two texts in a contrapuntal structure: the text on the left is a social media post by Oglala Lakota poet, activist and educator Mark Tilsen, from Pine Ridge, South Dakota on September 20th, 2016, and the text on the right are words from a personal interview with Waniya Locke, one of the four women who started the Standing Rock Protest on September 19th, 2016 (Dhillon 169). Long Soldier also read a piece directly addressing DAPL at the November 2016 "I Want a President" event in New York, during which

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<sup>132</sup> Long Soldier herself is Oglala Lakota, but she was a teacher at the Diné tribal college and lived on the Diné reservation. This Diné slogan has been a popular chant of resistance in response to Senate bill S.2109, also known as the Navajo-Hopi Little Colorado River Water Rights Settlement Act of 2012, which proposed that "Navajo and Hopi Nations would waive rights to the Little Colorado River in exchange for the Bureau of Reclamation piping clean drinking water into tribal homes" (Long Soldier, "Women at Standing Rock").

a selection of writers used artist Zoe Leonard's 1992 eponymous text as inspiration. In response to former President Obama addressing the native community as "brothers and sisters", yet failing to terminate the DAPL project, Long Soldier created a textual collage of social media posts by indigenous people in protest of the pipeline. She re-rendered the posts to question what the President might have done if his communal or biological family—not simply rhetorical "brothers and sisters"—had personally experienced the same concerns over water threats and ecological injustices that indigenous communities face.<sup>133</sup> The poet's condemnation of ecological injustices to the Lakota and Dakota people and land serve as a parallel conductor for the following analysis.

Long Soldier is also conscious that her truths don't encompass all Native peoples, or mothers for that matter, but that she writes what she knows. For example, in her introduction to Part II, she writes: "I am a citizen of the United States and an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, meaning I am a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation — and in this dual citizenship, I must work, I must eat, I must art, I must mother, I must friend, I must listen, I must observe, constantly I must live." (57). Relationships are not made of nouns but *verbs*; the verbal rendering of the roles "mother" and "friend" are not static but active, conveying a committed presence that must be continuously tended to and reimagined. Her use of "art", "friend" and "mother" as verbs is, as Métis scholar and petrographer Warren Cariou writes, "most appropriate to Indigenous ways of thinking, in which the entire world is always doing or relating rather than simply being" (Cariou 31). These verbs therefore contradict the statement in the federal apology, "Native

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<sup>133</sup> The printed version of Layli Long Soldier's speech at the "I Want A President" rally in New York City, November 6, 2016 includes Long Soldier's disclaimer: "This piece was originally intended for sharing verbally, in the moment, and as a one-time-only, from-the-heart offering. It is here, now, in written form. Yet my hope is that it can be read as if being heard. Understood by being felt" (Long Soldier, "The Presidential").

Peoples are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among those are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, as these rights are, Long Soldier writes, “abstractions” which “rarely serve a poem” and terms that are “best not to engage” with (70). In fact, she also uses verbs to point out that the document’s language is based on fixed conditions of otherness, which cannot be adopted as a language of sincerity: “[...] how do I *language* a collision arrived at through separation? [...] I cannot // *syntax* or *poem* the Creator nor differentiate one Creator from another Creator” (my emphasis, 70). Thus, her visual representations of her own verbal responsibilities bridge the distance between text and reader, a distance which the federal apology so carefully maintains. Likewise, these verbal roles listed above counter those previously enforced on native women in boarding schools, such as “cook roast beef”, “eat white bread” and “start a family not an education”, as Esther Belin writes in her poem “Euro-American Womanhood” (Belin, *From the Belly* 20). Long Soldier’s verbs above—“I must mother, I must friend”—are starting points for exploring the poet’s thought-music and kinetic relationships between the body and language. Thus, Long Soldier’s transference also relies on the verbal velocity of both English and Lakota; she learns Lakota not in intellectual isolation, but by actively reaching towards family and community—asserting that sincere language can be read physically— an engagement that the apology failed to see through.

In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss Long Soldier’s spatial dynamics, lineation, punctuation use or lack of punctuation, techniques which navigate her thoughts on the kinetics of motherhood. I give particular attention to her thirteenth “Whereas” poem, following the poet’s deliberation about learning Lakota and transferring it to her daughter<sup>134</sup>. I argue that

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<sup>134</sup> I use the term thirteenth “Whereas” poem or statement to indicate its order of appearance in this section, as the poems are untitled.



her thought-music typographically guides us through the significance of body language over statistical language, and the language of victimisation, which finally counters her citation in the poem regarding Derrida's chain of signifiers. I also analyse the intricacies of her punctuation or lack of punctuation in regards to maternal transference, for instance, in the experience of a miscarriage. I move on to discuss her shape poems, or embodied poems as previously mentioned, representing an eye, a pregnant belly, and the diamond-shaped quilt poems in her "Obligations" series. I accompany this analysis with close readings of sets of shape poems which do not directly centre around the kinetics of motherhood, focusing on two poems in her five-part sequence "Ĥe Sápa" and her poem in the shape of a hammer in the section "Resolutions". Drawing on Arthur Sze's and Diné poet Orlando White's understanding of charged white space and Leanne Simpson's "positive mirroring", I argue that these latter shape poems engage in a form of "visual sovereignty", to use Raheja's term, and kinetic complexity far beyond implying, as Alberts writes in a review, the "*destruction* of Indigenous cultures through the emptiness between the lines" (my emphasis, Alberts 133). Finally, I examine Long Soldier's final section of the collection, the "Disclaimer", which reverses the apology's tautological protection, and assembles the theme of grasses, which correlate with Long Soldier's telling of Andrew Myrick's statement towards the Dakota, "Let them eat grass", another poetic "occasion" of the collection. She disclaims the federal disclaimer, and breaks its structure with her polychronological allusion, "grassesgrassesgrasses".

### Expressions of Motherhood: Punctuation and Textual Space

Long Soldier's language throughout the collection is charged with physical exchanges and transmissions involving her daughter, and her reflections on the act of bearing, whether a

child or a poem itself. Firstly, beginning with Long Soldier's thirteenth "Whereas" poem in the second section of her collection, I will discuss how her lack of punctuation, particularly the comma, is replaced by using either white space, the word "comma" itself, or omitted altogether. This technique brings into focus the cyclical and physical nature of parenting, and gestures towards sincerity, as well as loss and struggle. To understand how the physical manifestations of an earnest apology reveal themselves, I will first refer to her first "Whereas" poem, in which she makes a claim for physicality as a conductor of an apology's sincerity:

WHEREAS when offered an apology I watch each movement the shoulders  
high or folding, tilt of the head both eyes down or straight through  
me, I listen for cracks in knuckles or in the word choice, what is it  
that I want? To feel and mind you I feel from the senses—I read  
each muscle, I ask the strength of the gesture to move like a poem. (61)

The language of a sincere apology has a physical reverberation<sup>135</sup>; it involves a somatic shift—"the shoulders / high or folding, tilt of the head both eyes down or straight through me." The lack of punctuation in "I watch each movement the shoulders / high or folding" and between "head" and "both" exemplifies Long Soldier's thought-music and inner perception; the shifts in the body are captured separately, yet, unbarred by punctuation, they are streamlined and simultaneous, thus reflecting the interpretive gaze of the eye and mind. Long Soldier's unpunctuated cadence energises words to extend beyond expected constraints, making the poem itself, as Ortiz suggests, a form of perception ("Song" 36). This visceral gesture of the apology "moves like a poem", through which she can "read every muscle", freeing the strictures of prose and making textual movement and physical movement events to be "read".

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<sup>135</sup> I point here simply to the coincidence of "verb" in the word "reverberation", whose etymology in fact is from the Latin *verberare*, meaning "to whip, beat, or lash," which is related to the noun *verber*, meaning "rod, lash, whip", from *Merriam Webster Online*.

In her thirteenth “Whereas” poem—which takes place at a ceremony for the first Diné poet laureate, Luci Tapahonso—Long Soldier dissects, with a self-dialectical intimacy, her responsibility as a mother in her native community. The poem begins with an interrogation, ushering a sense of maternal responsibility to transfer Lakota traditions and language to her daughter, although her own knowledge feels inadequate: “Whereas her birth signaled the responsibility as a mother to teach what is to be Lakota, / therein the question; what did I know about being Lakota?” (75). The question parallels what German composer Johannes Mattheson calls the “propositio” in music, a phrase briefly containing the theme or goal of an oratorio (Cameron 38), or what poet James Wright referred to as a poetic “occasion”. Wright elucidates on a few examples of traditional occasions, such as the modern *ars poeticas*, which contextualise the stance from which the music of the poem unravels. One of such dramatic conventions is in Irish poetry, in which “the poem itself is a response to an inquiry”, typically an imagined interrogation prior to the poet’s lyric response; “What are you doing in this bar?”, for instance. The question evoked in Long Soldier’s poem suggests that there are two simultaneous occasions: the larger occasion of the unpublicised issuing of the apology, and the more personal occasion, the reflection on being a mother, during a celebration for Tapahonso. The attention she draws to these occasions allows for “listeners of any kind to accept some of the music” of the poem, not only its “sound effects” but its context (Wright 45), which drives her lyric rumination on somatic transference to the poet’s daughter:

[...]

Today she  
stood sunlight on her shoulders lean and straight to share a song in Diné, her father’s lan-  
guage. To sing she motions simultaneously with her hands I watch her *be* in multiple  
musics. At a ceremony

to honor the Diné Nation's first poet laureate, a speaker explains that each People has been given their own language to reach with. I understand reach as active, a motion. (75)

Her line break on the word “ceremony” stresses the “occasion”, or the “event” as Simon Ortiz writes<sup>136</sup>, which invokes her struggle to respond to the federal apology through her mother-daughter relationship in a Lakota context. While Tapahonso's own maternal poems<sup>137</sup> confidently assert the matrifocal transference of Navajo “cultural formation”, Long Soldier hesitates (Blaeser, “Cannons” 249). Her daughter, immersed in the songs of different languages, can “be in multiple musics”, a way of “becoming”, which, as Diaz writes of “*Inyech 'Aha Mavakch ithuum*”, is the result of expressing through one's language one's pre-verbal identity (*Postcolonial* 46). Also, by omitting punctuation—for instance between “stood” and “sunlight”, “hands” and “I”—Long Soldier conducts the line into a free-flowing adagio that slightly broadens without slowing down, a “flexibility or athleticism that moves readers subtly out of their accustomed realities”, to use Cariou's words (Cariou 36). Simon Ortiz puts this experimental use of English in context: poets use “these (colonial) languages on their own terms”, because “it is entirely possible for a people to retain and maintain their lives through the use of any language” (“Towards a National” 10). However, despite statistics that “native languages are dying”, as Long Soldier writes in the poem, she follows Tapahonso's notion that language is a form of reaching; it is “active, a motion” (75). She rocks her daughter back and forth, saying *iyontanchilah michuwintku*, meaning “I think the most of you daughter”, or “I love

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<sup>136</sup> In his essay “Song/Poetry, and Language: Expression and Perception”, Ortiz writes: “A song is made substantial by its context—that is its reality, both that which is there and what is brought about by the song. [...] The context of a song can be anything, or can focus through a specific event or act, but it includes all things” (“Song”, 37-38)

<sup>137</sup> See for instance the poems “A Breeze Swept Through”, “seasonal Woman” and “Yes, It Was My Grandmother” in her collection *A Breeze Swept Through* and “Blue Horses Rush In” originally pushed in *Sáanii Dahataal/The Women Are Singing*.

you, daughter”, although the translation is not provided<sup>138</sup>. As we have seen in Diaz and Bitsui’s Mojave and Diné phrases respectively, omitting the English translation often represents untranslatability or a suspension of ambiguity, or as Dowling writes, language as “beyond the grasp of a pluralism controlled and defined by settlers” (Dowling 124)<sup>139</sup>. Harjo also explains the act of omission: “What do you put in a poem? What do you leave out? [...] And what can a poem hold? Are some things too heavy for a poem to hold? Maybe some things are not supposed to be put in English words at all” (Harjo, “Beyond Language”). Long Soldier’s use of Lakota, “*iyotanchilah michuwintku*”, coupled with the typographical and physical “rocking” of her thought-music, therefore allows for an “opening up” in its simultaneous kinetics. Long Soldier writes: “I can allow the reader to follow, to walk with me, as far as I can go. And if there is no answer or resolution, that in itself, can be the beauty of a poem, right? It is what we might call an opening up, rather than shutting down or closure to a piece” (Sernaker, “Five”). This linguistic “opening up” is in contrast with the impermeable closure of the congressional apology, with its defensive disclaimer, postcolonial verbosity and restricted syntagma.

Echoing this description of physical rocking is Long Soldier’s minimal punctuation and dramatic line jumps, which recreate not only her rocking back and forth, but her mental vacillation:

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<sup>138</sup> Although the poet does not provide a translation, according to a Lakota/English dictionary edited by Buechel and Manhart, *iyotan* is the suffix translated as “most” (Buechel xx), while David Little Elk’s song called “Iyotan Cilak’un” is translated as “you’re the only one for me” (Little Elk). *Iyotan cila kun* has also been translated as “I think the most of you” (Young Bear 88) or a simplified “I love you” (Ager), while *mičhúŋwintku* (Lak’ótiyapi Forum) or *cunwitku*, means “daughter” in the Buechel’s Lakota Dictionary (Buechel 457).

<sup>139</sup> Long Soldier recounts, for instance, that a group of Maori lawyers were able to prove there was no direct translation for the word “sovereignty” in their culture, for example, testifying against the definition used in a treaty (Long Soldier, Radcliffe). This could be said for “*iyotanchilah michuwintku*”, a phrase whose embodied animation may solemnise more than a gloss in English, which, as poet Linda Hogan states, cannot fully “touch the depths of our passion, of our pain” (Jensen 122).

[...] I listen as I reach my eyes into my hands, my hands onto my lap, my lap as the quiet page I hold my daughter in. I rock her back, forward, to the rise of the other conversations

about mother tongues versus foster languages, belonging (original spacing, 75).

As if learning a language as a child, the poet uses her body—"I rock her back, forward"—to converse physically. Her metaphor of her lap as a quiet page offers her own body as a place for the poem to exist in a three-dimensional, extra-textual form where language is felt: her eyes become hands, which become her lap, which becomes a page to hold her daughter. The poem also textually transitions in a dramatic line jump, reflecting the body's rocking movement; the same physical gesture Long Soldier makes above from eyes, hands, lap, and finally, the page, a kinetic supertext. As Joy Harjo said in an interview with Long Soldier, "Poetry is the closest step to beyond language, beyond the words. You absolutely need the words, but you employ language in poetry in a way that's kinetic, spiritual, and sensual" (Harjo, "Beyond Language"). Likewise, Long Soldier's abrupt stanza break after "the rise of other conversations" queues the poet's own reflections on "mother tongues versus foster languages, belonging" (75), a task which, as Frank Bidart writes, requires "writing in lines", not sentences or paragraphs, as the voice in one's head does not translate into "metrical or rhymed structures" (Bidart 12). This deliberate gesture in translating one's meditation on language itself contrasts Fiona Sampson's category of "a kind of automatic writing" in 21st century experimental poetry which, according to Sampson, "runs through a series of grammatical tasks or takes up space on the page", avoiding "the possibility that it might in itself create readerly experience, evoke insight, give pleasure or even argue a case" (Kennedy 20). Long Soldier's line breaks don't simply perform "grammatical tasks" but rather convert the intimacy of internal dialectics and the body's communication into textual

movement, which is not “automatic” but somatic. She suggests “an ongoing, aleatory arrivance”, in Moten’s words (Moten 132), a rocking movement as an echo of mothers preceding her, and which will continue after her. I argue that this confirms, as Barthes suggests, that writing is not necessarily the prolongation of thought, but that the two are inseparable; “we always think with language, we think when speaking and we speak when thinking” (Barthes, “Radioscopie”)<sup>140</sup>. Long Soldier typographically, grammatically and syntactically formulates this parallel, translating the simultaneity of “mother tongues” and motherhood in particular, an antipodal process to the grammatical containment and self-proclaimed infallibility of the federal apology.

The mother-daughter relationship is further developed in this poem with Long Soldier’s reference to post-structuralist Jacques Derrida, who deconstructs his own mother’s improbable language after her stroke, as recounted in Geoffrey Bennington’s book *Jacques Derrida*. Derrida asks his mother if she feels any pain, to which his mother responds, as quoted by Long Soldier in her thirteenth “Whereas” poem, “‘I feel a pain in my mother’, as though she were speaking for me, both in my direction and in my place” (75). Derrida’s mother “spoke in his place for his pain and as herself for her own, did this one-and-the-same”, Long Soldier elaborates, illustrating the maternal bond starting from prenatal development. And yet, the poet questions Derrida’s famous respelling of “différance” as “*différance*”, only seen graphically in the signifier, indicating that the meaning must occur in relation to what something is *not*; meaning thus differs and is deferred. The definition of “mother”, for instance, is postponed by a chain of signifiers, and is never semantically complete or fixed. Long Soldier’s thought-music challenges this; her own linguistic analysis allows her to “connect the dots” (75) and arrive at the “linguistic impossibility

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<sup>140</sup> Barthes comment in the original French: “[...] Non seulement le prolongement, mais peut-être même il ne sont pas séparables ... On pense toujours avec du langage, qu’on pense en parlant qu’on parle en pensant [...]” (“Radioscopie”).

of identity” (75), the latter word derived from “idem”, meaning the same<sup>141</sup>. However, if identity involves sameness, Long Soldier questions, “to whom, to what, are we the same?” (75). Long Soldier suggests that the present and historical binaries enforced by the federal government to essentialise the native “other” bear the complex realities behind “identity”. The apology states, for example: “Whereas Native Peoples are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (S.J. RES.14). Long Soldier points out that abstractions such as “Native Peoples” and “their Creator” “rarely serve a poem” (70); they purport democratic ideals despite colonial othering and broadstroke multiculturalism. Even more, the statement separates “*the* Creator vs. *their* Creator”, making a “differentiation” as Long Soldier writes (70) of us vs. them, emblematic of Barthes’s third element of metalanguage: identifying the essentialised “other” as “a pure object” (*Mythologies* 153). Long Soldier rebuts this binary with—as Diaz and Bitsui—anthimeria: “how do I / language a collision arrived at through separation?” and again, “I cannot // syntax or poem the Creator nor differentiate one Creator from another Creator, much less. That is, mine from theirs, theirs from ours, or why a Creator-split [...]” (70). Thus, she initially suggests that Derrida’s *différance* or deferral feels valid: “As if any of us can be identical ever. To whom, to what? Perhaps to Not”, Long Soldier writes (75). Her hypophora<sup>142</sup> here, an echo of her initial question, provides a subjective system of analytical checks, in order to come to her own conclusion:

[...] *iyotanchilah michuwintku*. True, I’m never sure how to write our language on the page correctly, the written takes many forms

yet I know she understands through our motion. Rocking in this country of so many languages where national surveys assert that Native languages are dying. Child-speakers and elder-teachers dwindle, this is public information. But her father and I don’t teach in statistics, in

<sup>141</sup> Definition from <https://latin-dictionary.net/search/latin/idem>.

<sup>142</sup> A figure of speech where the speaker raises a question and then answers it. Definition from *Collins Dictionary*: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/submission/16851/hypophora>.



this dying I mean. Whereas speaking, itself, is defiance—the closest I can come to *différance*.  
(75)<sup>143</sup>

Firstly, Long Soldier’s reminder that the “written takes many forms” addresses not only the various Latinised transcriptions of Lakota<sup>144</sup>, but recalls what the federal government attempts to rhetorically obfuscate in the written apology. Its effort to downplay colonial erasure and trauma exemplifies the element of Barthes’s fourth rhetorical strategy of myth, that which “deprives the object of which it speaks of all History” (Barthes 152). The evaporation of history—as Bitsui wrote a “gray amnesia” (*Dissolve* 48) or “dog-eared amnesia” (26)—is made to seem natural from the onset; the apology avoids the word “genocide” and replaces it with “conflict”, for instance (S. J. RES. 14, 2-4). “The written takes many forms” therefore simultaneously suggests that the poet’s visceral reaction to the apology is because of its written legalese and inaction: she is “crouched” in the apology’s insensitive footnotes, and “blazing” (61) in its mechanical title, “S. J. RES. 14”.

Secondly, in response, Long Soldier provides a subjective thought-music—typographical leaps, fluctuations, and unpunctuated orchestration—which comes to the fore at her translingual shift, cited above. “*Iyontanchilah michuwintku*” is a trigger which “clicks the gears of the poem into place” (53) Long Soldier writes in her poem “38”, towards her existential revelation<sup>145</sup>: the

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<sup>143</sup> The indentation format has been adjusted to maintain the poet’s line breaks.

<sup>144</sup> The earliest transcriptions of Dakota—a language “homogenous” with Lakota and has two dialects, “Santee-Sisseton and Yankton-Yanktonai” (“Rising Voices”)—in Latin script were made by missionaries, for instance Stephen Riggs, John Williamson, and Samuel and Gideon Pond. Ella Deloria, of both Dakota and European ancestry, also helped translate and transcribe the Lakota language (Taylor, *Remember This!* 12). The *Oceti Sakowin Oyate* (“People of Seven Council Fires”, often known by the erroneous French exonym, “Sioux”), “include the Lakota-, Dakota-, and Nakota-speaking people” (Estes, “Fighting” 121). However, Jan Ullrich’s 2008 study of these linguistic separations argues that the group “*Ihánkthunwan-Ihánkthunwan* (Yankton-Yanktonai or Western Dakota)” have been incorrectly called “Nakota”, and that the “Nakota” language of the Assiniboine and Stoney people (the latter’s reservations in Alberta and in Saskatchewan) is more distinct from Lakota and Dakota (Ullrich 2).

<sup>145</sup> The poet’s illuminatory ending recalls poet and activist Susan Harjo’s stance on American colonialism of indigenous populations: “When you people came here, it was like you threw a blanket over our heads.

questioning of *différance*. Its dynamic association with the poet's rocking provides a shape, a "moment of grace" as Phillis Levin says, of the poem's "small journey" in which a change is imminent. In this case, the poet's initial "amorphousness" of ideas takes on a figure towards its realisation ("The Sonnet", *In Our Time*). Unlike the federal apology's mechanical "Whereas" statements and rhetorical argumentation<sup>146</sup>, Long Soldier, in her ability to "be in multiple musics" as she describes her daughter, undertakes a typographic journey from her subjective thought-music as a Lakota mother.

Moreover, opposed to the "abject space" of the settler state's geographical boundaries as Mishuana Goeman explains (Goeman, *Mark* 87), Long Soldier's process of translanguaging allows for imaginative geographies such as the physical connection beyond the page that "create the material consequences of everyday existence for Native people, even while the historical onslaught of legislation continues to rip that grounding out from under them" (87). New geographies—literal and figurative—"scrutinize the impact of spatial policies in our cognitive mapping of Native lands and bodies", against the "statistics" that Native languages are dying, as Long Soldier writes above. Claire Colebrook was told by social scientist Kenneth Prewitt that a set of statistics comes to evoke "an English word", denoting "a species of translation". "The aura of the word" given to these sets of numbers is telling of whether or not there was "progress" (Colebrook 40). Statistics about native languages are branded with the word "dying", as Long

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we've been in darkness all these years, and only now are we starting to lift it up and see who we are" (Jensen 125).

<sup>146</sup> As Quintilian says of the five stages of oration in the art of rhetoric, which dates earlier than the fifth century BCE, and originally associated with the judicial system: "[...] For not only what we say and how we say it is of importance, but also the circumstances under which we say it. [...] But a delivery, which is rendered unbecoming either by voice or gesture, spoils everything and almost entirely destroys the effect of what is said. Delivery therefore must be assigned the fifth place" (Quintilian, "The 'Institutione Oratoria'" 383, qtd in Cameron, "Rhetoric" 35). Long Soldier's poem responds to the non-delivery of the unvoiced, ungestured federal apology.

Soldier writes above, giving them the debilitated aura of decline rather than progress. Indeed, insistence on dying cultures and languages also falls into one of Cook-Lynn’s traits of “anti-Indianism”, “that which treats Indians and their tribes as though they don’t exist, the sentiment suggests that Indian nationhood (i.e. tribalism) should be disavowed and devalued” (Cook-Lynn x). The word, however, doesn’t apply to the poet’s efforts, reflections, and reaching that this poem encapsulates. In this case, Long Soldier’s thought-music serves as an anti-statistic and ante-statistic; the words refer to intimate, actual, somatic relationships, rather than an abstract set of numerical approximations. Even more, because the apology concerns her and her family, her response has taken “numbered hours” (76), while the federal government was less invested in their short, unrepresented, evasive statement; Amiri Baraka rightly points out that the legal terms of our “realities”, which often “belong to governments”, are “quickly stitched together to make formal statutes” (Baraka 423). Likewise, statistics are quickly digested by the general public, while a willingness to invest one’s full attention and time in a poem requires energy that many might shirk.

In the last line, Long Soldier inserts a blank space between words, in place of punctuation, another technique seen throughout the “Whereas” section:

These hours alone to think, without. My hope: my daughter understands wholeness for  
 what it is, not for what it’s not, all of it                                the pieces; (76)

Firstly, the space between “all of it” and “the pieces” is again a gesture in place of a punctuation; it reminds us that, as Diaz explains in her attempt to translate not simply words but *belief*, the text is only the beginning of expression. Punctuation, Long Soldier says, is “ultimately, to score your work, almost like musical notation. It indicates breath. It indicates rest, pause, and so forth”

(Long Soldier, *Brooklyn Magazine*), which parallels Adorno's statement, "There is no element in which language resembles music more than in the punctuation marks" ("Punctuation Marks" 300). These notations are similar to our neural processes; our thoughts contain their own orchestral score of run-on ideas, long pauses, and dissonant thoughts which ultimately reach towards our physical gestures. For instance, her question "What did I know of our language but pieces?" begins with an expected question mark. But she continues, "Would I teach her pieces." (75). Her period here at the end of the second question is not only unconventional, it has a similar function to that of a fermata over a bar in music; a decisive halt succeeding the staccato pulse of the phrase, in contrast with the previous question's dactylic rhythm.

Secondly, Long Soldier's understanding that "native" is not defined by what it is *not*, its "*différance*", but by everything it *is*, creates an "uncontainable, sassy and strong" (Goeman *Mark* 103) counter-geography in contrast to the "imposed spatial ideologies" of statistical or political maps, which, as Belin writes, involve "sets of choices, *omissions*, uncertainties, and intentions" that are "obscured within" the mapping of the "body polity and nation-state" (my emphasis, qtd in Goeman, *Mark* 88). Likewise, Long Soldier's emphasis of this negation reflects Linda Quiquix's study of imposed geographic and ontological binaries: "Americans define themselves against what they are not: the enslaved, those whose lives are shaped by an external force; those outside of civil society; those who cannot own property because they are property; those who are denied consent". This negation leads to her assertion that "the modern world itself was only able to invent Europe through the invention of non-Europe" (Quiquix, "Reparations"). Long Soldier thus distills "wholeness"—which is both "all of it", the

manifestations of colonial history as well as relational identity, and “the pieces”, each person doing their part—against these categorical negations<sup>147</sup>.

Finally, Long Soldier’s message imparted to her daughter is born in this gap or silence, between “all of it                    the pieces”, an intention that must be *shown*; as Wittgenstein notes in his familiar adage, “What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein 3). The separation appears to put the words in dissonance with each other, yet in contrast, both elements find themselves dependent on one another: being a part (*hanǰé*) of a community is “still our piece to everything” (64). Similar to the abrupt spaces in the poem’s rocking enjambment, this gap echoes the poet’s rocking movement, providing a space for the reader to pendulum between both realities. It also denotes a break in thought, which Long Soldier renders visible on the page, as this spatial geography is visible in our actions and relations. Rather than separate part and whole, the gap unites them, or puts one in balance with the other. As Linda Hogan says, “silence is the source, that place where everything comes from. In that space, you know everything is connected [...]. In that place it is possible for people to have a change of heart, a change of thinking, a change in their way of being and living in the world” (Jensen 123). Therefore, this final shift goes beyond the negation of Derrida’s *différance*: as Laurent Dubreuil borrows Da Vinci’s statement on painting—that poetry is a *cosa mentale*—“the mental experience of poetic speech events relies on noetic extension”, the mental activity of understanding what is real or true. In other words, “poetry changes our minds” (Dubreuil 65). This gap indicates that shift: both the poet and her daughter’s

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<sup>147</sup> In her fourth “Whereas” poem, Long Soldier elaborates on the notion of wholeness as being a part, “hanǰé”: “I walk out remembering that for millennia we have called ourselves Lakota meaning friend or ally. This relationship to the other. Some but not all, still our piece to everything” (64). Her Lakota identity, its endonym meaning “ally”, is part, “but not all” of her present existence; the meaning of Lakota implies “we are a part of a greater whole” (Harvard Radcliffe), extending beyond human communities.

listening as a form of communication and understanding, the poem as an alternative perception of “wholeness”: a shift in tension from not knowing Lakota to learning together—the word “Lakota” means “friend” and “ally” (Long Soldier, Radcliffe)—and embracing all the parts that they are. The poet’s *physical* language—her rocking and the white space which textually reflects it—imparts this complex wholeness to her daughter. Indeed as Ortiz says, “all of these items (context, meaning, purpose)” within a poem function “not in their separate parts but as a whole” (Ortiz, “Song” 39). Even more, Lakota flute player David Nigteagle said, “My grandfather taught me to listen to what people say—analyse, weigh it, and think about it”. White anglophones however, according to Nigteagle, “keep talking, never breathe all the way” (Foy 111). The gap’s silence might remind one of a Lakota intention of pausing or breathing to weigh words, in this case, a form of “reaching”.

This active engagement and weighing of language shows that both “all of it” and “the pieces” represent a contrast to “m-othering”, the crippling alienation of motherhood in postcolonial societies, according to Katrak (212). On the contrary, this gap reflects what Orlando White calls “functional white”: the unexpected breach in the line offers a non-punctuated visual silence for this transference to take place, echoing the poet’s own reflection and gesture (White, “Functional White”). Long Soldier’s gap between “all of it” and “the pieces” suggests a similar unobstructed confluence between the facets of her identity: being whole carries with it a constellation of linguistic and cultural fragments, exacerbated by colonial attempts at erasure, as well as turning to one’s language and culture, which Long Soldier must transfer to her daughter.

Another example of Long Soldier’s use of Lakota is the word “bluḡo”, meaning tired, which is in dialogue with the above thirteenth “Whereas” statement, and appears in the poem

before it. If *iyotanchilah michuwinktu* “clicks the gears” of the thirteenth “Whereas” poem in place, “bluḡo” is the poem’s gravitational pull. Long Soldier writes that she is “weary, weakened, exhausted” by the language of the federal apology: although the apology cites the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864 and the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, its rhetoric is self-defensive, with sentences such as “both [Natives and the American government] took innocent lives” (74). The document plays out the first ingredient of Barthes’s *Mythologies*: “admitting the accidental evil of a class-bound institution the better to conceal its principal evil. One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil” (Barthes 151). This admission of “accidental” evil also leads to blame, the “third trait of Anti-Indianism”, as defined by Sisseton Santee Dakota scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn: “the use of historical event and experience to place the blame on Indians for an unfortunate and dissatisfying history” (Cook-Lynn x).

As a reaction to these types of fatiguing animadversions, the poet calls her father to ask him how to say “tired” in Lakota. He responds “bluḡo”, a different word to the one listed in her dictionary, yet she believes him, because in the end, “who knows better what tired is than the *people*” (74). The correspondence she had with her father regarding the definition of “bluḡo” is more real than the fixed dictionary, which can be less specific to linguistic nuance—“This is my family’s way—the Oglala way—” (74), she writes. Long Soldier is nevertheless overwhelmed with what is *real* linguistically and what is not, and sifts through a list of her own realities: “Really, I am five feet ten inches tall. Really, I sleep on the right side of the / bed. [...] Really, I climb the backs of languages, ride them into exhaustion—maybe I pull the reins when / I mean go.” (74). One of these realities is the rhetorical collateral, rather than an apology, in the

resolution's generalisation and stereotypes of "Native peoples" as one isolated cultural group, who collectively "engaged in numerous armed conflicts", as the poet quotes (74). Rose Gubele reminds us of the modern usage of "stereotype", born of the printing industry to refer to typographical duplicates, and coined by Walter Lippmann for its psychological usage and elements of distortion. Gubele writes that "Lippmann saw stereotypes as the 'pictures in our heads' that we use out of necessity, noting that 'there is economy in this. For the attempt to see all things freshly and in detail, rather than as types and generalities, is exhausting, and among busy affairs practically out of the question'" (Lippmann 88, qtd in Gubele 97). The apology's stereotypes, or economic refusal to accurately elucidate rather than generalise, is countered by Long Soldier's exhaustive linguistic specificity in this poem and thus her physical exhaustion in undoing language. For instance, she takes care in her final warning, in reference to the horse metaphor ("I pull the reins") as quoted above: "*Beware, a horse isn't a reference to my heritage;*" (author's emphasis, 74). Here, the poet parallels Cook-Lynn's opposition to the final trait of "anti-Indianism" in her own terms: "Anti-Indianism is that which exploits and distorts cultures and beliefs. All of these traits have conspired to isolate, to expunge or expel, to menace, to defame" (Cook-Lynn x). Likewise, the apology uses the word "both" ("both took innocent lives") to its advantage to distort and defer the apology itself. While Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology* that "it is necessary to use the word, since language cannot do more" (xv), Long Soldier shows us that the words nevertheless matter (as poet Solmaz Sharif wrote in "Look", "it matters what you call a thing" Sharif 3) insofar as they refer to the physical presence and somatic understanding of a word.



Perhaps, in her experience as a daughter, the exasperating effort to underline this linguistic investigation is grounded in her responsibility as a mother to her own daughter. For instance, her honest admission and care in this poem—"I call my dad / to ask and double-check my findings" (74)—shows the poet's humility, as in her question "what did I know about being Lakota" (75), yet this time as the daughter. "One thing I'm realizing", Long Soldier notes, "is that making art and poetry is not just about me and the page. Sometimes I wish it were. But there's so much more with regard to people, community, and relationships", she writes ("Beyond Language"). Donald Warne, Oglala Lakota professor and Director of the Indians Into Medicine and Public Health Programs at the University of North Dakota, explains that humility is an important value in Lakota philosophy, which he incorporates into modern medicine. In his analysis of a photograph of Lakota chief Red Cloud shaking hands with a government official to mark a land treaty, Warne notes that Red Cloud is seated and looking down, both symbols of humility in Lakota tradition. The government official, however, is proudly standing upright, looking down at Red Cloud, and foretelling a broken promise. Warne says humility is a virtue we should adopt to be more holistic towards each other; self-power and self-involvement cripples the ability to heal (Warne, "All My Relations"). Long Soldier admits that as a poet, she knows only a little, yet everyone in the community has a different kind of knowledge to share (Long Soldier, Radcliffe). Long Soldier has the humility to accept that she doesn't possess all the keys to passing down Lakota language and tradition; in fact, she's reminded by a friend, "*don't worry, you and your daughter will learn together*". Jacques Rancière develops this form of symbiotic learning in his book *Le Maître Ignorant*, in English *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Ignorant Schoolmaster*, in which Rancière recounts the panecastic (or *panécastique* from the

Greek meaning “everything in each”) principles of teacher Joseph Jacotot, who, while in exile in Belgium during the Restoration, created a method for illiterate parents to teach their own children to read. Ideally, one breaks the “circle of powerlessness” that binds the student to an all-knowing teacher. Learning together, then, is more emancipatory than the “stultification” involved in the dutifulness towards one’s instructor. Rancière argues, “*there is no hierarchy of intellectual capacity*” (27), in line with the epigraph to *WHEREAS* which quotes Arthur Sze: “no word has any special hierarchy over any other” (*WHEREAS* 2)<sup>148</sup>. In passing down the knowledge of language in particular, Long Soldier’s topos, Jacotot insists that “the words the child learns best, those whose meaning he best fathoms, those he best makes his own through his own usage, are those he learns without a master explicator, well before any master explicator” (5). Long Soldier’s admissions of her inherited lack of fluency in Lakota, as well as her initiative to learn together, bring us full circle to the congressional apology’s lack of humility, physical admission, and exchange. The poet’s reaching towards her family for linguistic reassurance counters the apology’s didactic assertion of the “circle of power” and its tautological rhetoric on a colonial scale.

Long Soldier’s inventive punctuation, or refusal to formally punctuate, is again coupled with motherhood and learning Lakota in her poem “Waǰpánica”, a Lakota word which means “poor”, or “more precisely *to be destitute to have nothing of one’s own*” (43), as Long Soldier translates again without punctuation, giving the two phrases a unified simultaneity. In the poem, which describes a picture of the narrator’s husband and daughter sleeping, the comma as a sign

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<sup>148</sup> In the original French: “Il y a inégalité dans les manifestations de l’intelligence, selon l’énergie plus ou moins grande que la volonté communique à l’intelligence pour découvrir et combiner des rapports nouveaux, mais il n’y a pas de hiérarchie de capacité intellectuelle” (Rancière, *Le Maître Ignorant* 18).

dissolves, and the poet writes the word “comma” in its place, not unlike Bitsui’s spelling out of “hyphens” and “semicolons” explored in Chapter 1. A friend suggests that the “comma” can “tip a phrase into sentimentality”, and that “question marks dashes lines little black dots” (43) are not what captures meaning in writing, characters that legally bind the federal apology. Long Soldier, therefore, uses the word “comma” itself to “slow the singular mind of two lovers” (44), to be interrupted with “quiet” (43), to “disassemble mechanics comma how to score sound music movement across the page” (44). The word “comma” in place of its symbol essentially allows her to approach the notion of “Wahpánica”. Poverty is firstly being financially poor, as the narrator’s friend says; “anyone asserting that poverty isn’t about money has never / been stomach-sick over how to spend their last \$3 comma on milk or gas or half for both with two children in the backseat watching” (44). The reader assumes from her unpunctuated list that the narrator has experienced financial poverty first hand: “candy-stained mouths a / neighbor girl’s teeth convenience store shelves Hamburger Helper a dog’s matted fur [...] those children playing in the carcass of a car mice on the floor- / board my sweeping chill hantavirus [...]” (44). In these examples, financial poverty, although it is “the cheapest form of poor [...] it’s the oil at the surface”, is inextricably linked to children, the potentially hazardous environment they are raised in, and how to cope as a mother.

“Wahpánica” also indicates, however, being poor of company, or poor of physical intimacy: “it’s true a child performs best when bonded with a parent before the age of five closely comma intimately” (44). The weight “comma” reminds the narrator of her own solitude as well: “Father’s Day comma I am not with you” and “I feel wahpánica I feel alone” (44). Finally, “wahpánica” is “*language poor*” causing a “meta-phrasal ache” (44): although one

“performs best to the music in- / between the rise and fall of the voice” as her friend suggests, the poet must “write to see it comma how I beg from a dictionary to learn our word for *poor* comma in a language I dare to call *my* language comma who am I” (44). In all of the examples I have noted, the poet doesn’t use “comma” where one might always expect one to appear, nor does she use other punctuation within each phrase, for instance, the question “who am I” elides with the “comma” before it, without a question mark afterwards, creating a superimposed effect as in thought. “Comma” therefore takes on a function of its own as a mental and physical pulse—a functional punctuation, to echo White’s “functional white”. The anxiety of not being able to “speak” her “mind” is exacerbated by not knowing Lakota fluently, as well as the polysemic manifestations of poverty, when raising her daughter. Because the caesura of the word “comma” is more “detached, patient”, and more visceral when spoken than its sign, the poem serves as a meditation on how to “score sound music movement”, and the struggle of learning Lakota, which the government attempted to erase. The necessity to write “waḥpánica” embodies “what we *do* possess” (my emphasis), the poet writes, despite these facets of poverty.

In her poem “Edge”, Long Soldier similarly refuses the comma as a symbol but doesn’t replace it, so that her descriptions are streamlined in the poem’s crisp, prose block which challenges syntactic norms: “The drive along the road the bend the banks behind the wheel I am called Mommy” (48). Long Soldier’s thought-music comes to the fore here as her physical driving maneuvers the poem’s iambs forward. As she proclaims in an interview with *Woman’s Quarterly Conversation* regarding her daughter: “On our drives together: I think. I am a poet, so I think. I’m a mother, so I think and think” (Long Soldier, “Profiles in Poetics”). As in “waḥpánica” above, the title “Edge” is multidimensional; it is both the edge of the road she

drives on with her daughter and the edge of transference. In other words, she negotiates what to avoid out of caution for the child's sensitivity, such as the dry grasses the horses must eat and the desperately hungry people outside: "And I see it I Mommy the edge but do not point do not say *look* as we pass the heads / gold and blowing these dry grasses eaten in fear by man and horses" (48). The lack of punctuation again unifies the piece as one song, one expression, echoing again Ortiz's notion of integral movement: "all of these items (context, meaning, purpose) not in their separate parts but as a whole" (Ortiz, "Song" 39). Ortiz adds: "song at the very beginning was experience. There was no division between experience and expression. [...] The context has to do not only with your being physically present but it has to do also with the context of the mind, how receptive it is" (38). "Edge" undertakes the mind's full receptivity, in that the poet defies the "edge" between words, translating the moving imagery from the car and the "wondering" (to use Diaz's distinction from "wandering") mind<sup>149</sup>.

The edge may also be the road itself, and boundary between the speaker and hunger of those outside, the edge of fear about nourishing her daughter, linked to generations of colonial conditions (including "some origin(al) / hunger" (46) as she writes in her poem "Irony"). Furthermore, the unified inertia due to the lack of commas steadily holds the tension, or "edge", between the responsibility of being "Mommy", one who safely drives her daughter, and the questions of parenthood as a Lakota woman today. Her lack of punctuation, therefore, engages in a new orchestration which translates present thought: "I really wanted it to be grounded in the now, at least within my own lifetime. And I wanted as much as possible to avoid this sort of nostalgic portrait of a Native life, my life [...] within living memory", Long Soldier writes (Long

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<sup>149</sup> As already quoted in Chapter 1, Diaz describes Mojave songs as maps, which "tell about our movements and wonderings (not wanderings) across a space [...]" (Diaz, "New Poetry").

Soldier, “The Freedom”). In a recording of Long Soldier reading this poem, not only is her streamlined assonance and consonance more acute—“spark”, “walls”, “apart”, “rock”, “large” “car”—but in her line “And I see it I Mommy the edge” (48), she pauses between “I” and “Mommy”, so that one understands “Mommy” as both a noun and as a verb.

In Long Soldier’s three-part poem “Left”, the reader learns implicitly that the narrator has experienced a miscarriage. In the first section, she converts her loss into surprising lineation and syntax, using the word “left” as a trigger:

yet the baby was gone by the time they checked truth is  
a scopic rod pried it showed nothing my head turned to left  
away from the black screen [...]  
I roll over even now my head to the left  
the direction of beginnings black mark of the first letter: left, I still ask  
When did I?  
Where did I?

Lose

baby. (37)

Although it seems modern poetry has indulged in every facet of loss, there are only a few notable poems recounting miscarriages, although miscarriages are relatively common<sup>150</sup>. “Left”, however, provides a contemporary view of motherhood before and after losing a baby, opening herself to what Ross Gay covets as “the ability to be uncomfortable” (Gay 142). In this first section seen above, the word “left” is firstly the direction away from the ultrasound and where the narrator diverts her gaze; secondly, what is left or remaining, which is the narrator herself (as she writes in the third section: “the uterus does its cleaning through blood a methodical machine / washes itself new baby gone the mother left”, p. 38); and thirdly, the left margin of a page

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<sup>150</sup> See Sylvia Plath’s poem “Parliament Hill Fields”, Sharon Olds’s “Our Miscarried One [...]”, Dorthea Lasky’s “The Miscarriage”, Jane Duran’s “Miscarriage”, or Amit Majmuda’s “The Miscarriage”. According to the Mayo Clinic, about 10 to 20 percent of known pregnancies end in miscarriage, although unknown miscarriages would certainly raise that statistic (“Miscarriage”).

where a text begins. “Left” is thus an inexplicable loss and yet the beginning of a page, the creation of “the black mark of the first letter”. As poet Ross Gay writes, “we forget that poems actually come out of bodies, and are expressions of bodies” (Gay 143). Here, the constricting physical weight of bearing a loss is echoed in the poet’s aposiopesis—the breaking of off speech in her unfinished questions, “When did I? / Where did I?”—followed by her contrapuntal typography, her choice to align “Lose”, at the extreme right margin of the page—as if it’s a word she doesn’t dare utter, found in a corner of the mind—and “baby” on the left.

In the second section of “Left”, the poet’s punctuation again provides a semantic rhythm and visual significance. However, the period is used for fragmentation within words, and never between sentences: “a baby’s not a fetus at eight weeks it’s an embryo webbed hands eyelid folds / still I say *baby* soft like a poet two even syllables as.in. ti.ny bo.dy. or I.was. / evenly bent in two perhaps it’s just spotting [...]” (37). The spondee in “baby” is visually repeated by syllabic divisions using periods to emphasise the subsequent divided spondees, while her own body, like the curve of the baby in the womb, was “evenly bent in two”, a physical embodiment of a spondee during the pain of a miscarriage. The periods as a sign similarly evoke the blood which the narrator initially convinces herself is only “spotting”. Even more, although Long Soldier’s “Left” is on the surface apolitical, as poet Derek Walcott says, “no language is neutral” (Walcott, Interview by Campbell): during the six-year period after the Family Planning Services and Population Research Act of 1970, “physicians sterilized perhaps 25% of Native American women”, potentially more, “of childbearing age”. Under federal law, sterilisations for women were even subsidised for those “who received their health care through the Indian Health Service”, the federal agency responsible for providing health services to members of

federally-recognised nations, and were given the procedures often under “pressure or duress, or without the women’s knowledge or understanding”, a process that Marie Sanchez, chief tribal judge on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, declared a form of genocide (Theobald). Mass sterilisations, as well as other factors preventing healthy mother-child relationships for indigenous families in postcolonial America, enhance the tension in Long Soldier’s typographical expression of being “evenly bent in two”.

In her first section in the collection, “Part I: These Being the Concerns”, Long Soldier likewise explores the act of writing itself—“A poem about writing, bo-ring” (28) she quips—in relation to the act of mothering and grief. These poems are donned with a dot in place of the title, again separating the period from its sign of conclusion, and rather marking a beginning. In this section, she writes, “when / you love something let it go if it returns be a good mother / father welcome the poem open armed pull out the frying pan / grease it coat it prepare a meal” (24). The poem is, as a child, to be let go of when it’s time, to be welcomed and properly fed if it returns, to “home it” and “provide it [...]” (24). She also refers to writing in the following poem, in which her unpunctuated continuum of thought is a release from loss, and a turn towards homing and providing for an act of creation:

[...]so I re-turn back over to the first  
position of poesis prenascent page  
before any material thing makes  
in this right-side peace I work most  
nights I greet open-eyed delicate  
pronunciations like *thank you* I thank  
the empty room I still my body I work hard  
not to slip a centimeter in dark work not to  
interrupt my own conversation I move  
my mouth as if silently reading as if a begin  
ner or courting a friendship careful holding  
to my chest small gifts tight 3-lettered  
words in 3-word phrases I welcome in



the new new. (25)

The poet struggles to find a comfortable position remembering her “prenascent” body, perhaps the grief of her miscarriage, while trying to produce a poem on the “prenascent page”. In turn, the shape of the poem swells towards the end and then curves in, echoing the body’s turning back and forth in the fetal position. The silhouette of the text on the right margin also reveals the inverse shape of white space adjacent to it, as if enacting the imprint of the body turning to the other side. Again Long Soldier omits punctuation, noting that she is determined “not to / interrupt” her own conversation, as quoted above (25). In doing so, she allows for striking mid-word enjambments such as the unhyphenated “a begin / ner”, singling out “begin” as a noun, as if it were tangible, as well as highlighting the *verb* in begin(ner), as someone who begins, or even to “beg in” a sense of newness, emphasising a transfer. This uninterrupted thought-music conveys a rumination both on motherhood and poetry: her poem seeks, in its “uncontainable” expression, to use Mishuana Goeman’s word (*Mark* 103), “the new new” language to approach motherhood, or more broadly, communal relationships and life-changing transitions. In addition, the “3-lettered words in 3-word phrases”, referring to “the new new”, is suggestive of the three trimesters of pregnancy. This rendering of thought-music is thus a way “to home” language, to “provide” language, as quoted above, in other words, to give language as conscientious a shape and form as a womb for a child.

To elaborate on the disruption of expected articulation in this series of untitled poems, which self-reflexively address writing, I’d like to draw attention to one of Long Soldier’s first lines in this grouping: “When I want to write seriously I think of people like / dg” (24). The poet refers to Inupiaq-Inuit poet dg nanouk okpik, who, in an interview with H.L Hix, makes it clear

that her poem “Foist” should not be confused with a pure *ars poetica*. Okpik assures Hix that she doesn’t meditate on the art of poetry from a knowing “I” but “from the spirit of things”, by which she means, “I am just a hollow bone, a vessel through which the images and music blow. The words are not my own: they are the ashes of all languages derived from all knowledge or intelligence” (okpik, “Uncoverage” 227). This way of understanding poetry untethers it from one set of linguistic laws or singular, superintendent narrator. Okpik also provides an illustrious example: fishing with her father along the Susitna river near Talkeetna Alaska, she remarked that if she “looked a little closer, a little deeper” into the river, she could see the hundreds of salmon under the surface, “edging their way up the river” in a committed journey to spawn, and this urgency to survive reminds her to convey the voices of her history and cultural sensibility (228). Okpik’s metaphor is yet another way to interpret the kinetic effects of Long Soldier’s poem outside of the Western-grounded *ars poetica*: Long Soldier greets a voice, not the written word, but one that is moving under the surface of preliminary understanding, and these pronunciations, or thought-music, are the “first / position of poesis prenascent page / before any material thing [...]”, as she writes above. In other words, she seems to become conscious of, or she “still [s]”, her body in order to greet thought prior to writing, as okpik saw the salmon moving below the river’s surface. I also see this as a form of what Goeman calls an “embodied geography” (Goeman, *Mark* 113)<sup>151</sup>. Rather than regulating her inner dialogue to meet the norms of syntax and enjambment—as the federal resolution does, yet without sincere investment—Long Soldier commits to mapping her consciousness and physical awareness as a mother in the Lakota nation, even if the process requires going upstream.

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<sup>151</sup> Goeman uses this term in reference to Diné poet Esther Belin’s work, in her discussion of the importance of the Diné sacred mountains. I borrow this term here to refer to Long Soldier’s technical choices, distinct from Goeman’s discussion of Diné values in particular.

Finally, Long Soldier engages the forward slash to mark a moment in which the poet's role reverts again to daughter rather than mother. She begins with a lucid memory, "WHEREAS I heard a noise I thought was a sneeze" (65), a noise which turned out to be her father crying next to her. Although her father is now "sober, attentive, showered and eating", he was once a "terrible drinker" (65). However, he offered his sincerest apology, which indirectly reiterates the physical, kinetic transference the federal apology lacked:

I turned to him when I heard him say *I'm sorry I wasn't there sorry for many things / like that / curative voicing / an open bundle / or medicine / or birthday wishing / my hand to his shoulder / it's ok I said it's over now I meant it / because of our faces blankly / because of a lifelong stare down / because of centuries in sorry;* (65)

Her father's body language during his apology—"He pinched his fingers to the bridge of his nose, squeezed his eyes. He wiped" (65)—exemplifies sincerity, as we recall from her first poem in the collection: presented with a genuine apology, the poet writes, "I read each muscle, I ask the strength of the gesture to move like a poem." (61). The courage of sincerity moves throughout the body, as it navigates through language.

If one doubts the objective validity of sincerity, Robert Frost attempted to pinpoint it in his notebook: "There is such a thing as sincerity. It is hard to define but it is probably nothing more than your highest liveliness escaping from a succession of dead selves. Miraculously." (qtd in Faggen 456). The contours of sincerity have been delineated in many critiques of modern poetics beyond Frost, however. Danielle Chapman explains what it is *not*: a narcissism of "obscurity and incomprehensibility", the "bad habits" which congest poems, limiting the reach towards the reader (Chapman, "Bad Habits"). Peter Campion believes Frost was suggesting that sincerity is not something that can be willed, but is a force which Campion calls the "kinetics of

truthfulness” (Campion 245). Campion believes that this can be traced by the poem’s “speed”, or the skill of dwelling on “each image no longer than need be”, which he relates to Americanness in poetry (Campion 245).<sup>152</sup> I argue, however, that the latter skill is a poetic norm, and in Long Soldier’s case, sincerity lies in the representation of somatic experience, against the very Americanness of colonial insincerity which left communities to face “centuries in sorry”, as Long Soldier expresses it. However, not unlike Frost’s own conception, the poet and her father’s “highest liveliness” seems to escape in Long Soldier’s segments, separated by forward slashes: “like that / curative voicing / an open bundle / or medicine / or birthday wishing / my hand to his shoulder” (65). In each separated “bundle”, clarity escapes from the father’s “dead self”, the absent self, and liveliness returns in both the father’s presence and the poet’s reception, represented typographically.

The use of slashes here rather than line breaks have multiple effects; firstly, they slow the reader down without breaking the line, crystallizing the moment’s gravity. In this way, the slashes mirror a crotchet or quarter note rest, a pause which mimics the broken speech of someone crying; desperate in a moment of heightened emotion. Secondly, Long Soldier’s slashes suggest a dual temporality: what if, for example, the innumerable degrees of colonial violence had not occurred, then perhaps alcoholism among native communities wouldn’t have occurred, and therefore inherited domestic trauma, including how to pass on the Lakota language to her daughter, might not have weighed so heavily. Her father’s apology encompasses his neglectful parenting and addiction, but also the “centuries in sorry”, a result of colonial acts for which the federal government failed to hold themselves accountable. The slashes therefore propel the poem

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<sup>152</sup> These comments are in regard to Elizabeth Arnold’s second volume of poetry *Civilization*, elements that Campion says are “what makes Arnold so American” (Campion 245).

forward, but also shift the poem's gears chronologically backwards, allowing for forgiveness. As Valéry writes, "Spoken language itself, when spontaneous, is an explosion that relieves us of the weight of some impression" (Valéry 228), which Long Soldier affirms in her comments on this poem: "I was able to put away a whole lifetime of grievances, of hurt, and of pain" ("Interview With 2018", *Brooklyn Magazine*). While many punctuation and typographical choices in Long Soldier's poems trace the cultural and linguistic bonds of maternal transferability, as I have outlined, here the slashes clarify the non-verbalised trauma transferred "*transgenerationally*", as psychologist Anne Ancelin Schützenberger notes, and break free from "the traps of unconscious transgenerational repetitions" (Schützenberger 3).

In addition, this sequence of slashes strongly echoes Ursula Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction", published in Glotfelty and Fromm's seminal *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, in which Le Guin remaps the classic prose arch of conflict and resolution laid out by Freytag, representative of the "Techno-Heroic" tragedies of linear narratives. She writes: "Conflict, competition, stress, struggle, etc., within the narrative conceived as a carrier bag/belly/box/house/medicine bundle, may be seen as necessary elements of a whole which itself cannot be characterized either as conflict or as harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process" (Le Guin 153). Language for Le Guin should embody the radical variety and reality of the carrier bags of our lives, each containing our everyday experience, from "wimps and klutzes", to the most subtle, sacred gestures (153). She argues that humans naturally carry containers, baskets, and bags of all sorts to keep, store, or share, reflecting the migrations of each "unending story" (154), and she upholds the unsettling verity and variety of our filled and emptied bundles over the triangular myth of an apotheosised

hero. Using these slashes, Long Soldier recreates Le Guin's typographical and metaphorical bundles; the unsettling, awkward, yet unbound expressions of sincerity our bodies parcel are unwound and re-parceled. Despite Theodor Adorno's conservative declaration that the slash is "among the losses that are punctuation's share in the decay of language" (Adorno 301), Long Soldier boldly uses them within the line to emphasise this simultaneous emotional surge; the present thread of inherited domestic "sorry", and the historical thread of "centuries in sorry". These slashes therefore drive a sense of shared sincerity, which moves from woman as mother to woman as daughter, who takes on a forgiving, maternal responsibility.

Finally, Long Soldier further elaborates on maternal transference with kinetic punctuation choices in her sixth "Whereas" poem, in which her daughter desperately tries to hold back her tears after a fall<sup>153</sup>, and instead of crying, she "feigned a grin" (66). The narrator insists that her daughter express her emotions: "*In our home in our family we are ourselves, real feelings. Be true*" (66). However, the narrator realises that she herself had a nervous reaction to laugh, rather than release anger, upon reading the apology's contorted version of history: "the arrival of Europeans in North America opened a new chapter in the history of Native Peoples" (66). Valéry discerns that there are actions which "modify ourselves, to dispel a kind of interior discomfort", for instance "laughter, tears, and cries", which "constitute an elementary language, for they are contagious" (Valéry 228)<sup>154</sup>. Indeed, her daughter has inherited this emotional displacement: "I shake. The realization that it took this phrase to show. My daughter's quiver isn't new— / but a deep practice very old she's watching me;" (66). This final line clarifies another

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<sup>153</sup> The daughter's friends say "*she just fell, she's bleeding!*" (66), an echo of the line "Babe I'm bleeding" in "Left" when the narrator is having a miscarriage, adding a layer to the cycles of mother-daughter experience.

<sup>154</sup> "Ces émissions constituent un langage élémentaire, car elles sont, ou contagieuses [...]" (Valéry, *Oeuvres* 1388)

transgenerational repetition; laughter instead of sadness or anger in reaction to the apology's definition of genocide as "a new chapter", a restraint which is transferred to the poet's daughter. Again, realisations manifest in their unpunctuated form; "a deep practice very old she's watching me;" is an unbridled thought that translates the chilling admission and sudden realisation of the "elementary language", as Valery writes, of inherited practices. Long Soldier defines this somatic sincerity and admission of her maternal experience in her thought-music—a lack of punctuation representing the significance of her realisation.

### *Matrifocal Kinetics: Embodied Shape Poems*

Accompanying Long Soldier's lineation, syntax, and punctuation choices, many poems take on more evident symbolic shapes, which are often, as I will discuss in this section, relevant to her interrogations about motherhood and both human and non-human relations. I call these embodied poems, echoing both Goeman's "embodied geography" as noted earlier, and Ross Gay's declaration that beyond the representational, geometric focus of concrete poetry, "poems are expressions of our bodies" and "that our poems are embodiments, [...] they pointedly address the fact of bodily forms in time and space" (Gay 147). I will explore a selection of these shape poems which address the complexities of motherhood and intimacy through the textual dynamics, reflecting somatic and linguistic relationality between parent and child, which parallels the exchanges between human and non-human bodies discussed in the previous chapter.

In another birth poem entitled "Dilate", which, like "Left", has three parts, Long Soldier represents a baby's first glance representing a pre-verbal gesture, using spacing and lineation as seen in the following excerpt:

she arrived safely                      mid-spring she                      scrunched her brow

an up-look      to her father. There's a turning              as pupils dilate  
as black vernal suns slip              into equinox. This was  
we never forget her  
first act" (original spacing, 35).

The spacing in this first section of the poem resembles, in its full form, an eye opening and the "turning" or widening of the pupil as it absorbs the world, exemplifying Ortiz's notion of a poem as "a way of [...] perceiving", or shift in understanding (Ortiz, "Song" 39). The space that breaks the phrase "mid-spring she      scrunched her brow" suggests the fragmented, inquisitive motion of a newborn. Indeed, the lines "this was" and "first act" serve as parentheses around "we never forget her" which appears in between, and which can be understood independently. Long Soldier uses the hyphenated anacoluthon, "an up-look      to her father", to unite the gesture with the intent behind it; the eye's instinctual mechanism to gaze towards the parent infers that our most effective communication is physical, beyond the grammatical sense we attribute to language. These gestures are often taken for granted as adults, only to be recalled in a form of anamnesis in an exchanged glance with a newborn. In this sense, the poet's spacing suggests that the eye's relationship to memory is permeable; the poet imagines the particular moment in her own mind's eye, and recreates it textually for the reader as a seemingly transparent image, so that we seem to be looking at the poet's appearing and/or dissolving memory of the eye, rather than the child's eye itself, creating an intimate experience of time from the mother's perspective<sup>155</sup>. As Orlando White writes, "because there is a pulse in the human figure, there is a pulse within the folio as well; the poetic existence in space between the written language is the vital sign of silence"

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<sup>155</sup> Relevant to this idea is Kickapoo, Comanche and Macehual scholar Patrisia Gonzales's point that the concept of past-future for the Aymara (of the Andes Mountains in Bolivia) contains the word "nayra" or "eye", evoking the past seen in front of them and the future behind them (Gonzales 167).



(White, “Functional White”)<sup>156</sup>. In addition, her soundscape of consonants, for instance in “as black vernal suns slip into equinox”, serves as a shift in momentum and again “clicks the gears of the poem into place” (53), as I previously described her use of “*iyontanchilah michuwintku*”, like a turning clock, emphasising the eye’s mechanics. Moreover, Sicangu Lakota elder Victor Douville noted that the vernal equinox for the Lakota initiates a series of four ceremonies to welcome the new life of spring<sup>157</sup>, which might be significant to this “mid-spring” birth; the mother spatially expresses that the eye’s movements are parallel with a larger pattern, perhaps the celestial cycle that marks the new season (Drake, “First Day”). Long Soldier’s aural and spatial arrangements therefore create a 2-way transparency; the image of her child’s first gaze is its own textual “equinox”, in which the poem’s eye-like form moves to meet the poet’s memory in her own mind’s eye. Furthermore, Long Soldier seems to distance herself from Charles Olson’s proposition in “Projective Verse”, borrowed from Robert Creeley, that “form is never more than an extension of content” (Olson, “Projective Verse”). Alternatively, for Long Soldier, “sometimes form comes first. Sometimes a shape comes first. There is no content; the content is yet to come. I’ll wake up and I’ll see a shape or I’ll feel a shape. [...] I’ll sit and work on it, and there’s no language yet [...] Then I have to sit, be patient, and allow the language to reveal itself” (Interviewed by Akbar, *Divedapper*). Form before language is fitting in this matrifocal poem, in which a child sees before it can speak.

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<sup>156</sup> White is in fact the father of Long Soldier’s daughter. Layli notes: [he] was an important influence on my development as a writer, as were the poets he introduced me to—bpNichol and Aram Saroyan—whose work I return to over and over” (Long Soldier, “The Whole Self”, 73).

<sup>157</sup> Ernestine Chasing Hawk notes that the equinox ceremonies also welcome back Wakinyan Oyate, the Thunder Beings (Chasing Hawk, “Welcoming”). Annette S. Lee writes that during the vernal equinox, the sun rises through the constellation Wicakiyuhapi (the Dipper) representing the Sacred Pipe or Çaañunpa. Between Çaañunpa and the sun is the Çaaßaßa Pusyapi (Red Willow) constellation, made up of the three brightest stars in Aries and Triangulum (Lee 1). The bark of the red willow is used to make tobacco for the equinox ceremonies.

In the second section of “Dilate”, the embodied poem forms the shape of a pregnant belly:

*All is experienced*  
  
*throu*  
  
*g*  
  
*h*  
  
*the*  
  
*body*

somebody told me.

As the eye typographically dilates above, here a belly seems to swell. As Theodore Spencer writes of the experimental typography of Cummings, Long Soldier’s typographical iconicity gestures towards “the smallest possible gap between the experience and its expression” (Spencer qtd in Tartakovsky 217); the poem’s shape is itself expressing the physicality that it dictates. The letters “g” and “h” are unvoiced, but present and separate, suspending the softness of the vowel, and thus asking the reader to welcome its phonic elongation, echoing the muted tones a baby might experience in the womb. The words “through the body” also act as a form of tmesis, they form a syntactical and visual parenthesis between “All is experienced” and “somebody told me” and thus the words itself can be read as if within parentheses, to illuminate the female body’s experience of “everything”, including our many languages—thought, physical, speech—and how their effects. This permeability represented in the spacing of “through”, reconfigures Antin’s avowal to John Dewey’s “Art as Experience” (1934): “For Dewey all experiences have a common form, a narrative form, because, as he sees it, an experience is not continuous or

instantaneous, but an articulated whole with a beginning and end that enclose a sequence of engagements between a desiring subject and a resisting object that comes to some kind of definite resolution” (qtd in Fredman 4). While Long Soldier reflects pragmatism in her heightened attention to the senses and materiality, there is no such resolution offered in Long Soldier’s “Dilate”—again, perhaps in contrast with the federal “Resolution”. Rather, the typographical openings suggest experience is in fact both instantaneous and continuous, to be revealed and articulated at any moment or revelation, as in pregnancy and language, and to be returned to.

Returning briefly to Sze’s decentring, this section in “Dilate” therefore offers a typographic and contextual decentring: the text is itself decentred, following its own convex trajectory, while the playful line “somebody told me”—as if hearsay—decentres the focus from the poet’s own body, and towards any body; the body of the baby, the body of the mother, the non-human body, the body of the poem. This surfaces a contrast with Mallarméan postmodernism as seen through Rancière; in Mallarmé’s “Ballets”, a ballerina becomes a metaphor: her body enacts a type of anonymous “corporeal writing”<sup>158</sup>, suggesting an idea, which, if taken to the page would be a poem. O’Keeffe believes that Mallarmé and Rancière both see this anonymity as “one of the conditions of possibility for a democratic poetry”, democratic because of its independence from “the scribe’s apparatus”, and because the ballerina herself “may understand nothing about the ‘writing’ her steps nonetheless trace out” with her body, therefore showing that nothing need impede a “democratic” access to writing (O’Keeffe 314). However, Long Soldier, in her open allusion to “the body” rather than just her own, elevates the

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<sup>158</sup> Mallarmé’s original French is: “une écriture corporelle” (Mallarmé 173).

poem's choreography from a mother's sensibility. Rather than the poem modeled on the "corporeal writing" of a dancer's art form—whose more abstract implications, as Mallarmé and Rancière suggest from their own perspective, the dancer might be unaware of—in "Dilate", "people are poems, in themselves", as Long Soldier states, and thus the poem is modeled after the body's own understood capacities, which are in fact parallel to those of the wider community and land: "the artfulness of the land, its endurance and change, its nonverbal lessons" (Long Soldier, "The Whole Self"). Typographical and contextual decentring, then, are not "democratic" in their anonymity (did the federal apology not aim to be "democratic" in their textual yet not physical admission of the government's "ill-conceived policies"?<sup>159</sup>), but rather the reader shares the poet's revelation of the body's own "nonverbal lesson", the mother's body in particular.

Long Soldier admits that while she wanted to avoid nostalgic representations and rather translate her present experience, she writes that there might be "a sense of longing [...] that I haven't myself recognized" (Long Soldier, "The Freedom"). One could, in exploring this possibility, suggest that the poem's shape might unintentionally echo that of a Lakota sweat lodge, which is in a dome-shaped structure, evoking the shape of the universe and the womb of a pregnant woman (*Encyclopedia of Religion, 2nd Edition* 5296). Similarly, poet Paula Gunn Allen of Laguna Pueblo and Lakota descent interprets the "sacred hoop", from Oglala Lakota Black Elk's vision,<sup>160</sup> as representation of a physical experience; "to stand inside the sacred hoop is to experience a web of balanced relationships, continuously changing. To enter the circle is to be

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<sup>159</sup> The full title of S.J.Res.14 is "A joint resolution to acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes and offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States" (S.J.Res.14).

<sup>160</sup> After having a vision to "bring my people back into the sacred hoop", Black Elk witnessed the Ghost Dance, with people dancing around a tree at Wounded Knee Creek, before the massacre occurred there: "[...] the circle of the men and women holding hands was like the sacred hoop that should have the power to make the tree to bloom again" (Neihardt 148).

gifted with the experience of integration and wholeness” (Allen, “The Sacred” 56). Like the sacred hoop, the poem’s seemingly minimalist curve makes our eyes trace the trajectory of a circle, suggesting natural cycles and movements such as “the developmental transformations of birth, growth, maturity, and death” (56). Likewise, Allen explains that in “gynocratic” native societies, a mother’s love is not sentimental but based on the bond “through her offspring in the womb”, which this poem’s form suggests (Allen, “Grandmother” 350). Yet, one is reminded of Long Soldier’s caveat in her aforementioned twelfth Whereas statement: “*Beware, a horse isn’t a reference to my heritage;*” (74).

Apart from these perhaps unintentional parallels, the poet splits the letters in the word “through”, reminding the reader of the federal apology’s *non*-delivery, and the poet’s physical suppression of emotions upon reading its euphemisms for genocide and colonisation. Long Soldier’s simple line seems to hold anti-colonial, maternal reflections which accentuate the body’s experience and captures, as Wittgenstein suggested, an intended truth that must be *shown* through a pictorial representation, yet cannot be entirely expressed in language (Wittgenstein 30)<sup>161</sup>. Secondly, the curve holds the tension of polysemy; somatic experiences of motherhood can be spontaneous or playful, yet daunting<sup>162</sup>. Each spatial, linguistic embodiment on the page reclaims this dichotomous experience—in addition to what Long Soldier establishes regarding imparting the Lakota language to her daughter. Gay states experiences should not be reduced to “events on paper”, and believes this is linked to privilege, for instance, “who has the privilege to

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<sup>161</sup> The quotation in the Pears and McGuinness translation is: “What can be shown, cannot be said”.

<sup>162</sup> “Maskoke Okisce” by Louis Oliver, also known as Wotkoce Okisce (Muskoke) is a poem in the shape of a tornado, which has been displayed as a wall mural in Leiden, Netherlands. The final word is deconstructed to represent the tornado’s tail, each letter on a new line, like Long Soldier’s poem above. While seemingly simple, it expresses both play and terror, as the tornado represents a turtle’s tail that’s been pulled off.

neglect the fact of the body, and who doesn't" (Gay 147). Long Soldier, as a Lakota mother reacting to this uncommitted, non-apology to indigenous communities who have inherited the gravity of colonial trauma, doesn't neglect the body nor disembody language.

Finally, Long Soldier's "Obligations" series of visual poems are part of a project which recreates the form of a star quilt, combining a set of diamond-shaped sequences (see image below). The project featured in her exhibition originally shown at the Racing Magpie creative space in Rapid City, South Dakota (2017-2018) which Long Soldier curated with Clementine Bordeaux and Mary Bordeaux, entitled "Responsibilities and Obligations: Understanding Mitákuye Oyás'iy". The curators explain that although the Lakota expression is often glossed as "we are all related" or "all my relatives," "the phrase has been appropriated as an all-encompassing idea of inclusiveness", and the exhibition engages with "Lakḥóta artists, scholars and general audiences to reflect on the (mis)appropriation of this phrase through mixed and multimedia installations" ("Responsibilities and Obligations"). Long Soldier's paper poetry quilts were inspired by a series of interviews of women in the Lakota community which are heard as repeated audio sequences within the exhibition. Long Soldier, Clementine and Mary Bordeaux "prioritize female voices"—of which there was a lack of representation—regarding the Lakota language, values of reciprocity, generational transference, and the misrepresentation of the phrase Mitákuye Oyás'iy, which is not a general statement of inclusivity but rather an engaged framework and set of values guiding land-based interaction, which reflects Long Soldier's non-hierarchical rendering of poems on the paper quilts. From these interviews, non-humans such as "pahin (porcupine), gnugnuska (grasshopper), tusweca (dragonfly), ptepha (bison skull), and inyan (rock)", were used as inspiration for the exhibits pieces, giving space to

non-human relations, including the mosquito image, which appears in the diamonds on Long Soldier's paper quilts alongside her poems (Bordeaux, "Responsibilites").

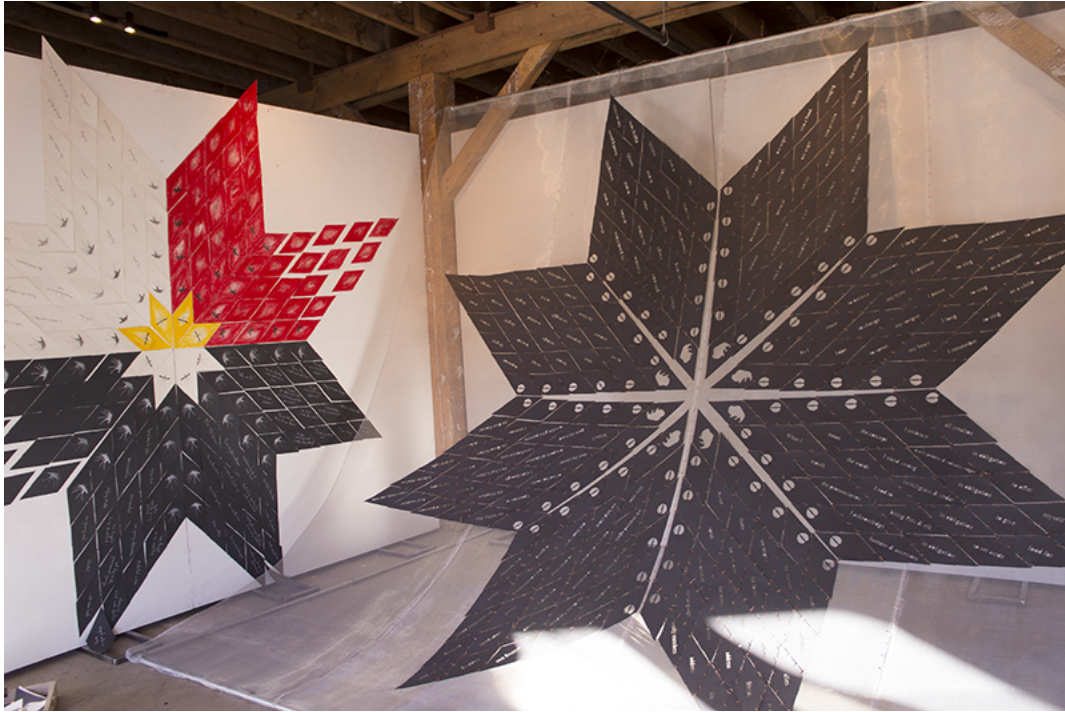


Image from the Racing Magpie website: <https://www.racingmagpie.com/mitakuye-oyasin-exhibit>

Following Gerald Vizenor's notion that "the problem in American society is [that it's] a rights society, not a responsibility society" (qtd in *In Light*, McLeod), which has also been affirmed by Haunani-Kay Trask and Kyle Powys Whyte,<sup>163</sup> Long Soldier pushes up against the hollow "rights" rhetoric of the federal government with responsibilities and obligations, configured in diamond shapes that allow for multiple, polyphonic navigations. To create this star quilt, which, as Long Soldier notes, Lakota people "make and give to each other for special occasions" (Long Soldier, Interviewed by Kaveh Akbar), she sewed together one-foot long

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<sup>163</sup> Trask writes, "There is far too little discussion of our responsibilities [...] to our nations, to our families, to our communities, and to our world. Rights without responsibilities are the way of imperialism and colonialism, not the way of Native America" (Trask 88, qtd in *Justice* 263-264). Similarly, in "What Do Indigenous Knowledges Do for Indigenous Peoples?" Whyte writes that for "Anishinaabe people (Ojibwe, Odawa, Potawatomi), planning figures prominently in our societies as a responsibility and not just a right" (Whyte "What do Indigenous", 1).

cotton diamond pieces with copper wire, to take up an entire wall in the exhibition. Her text is laser-cut on each diamond of the quilt, in the form seen here in “Obligations 2”, printed *New Poets of Native Nations*:

As we  
embrace      resist  
the future    the present    the past  
we work      we struggle      we begin      we fail  
to understand    to find      to unbraid      to accept      to question  
the grief      the grief      the grief      the grief  
we shift      we wield      we bury  
into light      as ash  
across our faces (28)

The parallel placement of the apparent opposites—“embrace” and “resist”—suggest two different paths, both eventually leading the reader to the last line, “across our faces”. This typographical and linguistic relationship deepens the meaning of “Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ”, the exhibition’s title which, as Long Soldier says, has often been misappropriated or misunderstood (Long Soldier, Interviewed by Kaveh Akbar); humans and all living things are related, just as words, meanings, and teachings. Oppositions, then, are interdependent; to “embrace” one thing might mean to “resist” another, yet both of them lead us to the same combinatorial possibilities and unified ending. The polyphonic lines—each vertical descent occurring on the page simultaneously—reflect the poet’s own simultaneous interrogations and thought-music throughout her work concerning her responsibilities as a mother and artist, as well as echo the



sensory multiplicity throughout the exhibition itself; the audio recordings of the female Lakota community members, some of which can be heard through stepping into the installation pieces, paralleled with the visual experience, provide multi-dimensional ways to interact with histories and relationships. Two pieces, *ptepha* and *inyan*, are also lined with white sage and sweet grass respectively, adding an aural-sensory experience.

Embracing the struggles of the past, present or future, the act/art of bearing a child or a poem, or resisting the colonial rhetoric in the federal “resolution”, are all possible paths that complexify at the poem’s centre, and then rejoin the physicality in the line “across our faces”, which refocus on the body as a site of communication. Her sixth line which repeats “the grief” in horizontal unison is a keystone that holds the diamond together, where the two reflecting triangles meet; grief is our unavoidable common denominator that we must pass through. Simultaneously, the star quilt’s compressed yet dynamic tension of concurrent meanings reflect a transference on a politically-charged level: after a speech in 2015 by Barack Obama at the Lake Area Technical Institute in Watertown, South Dakota, Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota artist DeVon Burshiem presented the former president with a star quilt, to which she had stitched “NOKXL” on the back, meaning “No Keystone XL Pipeline”<sup>164</sup>, a political, ecological stance embedded in a culturally significant gesture (Johansen 126). The inertia of compression and expansion of the diamond shape emphasises the equaliser of this poem where the two reflected triangles converge at a lateral expanse—“the grief”—echoing the emotional meeting place of the audience during this particular speech which preceded the beginning of the #NoDAPL protests in April 2016.

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<sup>164</sup> The permit for the extension to the 1,200-mile Keystone XL Pipeline due to run through Montana, South Dakota and Nebraska, approved by Donald Trump in 2017, was rescinded by President Biden on the day he took office, January 20, 2021.

Similarly, Long Soldier's piece "Obligations 1", following the same shape, interweaves responsibilities and family relations:

When I  
was young      grew older  
I learned from      I taught      I relied on  
my mother      my father      my children      my grandchildren  
how      reasons      where      to whom      always  
to speak      to speak      to speak      to speak  
truthfully      carefully      meaningfully  
digging stones      threading grasses  
from our chests (27)

One variation of the diamond can be read, "When I was young I learned from my mother how to speak truthfully digging stones from our chests", and another, "When I grew older I learned from my children" or "I taught my children" (Long Soldier *New Poets* 27), etc. As I have outlined, Long Soldier has expressed motherhood not only as a responsibility but as a continuum of learning, doing, physical transference, and reception. Here, each family member also encounters roles of transference and reception which shift throughout their lives. Thus, the textual recreation of the star quilt maps the threads of Lakota transference as a "way of modeling these bonds", as Schützenberger writes, through the shape's continued significance. "Transgenerational" (Schützenberger 3) connections can be, therefore, *transtextural*<sup>165</sup>: as Bitsui's densely

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<sup>165</sup> I am introducing this term to describe that which sets kinetic patterns with the text in relationship with kinetic patterns outside of the text. While Genette's term *transtextual* (*The Architext: an Introduction*, 83-84) relates a text to other texts, *transtextural* relates the interwoven fabrics of the text's structure or elements with interwoven patterns and relationships outside of the text, predominantly and in this case textile fabrics.

compressed images echo the “dynamic” compression of Diné tapestry patterns, which in turn reflect the close-knit kin relations in K’é, what Bitsui calls “the web” (Bitsui, PI), Long Soldier’s shape enables textual bonds which mirror textural bonds, which in turn mirror familial bonds. These embodied poems engage the reader’s participation in tracing multiple, simultaneous potentialities of experience, a prism of possibility against the monovocal dimensionality federal “resolution”. Its self-protection in defense of a single narrative is what Long Soldier’s “Obligations” series deconstructs in its kinetic unbraiding of relationships and pathways, while also drawing our attention to non-human relations: “digging stones” or “threading grasses” “from our chests”. Even more, her shape creates a non-hierarchical geometry—again reinstating Arthur Sze’s negation of linguistic hierarchies in the epigraph, “No word has any special hierarchy over any other” (2)—in which all of the words bear equal sonoric and textual weight, rather than the federal document’s supposed superior infallibility (*WHEREAS* 2). By expressing “all of these items (context, meaning, purpose) not in their separate parts but as a whole” (Ortiz 39) as Ortiz writes, Long Soldier affirms her statement about both learning and teaching “all of it the pieces”, particularly from a mother’s physical experience (75). Indeed, the non-hierarchical semantic relations in the patterned star quilt extend to its historical connections; star quilts were originally bison hide robes made by Lakota women in the midst of the extermination of bison, the sale of allotments of Lakota land to non-native settlers, and the reduction of federally sanctioned reservations. The pattern charts both transference of this memory, ongoing cultural survival, and reflective, interconnected relationships, while disrupting the quilt as an emblem of female domesticity. The poem’s patterns of embodied transference, inspired by past and present

Lakota women, provide a textual and physical polychronography<sup>166</sup> (Russo 55) of female possibility, history, and futurity.

### *Non-Matrifocal Embodied Poems*

Long Soldier's embodied poems or shape poems could be regarded as contributing to the lineage of concrete poems<sup>167</sup>, especially considering the influence of bpNichol and Aram Saroyan on her work, however, I argue that reframing these structures as embodied poems allows for more political and visceral representation than simply a reflection of a shape mirroring its content, or experimental typography. In the previous section, I outlined the visual representations in Long Soldier's embodied shape poems about motherhood, and in this section, I will discuss some of her shape poems which are not directly related to maternity, but whose use of spatial iconicity and multi-representational forms are more a kinetic, philosophical critique of colonial othering, land grabbing, and the reception of the apology. I focus on her five-poem sequence called "Ĥe Sápa", the initial sequence of the collection, as well as her poem in the shape of a hammer, found in the "Resolutions" section.

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<sup>166</sup> Featured in *Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing Within the Anthropocene*, polychronography is defined: "[...]To name measurements of time reflexively and make awareness of multiple flows incantatory—a poetics of temporal and temporary reverie. To embed personal events within human and more-than-human temporalities. To make referents slippery, to let action in one time flow become a current in another. To use sounds as connectives across temporalities. To body time. [...]"

Polychronography requires cut-ups and attenuations [...] Polychronography recognizes and enacts multiple understandings of temporality [...]. It can wade into deep time, the deep present, globalization's collapse of time zones, and even models of the universe that exile time" (Russo et al. 55-56).

<sup>167</sup> As coined by Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Augusto de Campos in their concrete manifesto in 1958. Long Soldier employs concrete poetry concerning "spatial disposition", as Marjorie Perloff asserts, closer to the Noigandres group in which de Campos took part, rather than the Poundian ideogram (Perloff 195). However, in this section, I elaborate on Long Soldier's poetry being distinct from concrete poetics.

“Concrete” poetry has a long history, dating back to Greek poets of the third century A.D.<sup>168</sup>, while more modern appearances are found in Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* collection which includes a variety of shape poems of animals, flowers and objects; George Herbert’s “Easter Wings”, which in its sideways format resembles angels’ wings; Dylan Thomas’s experimental poems in diamond shapes; pre-war Russian Futurists; E.E. Cummings’s work; and the Brazilian Noigandres concreticism in the mid 1950s. While Herbert’s inspiration was likely Hellenistic, more modern “verbivocovisual” poetry often follows Augusto de Campos’s concretism, that is, to avoid words “as mere indifferent vehicles, without life, without personality, without history—taboo-tombs in which convention insists on burying the idea”<sup>169</sup> (Armand 213). However, the recent anthology published in June of 2020, *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979* edited by Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre, broadly defines “concrete” as “any writerly practice that is underscoring the visual or sonic components of language activated in a direction to, or at least in tension with, their semantic charge”. Long Soldier certainly achieves this—much poetry outside of the vertically linear block does—yet, the anthology, which is a comprehensive overview of international visual and digital invention across those 20 years, is even more inclined towards abstraction. Although underscoring the “embodied properties of language” as reviewer Theodora Walsh states, it vacillates keenly towards image, which is why the book serves more as an “exhibition” in which the poems are “gazed upon”, and are dependent on the object of the book itself, “not the content poured onto the page” (Walsh,

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<sup>168</sup> See the work of poet and grammarian Simmias of Rhodes of the Alexandrian School during the Hellenistic period, whose visual poems were in the shapes of wings (both wings as opposed to Long Soldier’s singular wing) and an egg, for example (Liceti 59).

<sup>169</sup> “Concrete Poetry: A Manifesto” was originally published in *AD-arquitetura et decoração 20* (November/December 1956), São Paulo, Brazil, originally translated into English from the Portuguese by John Tolman, and reprinted in *Contemporary Poetics*, edited by Louis Armand.

“Endless”). Long Soldier’s embodied poems, their political, personal, and relational representations in both the figural image and the charged white space, are distinct from forms of visual concretism which privilege graphic arrangements and detached signifiers. Emmett Williams’s introduction to *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967), although only providing three examples of women writers, suggests a more applicable definition to that of Balgiu and de la Torre, which places “the emphasis on *poetry* rather than on *Concrete*” (v). The visual aspect, in analogy with the visual arts in the mid-20th century, is, Williams writes, “but a single (though consequential) aspect” of the work in his anthology, which often asks “to be completed or activated by the reader [...] using the semantic, visual, and phonetic elements of language as raw materials” (Williams vi). Long Soldier furthers this activation by somatic element of language and the language of somatic gesture as a material, which the reader is likewise invited to activate.

Many contemporary indigenous poets are not reticent about engaging shapes and forms, and do so with bold experimentation and intended textual movement, a visual component will perhaps always represent the minority of published poems. For instance, Laura Tohe’s “Map Songs of the Sandhill Cranes” outline the pattern of two flying sandhill cranes; Crisosto Apache’s (Mescalero Apache, Chiricahua Apache and Diné) “*Ndé Isdzan* (“Two of Me”)) is a colliding helix of two selves, female and male, a bi-stable form such as Rubin’s vase, depicting both female and male genitalia; Abigail Chabitnoy’s (Aluutiq) “July 26, 2015” is a recreation of a non-linear shopping list complete with notes, crossed out words, and arrows, and “Elocution Lessons” includes a line of downward arrows in a box to represent shark teeth. Joy Harjo attributes shape experiments in indigenous poetry to the poet’s efforts to “carry out established tribal form” (Harjo *When the Light* 2), and, following her notion that poets have “poetry

ancestors” (5), perhaps new embodied or shape poems have “form” ancestors: Hedge Coke’s mound poems echo the physical structure of mound-building cultures as I will explain in Chapter 3, and Bitsui’s textual forms discussed in Chapter 1 (in “River” and “*Nilchi*” for instance) may have connections to the practice of sand paintings, which his grandfather performed as a medicine man<sup>170</sup>. Many indigenous poets, however, Tommy Pico (Kumeyaay) and Julian Talamantez Brolaski (Mescalero and Lipan Apache) for example, don’t necessarily carry traditional forms or modes of translingualism into English, and, as Harjo writes, “work within generational urban cultural aesthetics” (Harjo, *When the Light* 2). Long Soldier’s use of shape and visual representation engages a space of interrogation, like the contours of a question mark. Her shapes recognise the experiences of “guardian relatives”, not as “historical accounts” but as “survivors”, so that “dis-appearances of Native women are not imagined, but inherited, embodied memories” (Erdrich, *When the Light* 100). This distinction is helpful in reading Long Soldier’s embodied poems “from place” and “related to place”, which claim the poet’s act of “power and profound connection” (101) to ongoing history.

The third section in her piece “*Ħe Sápa*”—the Lakota name for the sacred Black Hills—has four adjacent, unpunctuated lines of text in the shape of a square or box. In her review of the collection, Crystal Alberts argues that this poem “invokes the boundaries of a reservation, implies the destruction of Indigenous cultures through the emptiness between the lines” (Alberts 133). However, I argue that the visual form offers much more complexity. Alberts’s reading risks seeing this poem as a shape of victimry, which, as I have mentioned, Vizenor warns against.

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<sup>170</sup> On sand paintings, Bitsui remarks: “Those are so complex as well, you’re literally pinching colored sand over the earth, they’re also very temporal, they’re quickly erased after the ceremony. Sometimes during some of the ceremonies, you might have a sand painting the size of a hogan, and it’s just this piece of art. It’s so beautiful, but as soon as it’s over it’s just swept away” (Bitsui, PI).

Instead, I argue it is a refracted question regarding not only one's gaze but one's relationships, what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls "positive mirroring". The top line of the square reads "This is how you see me the space in which to place me" (8), echoing the confinements of the essentialist assumptions or othering of indigenous people and geographical containment. Each of the other three lines rearranges the words in this initial line:

This is how you see me the space in which to place me

The space in me you see is this place

To see this space see how you place me in you

This is how to place you in the space in which to see

Firstly, because of her aposiopesis—breaking off at the end of each line as if in mid-sentence—as well as the capitalised first word which indicates the clockwise movement of the phrases, Long Soldier's spatial dynamics create a perpetual centripetal force, in which one feels necessarily compelled to follow its trajectory, even if the poet has provided openings. As opposed to the curve of the womb in "Dilate", these spatial boundaries recall the process of "edging" which Warren Cariou asserts is what "creates slums and Indian reserves, and also what enables the relatively wealthy and privileged to enjoy their place in the nation without being bothered by the horrific inequities that typify colonial reality on this continent" (Cariou 32). Not



unlike Carious's reflection on Marvin Francis's poem "Edgewalker", Long Soldier illuminates and travels along these imposed boundaries, "making them visible again and providing a necessary window across them" (32). Thus, this poem in the "Ĥe Sápa" sequence is another echo of Ortiz's notion that a poem is perception—here reflecting a window of and beyond postcolonial edges—as well as a visual representation of George Yancy's "disagreeable mirror" (Yancy, "The Ugly Truth"), held up to their reader to bring the geographical and psychological constraints of reservations and ecocritical concerns into focus. Long Soldier's "Ĥe Sápa" sequence suggests that sacred land cannot be sanctioned off as property, the Black Hills being a place of contention for over 150 years. As Nick Estes outlines, in 1868, the government signed the second Fort Laramie Treaty with the Sioux Nations guaranteeing their sovereignty and ownership of the sacred Black Hills. When General George Custer announced the discovery of gold in Black Hills in 1876, it triggered an influx of white settlers who invaded the land for gold. The violation of the Fort Laramie treaties, statehood of North and South Dakota and "anti-Indian sentiment" in order to secure land led to the Wounded Knee Massacre (Estes, "Fighting" 116-117). In 1980, the federal Indian Claims Commission offered the Sioux \$102 million in restitution for the Black Hills, which the Lakota nations refused.

Here, following the notion of the mirror, I would like to establish a correlation between this poem's minimalist shape and rearranged syntax, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's rumination on Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus*. The latter tells a story of interviewing someone in the Mohawk community, to whom Simpson asks: "What is the ideal form of membership for us? What do you think makes someone a member of the community?". The interviewee answers with another question: "When you look in the mirror, what do you see?"

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson underscores how the interviewee's response is "reflecting the academy and the researcher back onto us", which refuses "the framings, the constraints, and the outright lies, and misinformation of the academy" (Simpson, *As We Have* 79). At the same time, his question doesn't provide a panacea for how or whether "someone else belongs", but rather "asks us to consider" how we ourselves belong; as Long Soldier writes in her 9th "Whereas" poem, "you're old enough now to look at yourself full-on" (70). Leanne Simpson finds that this question thus provokes a critical examination; "how I reflect, act, model, and embody my belonging back to my family, community, and nation" (*As We Have* 179). Long Soldier's poem asks similar questions by firstly reflecting the visually-symbolic mirror back at us, so that we recognize our gazes and fixtures, perhaps specifically towards people of native nations, whether intentionally or not, and secondly, how we perceive ourselves, an inverse double consciousness. Whereas Paula Gunn Allen distinguished a sense of alienation as an overlapping theme in native literature in the late 1970s, Long Soldier alienates the reader by putting them in the space of their own gaze, suggesting that the poet is—rather projected as alienated from the outside—engaging in her own relational terms in her community, on her ancestral land (Allen "Stranger" 2)<sup>171</sup>. The poem therefore acts as a refractory mirror; the reader reflects a gaze onto an "other", while the linguistic reflection of that very line on the bottom of the square reads, "To see this space see how you place me in you", suggesting that one can also agonise over where and how someone else should belong or be seen, usurping someone's own self-reflection. Long Soldier reflects these potential misconceptions back at us and asks the reader to question the boundaries

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<sup>171</sup> This recalls Sartre's third state of ontological being, being-for-others, in which one's gaze allows for both a sense of objectivity, which is how the self can be conceived, but also a conflict or alienation from the self and thus, perhaps initially, a threat to one's freedom (Crowell, "Existentialism")

we set, just as Audra Simpson's story prompts Leanne Simpson to extend these reflexive questions to the non-human:

Does that moose see me as someone who is engaging with her in the relational terms set out in our diplomacy? Does she feel respected and that she has sovereignty and agency over the act of harvesting? Or have my actions made her feel like a resource? Does she see me as the enemy? Does she feel exploited? Unseen? Unrecognized? Hunted? [...] What makes me a member of my nation? What am I contributing? How am I living Nishnaabewin? [...] What do I see when I look in the mirror? A list of negative stereotypes? The positive attributes? [...] How am I recognized? (*As We Have* 180)

Simpson's extensive set of questions on recognition and self-reflection are in dialogue with Long Soldier's doubly reflected mirror. The "space in which to place me" can therefore refer to the way we question our contributions and actions towards respecting the agency of the land and non-humans, and it evaluates the 150-year coveting of *Ĥe Sápa* as "a resource" that is "unseen", "hunted" as Simpson writes above. Returning briefly to Long Soldier's emotional plea in her "I want a President" text, she attempted to hold up the same bifocal mirror to the federal government in reference to the development of the DAPL and the excessive violence on the water protectors, by asking: do you recognise the space you've placed us in? Are you acting as if you have a brother, sister, or mother in the same position? How are you contributing? What do you see in the mirror? Simpson calls this "positive mirroring" (180): "Positive mirroring creates positive identities; it creates strong, grounded individuals and families and nations within Indigenous political systems. So at the same time I am looking into the mirror, I also am the mirror" (180-182). Long Soldier's poem then, is not a facsimile of what it feels like—human or non-human—to be contained, boxed, othered, exploited, but rather presents a question and a mirror, each side of the poem syntactically rearranged from another angle in order to reformulate our self-reflective questions. Visual artist Carolina Caycedo, whom I mention in more detail in

Chapter Four, brings river portraits of the Cauca River in Colombia to the viewer inside a museum space as a mirror of the self, whereas, as Diaz notes, water is typically exploited and pumped in every direction away from its source, largely invisibilised, and taken for granted in cities<sup>172</sup> (Diaz and Caycedo, “Borderlands”). Long Soldier, in a similar sense, brings us *Ĥe Sápa* as well as its relationality to the page, which provides the poem-as-mirror. Recalling okpik’s aforementioned lesson from Sze, okpik describes “seeing an object from many points of departure or angles: as if it were a crystal ball hanging from a string, multi-faceted, collecting light while twirling in freedom” (“Uncoverage” 228). Indeed, Long Soldier leaves asymmetrical spaces in the square shape as if a refracted light is passing through, allowing space for anti-colonial individuality to be alternatively perceived. As Sze explains, white space is an “active” “counterpoint to sound”, which can, as in Asian calligraphy, shift our attention from the black ink to the white (the calligrapher is instructed to “paint the white”) and which charges the poem in its reflection on perception itself (Sze, “An Interview” 211).

Parallel with the poem’s mirror-like form is a perhaps unintentional allusion to the boxwork formation in Wind Cave in the Black Hills region, where the Lakota believe their people emerged from the underworld. Boxwork is composed of lines of calcite that project from cave walls and cross each other at various angles, forming a box structure (“Speleothems”). These boxed calcite blades could therefore represent the other side of the colonial mirror; a form of the poet’s Lakota vision of the self, influenced by an attention to the forms of natural kinetics. Furthermore, the first poem in the five-sequence piece tackles the settler translation of “*Ĥe Sápa*”

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<sup>172</sup> In her conversation with Caycedo, Diaz notes: “By the time our water arrives indoors to us, it’s called dead water because all of its energy has been diminished in some way. [...] The fact that we normally used to situate our homes and our communities by the water, because of its importance to us and [...] the further into architecture and things, we lose that type of relationship, and we lose that energy [...]” (Diaz and Caycedo, “Borderlands”).

into English as “Black Hills” or “Pahá Sápa”, when the Lakota word actually means “mountain”, thus diminishing it. Eventually the phrase was re-translated, but Long Soldier’s evocation of the original name, and “the influence of English translation” is reflected in her typographical square, in which the rearrangement of the words “This is how you see me the space in which to place me” on each side could likewise be read as false translations which were remembered that way, as arbitrary borders and stereotypes contain and maintain falsities.

The following poem, the fourth in the “Ĥe Sápa” sequence, takes up the theme of “*wanbli*”, meaning eagle in Lakota, as does the poem’s form; the right-aligned text fans out like a bird’s wing. The poet begins with the admission that because of her lack of fluency of Lakota, she cannot quite begin where she ought—the apology—which instead curls itself up in the tension of language. Long Soldier presents instead the image of an eagle, which is not “spotted”<sup>173</sup>, or bald”—the bald eagle embodying, for most Americans, the symbol of nationalism on the presidential seal and presidential flag. Her “*wanbli*” is a golden one, although, she specifies, not the “Golden Eagle”, not a “ground-gold / man-gold, or nugget”, which one might associate with the eagle on the American gold bullion coin, a reminder of the colonial exploitation surrounding the scramble for Ĥe Sápa. Instead, it is “the gold of light and wind together. / Wings that do not close but in expanse / angle up so slightly[.]” (9). The text itself angles upward, forming the wings of an eagle flying down the page, resembling the bird’s “plunge with muscle / and stout head somewhere between / my uncle, son, father, brother”, leading to the question in her final two lines: “in the plunge we fear for the falling in how we buckle to wonder: “*What man is*

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<sup>173</sup> As Thomas Gannon writes in his book *Skylark Meets Meadowlark*, in one of the first Lakota publications, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933), Luther Standing Bear’s homeland is called that of the Spotted Eagle, which Gannon suggests reflects “the Lakota belief that man did not occupy a special place in the eyes of Wakan Tanka, the Grandfather of us all”, and that both humans and birds were “*oyate*”, or “people” (Gannon 12).

*expendable?*”. The text’s winged descent forms its dual meaning; the body of the poem itself “buckles”—bending or giving way—under the weight of its own question, and the question itself buckles in italics: it is the question the poet has wanted to ask from the poem’s outset, but could not.

Her final section “Resolutions” uses the text of the apology itself; one poem labeled “(5)” forms the shape of a hammer, for instance. Unsatisfied with the apology’s superficial promise towards a “brighter future where all the people of this land live reconciled as brothers and sisters” (93), she writes an initial line to this poem which is separated from the hammer shape: “I express commitment to reveal in a text the shape of its pounding” (93). Each letter in the subsequent shape poem is spaced apart, suggesting microcosms of a hammer’s pounding, while spelling out the apology’s exhausting, hypocritical directive: “expresses its regret for the ramifications of former wrongs and its commitment to build on the positive relationships of the past and present to move towards a brighter future where all the people of this land live reconciled as brothers and sisters and harmoniously steward and protect this land together” (93). Simultaneously, the shape activates the charged white spaces between each letter; the spaces themselves seem to suggest the very “the shape of its pounding”, the haunting lightness or hidden manifestations of trauma that these words can produce in the body. The statement is only one of many false ideals of ecological protection on the part of the government, and thus the pounding is a recurring one. Long Soldier’s spacing renders the text almost illegible, emphasising the irony of their “commitment” in the face of their indecipherable, underhanded non-delivery, and innumerable colonial “wrongs”. As a result, the reader primarily perceives the shape of the hammer rather than the text it spells out, embodying both this physical pounding

effect and the irrefutable federal judgement. This poem's typography therefore points to Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja's explanation of how native artists engage in "visual sovereignty": by framing, "from wam-pum belts to film", "more imaginative, pleasurable, flexible, and often humorous renderings of Native American intellectual and cultural paradigms [...] than are often possible in official political contexts" (Raheja 29). In her imaginative visual response to the apology, the poet asks, whose voices are lost in this pounding directive? What shape does pounding language take in the body? And once again, what or who is expendable, and who decides?

Long Soldier's visual poems are "navigating the spaces between" the insufficiencies of language, as poet Kaveh Akbar suggests, where understanding is visual or physical (Interview with Akbar). Even more, typographical spatiality embodied with semantic meaning and kinetic iconicity undermine the government's two-dimensional apology, in which there was *only* content, and a lack of physical enactment. These typographical aspects cannot be translated into performance, which is why pages in a book, despite being "cavernous places, white at entrance, black in absorption" (61) as Long Soldier writes, are spaces to visually and physically transform. Her self-reflexive thought-music in her embodied shape poems therefore include the reader, an essential part of Ortiz's notion of the active story: "(The storyteller) participates in the story with those who are listening. The listeners in the same way are taking part in the story. The story includes them in. You see, it's more like an event, the storytelling. The story is [...] occurring, coming into being" (Ortiz, "What Indians Do" 104). Long Soldier's visual animation creates a proximity, "troubling the safe distance we imagine between a speaker and poet" (104), which develops a "music scape", as Joy Harjo says (Harjo, "Beyond Language").

## The “Disclaimer”

In this final section, I will examine Long Soldier’s “Disclaimer” on the last page of *WHEREAS*, in which the three-fold phrase “grassesgrassesgrasses” encompasses personal and historical relationships with the Lakota land and breaks from the federal disclaimer’s self-proclamation of hierarchical infallibility. In her essay “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom”, Sylvia Wynter traces a lineage of hierarchies in society beginning with Greek taxonomies, which were reclassified and institutionalised in Christian hierarchies (for instance the divine knowledge of priests), and were finally reframed by the self-proclaimed dominant white society, not to distinguish between those who are righteous and those who have sinned, but to separate people as either rational or irrational, the latter being a “space of otherness” (274). This “by-nature” irrationality legitimised the efforts, in the case of European colonisation of the Americas, to govern and dominate the designated “irrational” cultures which could apparently not govern themselves (264). Wynter argues, in line with Warrior’s thoughts on taxonomies described in Chapter 1, that this hierarchy of rationality enabled “the modern state’s own secular goals of imperial territorial expansion”, by which indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans became the “physical referents” of America’s “reinvention of medieval Europe’s Untrue Christian Other” (265). This translates, in some ways, into institutionalised rhetoric, as Lee Maracle asserts: “For Native people, the ridiculousness of European academic notions of theoretical presentation lies in the inherent hierarchy retained by academics, politicians, lawmakers, and law keepers. Power resides with the theorists as long as they use a language no one understands” (Maracle, “Oratory” 238–39). One must “be fluent” in these linguistic codes,



Amiri Baraka writes, “to be any kind of ‘success’” in a hegemonic culture. “Semantic philosophers”, Baraka continues, “are certainly correct in their emphasis on the final dictation of words over their users”, however, while “words have users, [...] users have words”. Indeed, words which dictate “social hegemony” often “become, even informally, laws” (Baraka 423). These hierarchies, and the “space of otherness” they form (Wynter 274), are present in the federal apology’s disclaimer:

- (b) DISCLAIMER.—Nothing in this Joint Resolution—
  - (1) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or
  - (2) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.

Long Soldier uses their metalanguage against them in her own inverted “Disclaimer” at the end of her collection:

Nothing in this book—

- (1) authorizes or supports any claim against Layli Long Soldier by the United States; or
- (2) serves as a settlement of any claim against Layli Long Soldier by the United States, here in the grassesgrassesgrasses (original spacing, 101).

Firstly, Long Soldier subverts the protection the federal government endows itself with, insisting on her own autonomy of expression, which indeed has proven effective in terms of recognition; *WHEREAS* has gained more readership and attention than the apology did when it was released. However, their legally unopposable self-authorisations adhere to Roland Barthes’s fourth and seventh categories of myth; firstly, the document is tautological—the federal text defines like by like, and thus cannot be refuted—and secondly, it presents statements as facts—a universal, proverbial metalanguage that disallows any explanation. Barthes writes: “Since it [tautology] is magical, it can of course only take refuge behind the argument of authority: thus do parents at the

end of their tether reply to the child who keeps on asking for explanations: ‘*because that’s how it is*’, or even better: ‘*just because, that’s all*’” (*Mythologies* 153). Long Soldier’s own disclaimer therefore reiterates Sze’s quote in her epigraph, that no word has any hierarchy over another, countering these “semantic rituals of power” (Baraka 423).

Secondly, the federal disclaimer is used to as Barak continues, “trip a familiar lever of social accord”, to “recreate instantly the understood hierarchy of social, and by doing that, cultural, importance” (423). In response, Long Soldier ironically echoes the punctuation of the federal disclaimer, until surprising the reader with a gap before her three-fold “grassesgrassesgrasses”. Here the poet recalls Andrew Myrick’s dehumanising words “let them eat grass”, which exemplify Wynter’s “by-nature” “space of otherness”, and returns full circle to Long Soldier’s opening line of the collection—“Now / make room in the mouth / for grassesgrassesgrasses” (5). As Long Soldier recounts in her poem “38”, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dakota territory was portioned off into a miniscule percentage of their original hunting land, and the majority of the plains buffalo were slaughtered. Government traders wouldn’t issue food credits to the Dakota and Lakota nations, leaving them to starve. As a reaction, the Dakota organized killings of settlers and traders. This “Sioux Uprising” ended in 1,000 Dakota people imprisoned, thirty-eight hanged (the largest mass hanging in US history), and their land ceded to the government. One of the traders who wouldn’t issue food was Andrew Myrick, who is quoted to have said, “If they are hungry, let them eat grass” (53). He was one of the first to be killed in the Sioux Uprising, and, as Long Soldier writes in “38”:

When Myrick’s body was found,

his mouth was stuffed with grass. (53)

The line is weighted with two juxtaposed phrases, reenacting the tension between Myrick's dehumanising statement and his death sentence. Following this line, Long Soldier writes that she is "inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem" (53), as "*Real' poems do not 'really' require words*" (53). This gesture was a "real" wordless poem; its effect lasted for decades through oral accounts, which Long Soldier brings into the broader American consciousness here

<sup>174</sup>. In "38", she continues:

I have italicized the previous sentence to indicate inner dialogue, a revealing moment.

But, on second thought, the words "Let them eat grass" click the gears of the poem into place. (53)

This retelling through the poet's "inner dialogue" does not rely on a "space of otherness" or the hierarchical codes outlined by Wynter and Baraka, but rather story and revelation; "human beings doing something, real characters working out the process of thought and being", as Maracle states (Maracle, "Oratory" 238–39). Even more, in her gap before "grassesgrassesgrasses", Long Soldier recalls her thirteenth "Whereas" poem, as previously discussed, in which a gap occurs between "all of it" and "the pieces", showing the significance of each part within a whole. She insinuates an intertextual reference to her own thought music regarding maternal transference, and the historical story of hierarchies defined in language. Her gap represents this space of connection or revelation, rather than a fissure. As Maracle notes: "No thought is understood outside of humanity's interaction. [...] If it cannot be shown, it cannot be understood. Theory is useless outside human application" (238–39). Therefore, the poet typographically "clicks the gears of the poem into place", or trips this "familiar lever", as Baraka

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<sup>174</sup> Long Soldier explains in her conversation with Nick Estes that she had heard the story as a young child and it has made a significant impression on her. When she finally found a mode of retelling this story in a poem, "38" took at least two years to write (Long Soldier, Radcliffe).

writes, on her own terms, reiterating Lakota philosophies and interrelationalities that can be acted out physically, rather than dictated in a legalese which is neither respected nor personally enacted. Additionally, Larry Emerson states that “we only have to look in our own front yards to find the Indigenous in our lives, our histories, our languages, and our cultures. [...] Indigenous knowledge is not linear and is nonhierarchical. Indigenous knowledge stresses cooperation, not just competition; collective action, not just individuality; relationality, not just compartmentalization; [...]” (“Diné Culture” 63). Long Soldier’s “grassesgrassesgrasses”, triggered by this reiterated gap, enacts the “collective action” of the Dakota people and swings us back to, as Emerson says, “our own front yards”—the “grassesgrassesgrasses” where “histories”, “languages”, and “cultures” are located, though often erased or misrepresented.

Lakota poet Tiffany Midge similarly writes that when she was able to “strike hard into the locked internal landscapes” of her “being”—not unlike Long Soldier’s “grassesgrassesgrasses”—she “learned the true meaning of forgiveness” (qtd in Archuleta, “I Give You Back” 95). Long Soldier inverts the catachresis the federal disclaimer creates; lacking a name—or a physical gesture—for their unapologetic document, the government called it a “Resolution” and an “Apology”, ending with the “Disclaimer”, which are “quickly stitched” metaphors for their hierarchical, protective mechanisms (Baraka 423). Long Soldier renames what the federal government has misnamed: the typographical leap of “grassesgrassesgrasses” rejects their apology and discovers its own forms of forgiveness through poetic language which can be physically enacted in her community. While Myrick’s words and the federal disclaimer both reflect “a colonial relationship” of “domination,” forming a “sedimented set of hierarchical

social relations” (Coulthard 57, qtd in Stirrup 123), Long Soldier’s disclaimer provides a kinship towards people and land, part and whole, and a forgiveness regarding inherited trauma.

Jamaican poet Kei Miller, whose work challenges modern British colonial attitudes, language erasure and unaddressed historical violence, has said that if a poem does not reveal something, it isn’t finished (Miller, “Power of the Pen”). This final “grassesgrassesgrasses” also reveals that the “grasses” are a thread throughout Long Soldier’s collection, not only a reference to Myrick’s statement. In her poem, “Look”, she writes:

the light  
grass  
body  
whole  
wholly moves (11)

Each short line drops in a long vertical stem to the right of the page, mimicking the “stalk ’n root” that she pulls “up / from / black matte /soil” (11). Because of this internal music, as in “grassesgrassesgrasses”, the poem operates by spatially representing “the temporality of consciousness, and that which is successive becomes simultaneous” (Verani 643). The succession of “grassesgrassesgrasses” threads the simultaneous resistance towards Myrick’s utterance, the rejection of the apology’s “by-nature” “space of otherness”, and the grasses of Lakota and Dakota lands. Retelling this story provides the defiant thread that binds the collection, accessing the force of language beyond static and statistical rhetoric.

The poet’s keen awareness, interrogations, functional punctuation and “functional white” in the poems I’ve outlined in this chapter are grounded in maternal experience, and allow for

self-apology and forgiveness. This new typographical territory Long Soldier carves, her unpunctuated shifts in cadence, and her reflections on motherhood and womanhood merit close attention. Joy Harjo notes that birth is a beginning, but every beginning is also an ending, a transition she calls “honoring the becoming”, to realise that one can “make it through despair” (Harjo, “Poète”). Long Soldier’s rewritten apology is not a determined “resolution”, as the federal statement claimed itself to be, rather, her animated thought-music in these matrifocal poems translates the capacity of “honoring the becoming”, kinetic revelations and processes of thought that simultaneously end and begin.



## Chapter Three: Intertribal Topography: Form and Lexicon in Hedge Coke's

### *Blood Run*

#### Introduction

The indigenous burial, ceremonial and trading grounds of the Blood Run area, spanning across present-day Iowa and South Dakota, were said to have been occupied 8,500 years ago. Early evidence suggests there were 400 mounds in the area in the 17th century, and in the 19th century there were at least 275 documented burial mounds on the site, less than eighty of which are visible today (Vogt 29). Between 1675 and 1705, this site was the largest recorded Oneota site (Henning, "Archaeological" 435) where, as poet and activist Allison Adelle Hedge Coke writes, traditional, ceremonial and social activities were practiced by approximately 10,000 people of at least twelve different nations: Ho-Chunk, Otoe, Ioway, Kansa, Omaha, Missouri, Quapaw, Osage, Ponca, Arikara, Dakota and Cheyenne (Hedge Coke, *Blood Run* 1). This site, however, is only one of the historical, pre-colonial multi-tribal cities in North America that has been marked by ritualistic, cosmologically symbolic earthworks, for instance those at Newark in Ohio<sup>175</sup>. Colonists in America systematically failed to recognise the societal significance of native earthworks across the country, often hatching fanciful speculations that ancient civilizations such as the Vikings were the true architects, leading to further justification for the earthworks' destruction in favor of settler colonial housing and infrastructure (Hodges,

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<sup>175</sup> Ray Hively and Robert Horn found that the Octagon Earthworks in Ohio "encode the complicated 18.6-year-long cycle of Moon rises and sets" and shows "that the Hopewell had a strong concern for geometrical harmony" and celestial records which were likely relevant to their calendar (Lepper, "The Newark Earthworks and the Moon"). Alignments with the solstices are also likely at the Cahokia Earthworks (Chappell 169) and the mounds at Poverty Point, Louisiana (Marcus 11).



“America's Forgotten City”). In effect, decades after it had been finally confirmed that native nations had built these structures, the state or federal implementation of their protection has been precarious and their presence, like many other indigenous sacred monuments, has been neglected in American educational curricula. In the introduction to the anthology *Sing: Poets from the Indigenous Americas*, Hedge Coke writes that when she lived just east of Sioux Falls near Blood Run, she realised there was “nothing at all in the local curriculum about the site, though some of the builders’ descendents were within driving distance” (Hedge Coke, *Sing* 2). The College Board Advanced Placement (AP) Art History curriculum was only rewritten in the 2015/2016 school year to include historical and contemporary native art of North America, including earthworks. However, a mere 2,072 schools participated in the exam in 2015. Even more, the same year saw a retrograde shift after a controversy concerning this reformatted framework of the AP History exam, which was criticised by the Republican National Committee, among others, on the grounds that the exam showed America in “too negative a light”, without emphasising “American exceptionalism”. Regarding indigenous genocide, they criticised the exam for discussing the settlers’ “impact on Native Americans”, but not their “complex motivations for becoming pioneers”, so that “Manifest Destiny” is framed more as a concern for “economic opportunities and religious refuge” rather than a “belief in white racial superiority”. The framework had been amended in 2015 in favor of these criticisms, including the prevarication that Native American “‘resistance’ to westward expansion led to war” (Flaherty, “Revisiting History”). Sites such as Blood Run have therefore failed to penetrate the collective non-native consciousness; centuries of colonial desecration, forced removal from traditional indigenous territories, and the divorce of cultural significance from these monuments and burial

grounds have widened the gap in discourse surrounding the history and biodiversity of these sites.

Blood Run, or *Xe* in the Iowa-Ote language, means “where something is buried” (Schuler 102), not unlike the Latin *monumentum*, meaning to remind, denoting a burial place. *Blood Run: Free Verse Play* is the eponymous work published in 2006 by Hedge Coke, whose Tsalagi ancestors were also mound builders. The collection features persona poems—“Sun”, “North Star”, “Clan Sister”, “Fox” and many more—which disrupt the conventional first-person narrative by giving agency to the site’s voices themselves, in their historical zenith, colonial peril, and present-day precarity. *Blood Run* aimed to convince readers to acknowledge the “remains of extremely valuable civilizations [...]” (*Blood Run* 93), and Hedge Coke’s testimony even played a major role in the decision to protect the site: she read a version of the opening poem to South Dakota’s Game, Fish & Parks Department, whose representatives voted unanimously to protect part of the site, now called Good Earth State Park, after twenty-three years of deliberation (*Blood Run* 94). Poetry that directly influences policy is a rare event; in fact, although poetry has been used as inspiration for movements towards policy changes, I have yet to discover another poem that has had immediate and direct impact on a decision to pass an environmental protection law. Poets can, it turns out, be “the institutors of laws” as Percy Bysshe Shelley suggested (Shelley 28), despite George Oppen’s doubt, as Dembo writes, “that politics could be made into poetry or, conversely, that poetry could have any effect on social conditions” (Dembo, “Individuality”). Even more, Hedge Coke’s involvement in this state-level decision to protect Blood Run confirms Laguna Pueblo poet and scholar Paula Gunn Allen’s thoughts that indigenous writing “is never simply pure self-expression” (Blaeser, “Language, Tents” 35).

Indeed, *Blood Run*'s artistic and political achievements beyond self-expression have been largely overlooked.

Among the few interpretations of this work is Chadwick Allen's essay "Serpentine Figures, Sinuous Relations: Thematic Geometry in Allison Hedge Coke's *Blood Run*", which uncovers the numerical placement of the poems in the verse play, and the number of lines in each poem in relation to numerical systems that bear significance across certain indigenous belief systems, as well as the mathematical layout of the Cahokia earthworks in Ohio, particularly the famous Serpent Mound effigy. While this numerical analysis of the poems exemplifies Hedge Coke's dedication to the structural workings of *Blood Run* influenced by, as she mentioned in a personal interview, her father's interest in mathematical alignments (Hedge Coke, PI)<sup>176</sup>, this focus risks overlooking the verse play's complex *lexical* and *typographical* interplay and symbolism which reinterprets the site's *topographical* body regionalism<sup>177</sup>, including ceremonies and plant and animal life specific to the Blood Run site itself (Russo et al. 25).

Firstly, in this chapter, I argue that Hedge Coke's prosopopoeia—a device in which absent or dead figures or objects speak—decries national amnesia and ignorance of inter-tribal earthworks. Whereas Emily Dickinson's "supposed person(s)" (Farr 78) as she called her personas, may have given her more authorial control—her definition poems, for instance, in which she attempts to "name the enigma of the self", or in which she tries to obscure the object being defined by proposing a kind of "riddle", as in "A Visitor in Marl" or "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" (Mann 484)—Hedge Coke's persona poems redistribute a singular narrative voice to

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<sup>176</sup> I will be citing this personal interview as "PI" henceforth.

<sup>177</sup> In *Counter-Desecration*, body regionalism derives from "bioregion" (life-place) which defines "a place in terms of its life-sustaining systems rather than to ecologically irrelevant political boundaries (such as state and nation)". Body regionalism "acknowledges all bodies as inclusive of bioregion" and "harnesses implicit and explicit reciprocities to extend its possibilities" (Russo et al. 25).

the entities of the silenced site, each title naming the non-human entity itself which speaks<sup>178</sup>. In the first subsection, I argue that Hedge Coke's personas speak to their own kinetic interdependencies; that is, they reference one another's interactive movements on the site, which frees them from being conceived as static entities, and they also reference figures which do not speak in the verse play, suggesting their interrelationality is much larger than the text can contain. I then explore the characters' lists of site-specific lexicons—lists of flora, fauna, and artifacts at Blood Run that are either still thriving, or were once abundant. The colonial concept of land “containment”, as scholar Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua asserts, is perpetuated by the condition that land is property (qtd. in Goeman, “Land” 72), thus Hedge Coke's *Blood Run* is what I perceive as *counter-containment* poetry: her ecocritical literary earthworks vocalise the land's kinetics as meaning-making, rather than its monetary value, against postcolonial silencing and continuous threats. Hedge Coke's prosopopoeia is not a leftover maneuver of Romanticism—although one might associate it as such, Heid Erdrich and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson whom I mention in this chapter prove otherwise—but rather, these non-human utterances animate the site's lived non-human and human experience by breaking the “crypto-mechanism”, as Scheler writes, quoted by Merleau-Ponty, of our normative state of seeing (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 67). In the final subsection of section one, I discuss Hedge Coke's techniques of *decentring*, a term I develop from Arthur Sze, who taught Hedge Coke when she attended the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA). Hedge Coke's linguistic,

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<sup>178</sup> Similar definition poems are Sylvia Plath's “Mirror” and “Mushrooms” (“We are shelves, we are / Tables”) or more recently Kathleen Jamie's “Daisies” (“We are flowers of the common sward, that much we understand”), which approach more closely Emily Dickinson's “supposed person(s)”. Hedge Coke's personas are not isolated poems, rather, each poem contributes to the intertextuality orchestrated in the verse play, presenting a broader range of experience, explaining who and what they interact with, how they are respected and what they have experienced.

typographical precision and intertextuality through small-scale to cosmic-scale relationships, including what Sarah Bouttier calls “perceptual” and “linguistic constraints” (158), decenter or detract from a mono-authorial polestar and instead reinterpret the site’s autopoiesis. Her personas’ syntactically experimental and asyndental language decenter from the “authoritative self” narrative, as critiqued by Barthes, which, despite having descended from the post-war confessional apex, still remains mainstream in contemporary poetry.

I will move on to discuss the kinetic qualities of the visual iconicity and lineation of the mound poems—poems in which the different types of mounds themselves speak—and their contribution to the collection’s heteroglossia, rather than focusing on, as other scholars have done, the relationship to repatriation efforts and pitfalls of NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) or their mathematical correspondence to other earthworks. According to anthropologist Colin Betts, mound construction at Blood Run surged upon European settler contact as a cultural revitalisation movement (Betts 102). Hedge Coke’s mound voices are thus a form of revitalisation literature: her personas’ “tribalography”—the pulling together of the storyteller’s “people, the land, and all their manifestations and revelations”, and connecting them “in past, present, and future milieus” (Howe, “The Story” 42) as defined by Choctaw writer Leanne Howe—carefully illuminates the site’s social complexity. In the final section, I discuss Hedge Coke’s formal aesthetics—experimental syntax, word omissions, archaic expressions and obscure vocabulary—distinguishing her work from other modern prosopopoeiac texts, briefly comparing *Blood Run*’s diction to Heid Erdrich’s modern vocabulary in *National Monuments*. I interpret Hedge Coke’s traditional tone in line with Momaday’s conceptualisation of the storyteller-listener relationship. Finally, I explore how Hedge Coke

represents the relationality of her personas through the kinetic manifestations of a “testa”—shell or seed shape—conceit, echoing the movements of the physical site itself, and Hedge Coke’s patterns enabling an ontological “immersion within place”, informed by the poet’s own upbringing.

#### The Three Dawnings: *Blood Run’s* Prologue

Hedge Coke’s collection opens with a section called “Dawning”, which includes only one poem, “Before Next Dawning”, in what is presumed to be the voice of an omnipotent narrator, rather than one of the site’s characters. The word “dawning” lends itself to a tryptic that frames the poem; firstly, the native communities early settlement on the site, secondly the onset of colonial contact sparking disease and violence, and finally a dawning of contemporary and future indigeneity. In the first dawning, pre-colonial North America is represented as a place where “some hundred / million People were already so securely home” (7), while the *sun’s* dawning (5) orchestrated the daily and seasonal transmotion, Vizenor’s term for “a spirited and visionary sense of natural motion”, outlined in Chapter 1<sup>179</sup>. In line with Hedge Coke’s overture describing how the Oneota “lived, prospered [...] relishing afternoon Sun—easy” (6), is Rotinoshoni (Mohawk) scholar Taiaiake Alfred’s assertion, quoted in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s essay “Listening to Our Ancestors”, that “At the time of their first contact with Europeans, the vast majority of Native American societies had achieved true civilization: they did not abuse the earth, they promoted communal responsibility, they practiced equality in gender relations, and

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<sup>179</sup> Rigal-Cellard reminds us that Vizenor’s “transmotion” challenges “the intrusion of History into the mythic time and space of the Natives”, and in his book *The People Named the Chippewa* he stages “the struggle between Chronos, the Greek god of time, the father of History and chronology, and Naanabozho, the timeless trickster of the Anishinabeg” (Rigal-Cellard 34).

they respected individual freedom” (qtd. in Simpson 123). Simpson continues that in Indigenous environmental philosophies, “there is an acknowledgment that all of life is related and that all of our actions and choices have impacts on other living beings. [...] Balance, respect, and responsibility characterize this philosophy” (127). This balanced, pre-contact rhythm is reflected in the poem’s initial form; Hedge Coke’s lines are dispersed harmoniously, echoing pacifist intertribal settlements which “worked with one another as cities do”, as well as the creation of sacred spaces “honored with mounds”. Her overlaid, balanced lineation reconstructs this social organisation, but also recreates the layered features of earthworks themselves. Each line is staggered, overlapping the next, stabilising the poem’s structure and resembling the soil stratification that native communities used in mounds and pits:

In the midst, a trading place, settlement,  
six cultures, bands, tribes, ten thousand People, families  
entwined.  
This was a place where a traveler might rest, take water, elk  
meat catfish,  
delight in warm company after weariness. A place of peace,  
a place of Wáwan. (original spacing, 5)

Her superposed, almost trellised alignment stabilises the structure as if echoing the stratum of earth which stabilises the mound itself; the word “ten” in the second line, for example, is situated directly under the space in the previous line. Christopher Carr explains that in the Hopewell culture in Ohio, many earthworks were constructed using at least six layers of natural material, including vegetation-topped muck, light brown clay, and soil with differing darkness and texture, according to a stratigraphic profile from 1926 of the site (Case and Carr 95). At the Blood Run site, archeologists noted that layers of “ash, gummy dark soil, gravel, yellow soil and high clay content” were used to build the structures (Henning and Schermer 443). These topographical

alignments could also mirror the cosmological beliefs of Blood Run nations: the Osage creation story involves four divisions of the heavens, and Frederick Starr in 1893 described a mound on the Blood Run site with four soil layers. The Omaha group separated the sky into seven different realms, and indeed, this first stanza of the poem has seven overlapping lines (Case and Carr 95). A startling comparison to these layers, however, can be made with the layers of waste in illegal trash dumps across Dinétah, as mentioned in Chapter 1. Kim Smith, who was part of an effort to clean up a half-acre long dump, noted the layers of consumption that are polluting the Diné watershed: “The bottom layer was mainly tin, and then it started transitioning into glass, and started transitioning into plastic, [...] [this] archeology of how we consume and how we were introduced to capitalism, and how we were taught to consume through capitalism, but we weren’t necessarily shown to dispose of those things” (Smith, “Healing”). The very religion of capitalism, then, which formed the archeology of these modern trash mounds, is also what stripped many of Blood Run’s intentionally layered structures.

However, Hedge Coke’s visual iconicity also seems to provide room for the voices of the site, especially those buried within the earthworks, to breathe as well and to speak in the following monologues. In Hedge Coke’s words, a writer is “in the position to be able to cause a ripple, cause some sort of sensation, a bit of breathing space, a bit of comradery, the call to gather” (Hedge Coke, “Returning”). “Before Next Dawning” visually and structurally serves as this basis for comradery, and foreshadows the personas to come—the voices of the landscape and the human remains buried in veneration—with each space, as if allowing room for them to speak in their forthcoming monologues. Hedge Coke’s synchronicity also provides a spatial iconicity, as her caesuras interpret the communal effort and commitment to construct these mounds, which



likely took years: “[...] structures, from gathered earth hauled in baskets, / strategically placed, forming designs [...]” (5). Likewise, her half-rhymes—“tribes”, “entwined”, “rest” and “weariness” (5)—phonically emphasise harmonious ritual and a “transnational and ever-moving identity” (Carpenter and Kelsey 65). These spaces—or as Deleuze and Guattari might suggest, “multiple entryways”—are thus semantic, phonic, and visual (Deleuze and Guattari 12). Although *Blood Run*’s form is emblematic of Oneota life cycles and not fundamentally in accordance with Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome riff<sup>180</sup>, Hedge Coke’s typography recognises the topographical, cultural and interspecies linkages—or eternal multiplicities in the “ageless prairie” (Hedge Coke 9) at the pre-colonial settlement.

Hedge Coke’s opening poem also demonstrates what vital materialism or material ecocriticism often overlooks; continued indigenous systems of knowledge about local ecosystems, an understanding of the complex processes which enable those ecosystems to thrive, and a sacred sense of place, which the indigenous ancestors of Blood Run maintain. Landscape architect Brenda Williams was hired in 2015—at a point when conflicts left tribal consultants who have ancestral ties to the area “distrustful” of state officials—to work on a master plan for the Iowa portion of the Blood Run site (Schuler 106). Unlike South Dakota state officials, Williams was more perceptive in asking the tribal representatives—including Lance Foster, the tribal historic preservation officer (THPO) for the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska; Randy Teboe, who “consulted at Blood Run on behalf of the Ponca and is THPO for the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska”; and Omaha tribal member Marisa Miakonda Cummings—what *they* envisioned, and made sure they were at the forefront of the decision-making process. Cummings

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<sup>180</sup> For instance, “The Tree at Eminija Mounds” speaks in the verse play, trees being Deleuze and Guattari’s symbol of supposedly “arborified” binaries which obstruct desire’s production (Deleuze and Guattari 14).

commented, “We want to educate people. We want to show them all of our biodiversity. We want to show that we weren’t roaming around just chasing a buffalo with a spear, but that we were agriculturalists. We were engineers. We were architects” (110). Teboe describes his ancestral connection to the site, which he notes was “a refuge, far from the conflicts erupting on the East Coast”: “I was out there by myself, and I could hear drums and singing. I went to a different part of the park, and I could smell food cooking.” (118). Hedge’s Coke’s opening in *Blood Run* reflects these continued knowledge systems, interspecies reciprocity, and inherited connections: “This is world history. This gorgeous settlement / nettled with bluestem, red grass—Blood Run. Pitted pink granite testament to thriving culture / of time before New Dawn, before disease, / new ways iron blades, guns money—” (8). These lines echo Simon Ortiz’s assertion that “the knowledge of land, culture, and community as [...] experienced, ascertained, evolved, created by Indigenous peoples is basic and primary”, and that “Europeans knew [...] next to nothing about the Indigenous lands of the continents and adjacent islands; they relied, in fact, practically and necessarily, upon Indigenous native peoples (Ortiz and McAdams, “A Conversation” 2). Material ecocriticism’s manifesto, as delineated by Timothy Clark, that the “material and natural world is [no longer] falsely conceived as the realm of passive, separate entities, ripe to be used at will as resources for humanity” (Clark, *The Value* 114) has been the belief, as Hedge Coke’s spatial iconicity and depiction of Blood Run suggests, of many indigenous communities for millennia. This typographical complexity is an introduction to the interrelational plexus explored in the rest of the collection.

Indeed, the poem’s spacing soon tightens and the rhythm quickens upon the arrival of “Strangers”, the encroachment of European settlers. The Strangers arrive in “hordes in boats”

and with their colonies come “Disasters drifting their journeys’ wake”; they “incinerated in Night”, “entire families sleeping peacefully / waiting for dawn” (6). This second dawning, the colonial commandeering, embodies chaos and darkness, a dichotomy with the mollifying, rhythmic solar dawn. The dawn in pre-contact times prophesied of a peaceful continuation, until settler occupation: “this Hemisphere spanning / from the Arctic to Antarctic where some hundred / million People were already so securely home, before this dawning” (7). Subsequently, as the poem’s breathing space decreases, “neoliberal earthworks”, as Anne Stewart calls them (Stewart 57), increase: “gravel pits, / golf courses, housing, salons, cafes erected upon Indigenous / People’s graves” (original spacing, 9). In this case, Hedge Coke’s typographical patterning reflects the domination of neoliberal topography as invasive prepotency; the opening stanzas’ spaced tranquility turns into tightly-packed quasi-prose lines echoing the quickening waves kneading on the shore, the incubation of European settler development in the Americas. The personified “Horizon” (5) —“across Horizon where plumed danced skyward”—serves as a marker of the dawn itself, but also splits history in two historical narratives: before the Strangers, and after. “Horizon”, which later speaks on its own accord, has a particular “conceptual horizon”, a “vantage point” in Bakhtin’s terms, of an individual speaker, but its perspective is also panoramic, and thus holds a “belief system” (Bakhtin 425) representing the scale of native community life and the dawning of colonisation. However, although diseases ran rampant through the dissemination of “strange blankets” (“Not like any infirmity had ever blistered / upon The People until this time”, 7), and sacred settlements were ignored or destroyed, Hedge Coke insists on a possible consciousness shift: “It is in this dawning consciousness is raised. A chance” (original spacing, 9). In this third dawning, or the “Meanwhile” according to

Berger—the time between shifts in consciousness in which political activism might occur—Hedge Coke engages in reestablishing the site’s “own landmarks, naming places, finding poetry” (Berger 28). Her use of “raised” also suggests that mounds—raised structures—are physical loci to elevate our understanding of colonial history and of sacred indigenous sites. The final six sections of “Before Next Dawning”, form a diapason of deliberate, shorter stanzas, in contrast to the dispersed words within the line. This accelerates the poem’s rhythmic urgency and elevates its intensity:

May she breathe again.  
May she breathe.  
  
May the revealed find refuge.  
May the revealed find peace.  
May she breathe.  
May she breathe again. (10)

Hedge Coke’s anaphora “May she breathe” and “May she breathe again”—repeated in reverse the second time—is a mantric call to action, the “she” addressed as the embodiment of the Blood Run site and its voices. The prayer-like form is Hedge Coke’s culmination of this three-part overture to the collection, from textual typography, to chaotic settlement, to vulnerary breath. The poet remarks that “everything you do is breathing, when you’re a poet” (Hedge Coke, “Still Life”), perhaps a synthesis of experimentation inspired by Sze, and Hedge Coke’s own attunement to music as “the sound of consciousness” (Hedge Coke, PI). Natalie Diaz defines this type of expression—a unified or focused effort towards one subject—as being less dependent on the “product of poetry”—a fixed result—but the “invisible thing about poetry that pulls us to it which where I come from is something very close to prayer; not Christian prayer, not western prayer, but a kind of energy before you and after you, an endless thread that’s being pulled

through you (Diaz, “Episode 17”). The dawning of disease and razing of the land for the sake of the industrial revolution was a dawning in itself for European colonies, who began “smothering” the earth’s “breath with concrete, brick, mortar” (9). And yet, the prayer-like incantation of “May she breathe again” uses poetry as a resource for its “great power of healing”, as poet Derek Walcott says, in order to tap into a “language equivalent to the passion of the vehemence” (Walcott, Interview with Christopher Campbell). In her own insight, Hedge Coke says in her interview with Amanda Cuellar that a lot of her writing “tends to be incantatory in a way. And it goes along with older forms of testimony, you know where at one time, in the east people would lay down their belt while they were speaking and you know it was important and now we have our books, books have become that avenue of testimony [...]” (Hedge Coke, “Returning”). Hedge Coke references wampum used in eastern indigenous traditions, among the Mohegan and the Haudenosaunee for instance, for storytelling, speeches, and as a mnemonic device to remember oral testimony (Lopenza 222). Incantation, as Walcott has said about poetry and the elegiac form, makes a “triumph out of tragedy” proving that poetry is “making something happen” (Walcott, Interview with Christopher Campbell), that the art is not simply two-dimensional; Hedge Coke textually raises these razed earthworks in her architectural form and stratified meanings, to ensure that “*consciousness* is raised” (9). To mirror the pre-contact breathing space in the beginning of the poem, this anaphoric ending is a counter-containment incantation to liberate the Blood Run area, referred to as “she”, and closes her three-part overture: harmonious, textual topography, to constricting colonial settlement, to rhythmic chant.

Finally, my reference to the rhizome above not only echoes the metaphorical “movements of deterritorialization and destratification” (Deleuze and Guattari 3) of Deleuze and

Guattari's non-hierarchical, non-linear off-shoots that one experiences in a book's *assemblage*<sup>181</sup>, but also the literal grass rhizomes found in pits at Blood Run, along with seeds and wild plants (Green 526), indicating that the Oneota relied on a balance of horticulture and plant gathering as well as hunting (530). Although my analytical framework in this chapter takes some cues from the uniformist angle to reader-response theory, in its binary focus on both the text and the effects it has on the reader (rather than the value of the text lying solely in the reader's response), Hedge Coke's own connection to this site, and these intimate structures that the verse play embodies as a result, is significant. For instance, Hans Robert Jauss's binary distinction of the poet as creator and the reader as receiver misses the reality that the poet also experiences a reception in the writing process. Bitsui, for instance, describes language as something *approached*: "when I come to an image [...] when I come into or when I come up to an image" (Bitsui, PI). Similarly, Hedge Coke confirms a reception regarding poetic inspiration: "imagine there are roots going through your feet down below where we're standing, so deep that there is water and you can draw it up into yourself when you need it" (Hedge Coke, PI). Her description doubles as an alternative, corporal imagining of language. Likewise, in the collection *Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing Within the Anthropocene* for which Hedge Coke wrote the preface, "resistance" is redefined as "to seek the *roots* upward, downward, and sideways. To see which processes monoliths serve. To counter forgetting and *root*, to expand and recognize stories beyond the monolith. Working with both roots and methods of dispersal" (my emphasis, Russo et al. 60). Hedge Coke's conception of poetic reception is in line with a broader register of linguistic resistance, a dispersal rooted in perceiving alternatively; intimately, somatically and more

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<sup>181</sup> In *Material Ecocriticism*, Serpil Oppermann uses the rhizome to compare the "narrative agency" in literature featuring non-human organisms and their "coemergent and ontologically hybrid forms of expressions" (Opperman 30).

intently. Hedge Coke adds that for her collection *Streaming*, she received some poems as songs, and subsequently articulated their musicality: “I heard the music of it for over a year, it just comes to me it’s like a radio comes on. I heard all the different parts of the music, and one day it was very clear where the words were. [...] I think music is the sound of consciousness. [...] If I sit long with it, it becomes very apparent what it is and it needs to be articulate [...]” (Hedge Coke, PI). This reception on the side of the poet—a mode of tapping into the “sound of consciousness”, or even the unconscious—should not be neglected, as it is then translated and transmitted as a linguistic gesture to the reader. In Wolfgang Iser’s readers-as-stargazers metaphor, each reader will “be looking at the same collection of stars” and yet see different geometric shapes aligning them. In other words, the text is fixed but “the lines that join them are variable” and up to the reader to interpret (Iser 287). Yet, Iser’s metaphor, like Jauss’s focus on the reader as receiver, neglects the poet’s own process of joining lines, or drawing from the roots as Hedge Coke states above. This would be, to expand Iser’s metaphor, the trajectories and continuum of movements of the cosmos that we don’t intimately perceive from Earth, the orbits of planets, asteroids, comets. This overture then introduces the germination of a story received by the poet, reflecting the very germination of the site and its communal interrelationality, which the voices will enact in the following sections.

### Prosopopoeia

The voices in *Blood Run* form a heteroglossic chorus, but each represents an entity on the site which Hedge Coke endows with vocal agency; some human and indigenous such as Clan Sister, and some colonisers, or those who misunderstand the site, such as Early Interpreter, Squatters, Looters and Early Anthro. Most of them are non-human, abstract, or cosmological, for

instance Sunflower, Blue Star, Fox, Memory, Horizon, River, Beaver. In this section, after giving a brief outline of the typical features of prosopopoeia and how Hedge Coke's verse play differs from these standards, I approach Hedge Coke's intertextuality and implied discourse between the personas, and their references to supposed characters who don't speak in the text.

Eric Anderson interprets Hedge Coke's subtitle "*Free Verse Play*" as

[...] an announcement about *Blood Run*'s genre but which, particularly given the non-Westernness of the volume as a whole, might also guide attention to something more like three interconnected actions or ideas or modes of being or imperatives: free and not bound, even after much colonially induced duress and destruction; verse, perhaps a reclaiming or repurposing of Western etymology—'verse' as 'turn'—as well as an anticipation of what the volume primarily contains; and *play*" (9).

However, boxing her book as "non-Western" is a sweeping misnomer; the polestars of "Westernness" and "non-Western" are often viewed from the framework of the Enlightenment, or knowledge stemming from Greek antiquity, the latter of which was, as Anthony Appiah argues, actually steeped in what one might call "Eastern" knowledge (Appiah, "Mistaken"). Although certainly anti-colonial, "non-Westernness" does not account for the verse play's intertextual prosopopoeia which blurs genre boundaries<sup>182</sup>. Even more, I argue that "verse play" can be explored far beyond the play on words—"play" as in amusement and verse as in "turn", as Anderson suggests. Rather it presents the poet's use of heteroglossic and theatrical tropes which endow the human and non-human characters with specific functions, consciousnesses and

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<sup>182</sup> Hedge Coke's influences, which are reflected in *Blood Run*, are also highly varied and aren't all "non-Western". At IAIA, Hedge Coke embraced "poetic departures from the established expectations" by studying Olson's projective verse and "experimental language poetics", as well as finding influences from "Chinese dissidents, Misty Poets, Deep Image Poets" to "Language Poets", "Peruvian poets" and "musicality-led poetics". Hedge Coke's writing started to be concerned with "dismissing the notion that the poetic had to be anything anticipated from the school, from the publishing field, the Native Lit canon, Native Renaissance, newer Post-Renaissance Alexie/Louis movements [...]" (Hedge Coke, "Szeism").



intentions. Her multi-voiced prosopopoeia provides the text's "hybridization"<sup>183</sup> and an "underlying fundamental socio-linguistic orchestration", which Bakhtin denies of poetry. For Bakhtin, any form of heteroglossia in poetry is not meaningful but rather "stylistically secondary" or satirical (Bakhtin 325). However, the heteroglossia in *Blood Run* does in fact assert a meaningful socio-linguistic orchestration because of its polychronography (see Cokinos's definition in the later section "Hyperbaton in the Invisible 'Snake Mound'") and cyclical conceits within the personas' intertextuality. If read as a "verse play", one might apply Bakhtin's use of orchestration, in which the text is not confined to a "single hermetic and unitary language system" (325). Indeed, the "verse play" voices can be read as vocative monologues as much as poetic modes of prosopopoeia.

Prosopopoeia in western antiquity was often used for writing exercises—as were sonnets<sup>184</sup>—in which the writer would give a voice to a famous historical or mythological figure as a character study. The term is associated and sometimes conflated with personification, apostrophe or dialogism, as Michael Riffaterre notes from Pierre Fontanier's *Les Figures du Discours*, each of which are not the same, though "almost always occur with" prosopopoeia (Fontanier 404, qtd in Riffaterre 107). Prosopopoeia is a "staging" of "absent, dead, supernatural or even inanimate beings"<sup>185</sup> which speak, act and answer at their own will. Fontanier writes that these entities or

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<sup>183</sup> For the novel, Bakhtin defines hybridization as "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor" (Bakhtin 358). This involves a second "representing consciousness" other than the author (Bakhtin 359).

<sup>184</sup> Sir Frank Kermode, Phillis Levin and Jonathan Bate agree that during the Renaissance period, the sonnet was a form of annotation, a meditative exercise that focused the attention (Bate).

<sup>185</sup> Fontanier's original French: "L'apostrophe est cette diversion soudaine du discours par laquelle on se détourne d'un objet, pour s'adresser à un autre objet, naturel ou surnaturel, absent ou présent, vivant ou mort, animé ou inanimé, réel ou abstrait, ou pour s'adresser à soi-même".

characters are “confidants, witnesses, accusers, avengers, judges” (Riffaterre 107)<sup>186</sup>. Riffaterre refers to Malherbe’s “Prosopopée d’Ostende”, a translation from the Latin of “Prosopopoeia” by Hugo Grotius, as a classic example, in which the Belgian city of Ostend speaks, forlorn about being besieged by the Spaniards. The device is legitimate here, as the city is not apostrophised, nor does it take on a humanlike form. Although De Man writes that the convention of giving “voice” also “assumes mouth, eye, and finally face”—“a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope’s name, *prosopon poiein*, to confer a mask or a face (prosopon)”—Hedge Coke’s use of the device does not simply put a mask on a faceless, dead being, or lend a voice to “a voiceless” non-human, without “inviting visualisation” or “sensory perception” (Riffaterre 108). Rather, each non-human or human persona speaks as a voice, with no assumption of human facial features, and are all interrelated in their movements, observations, desires and needs. Though Riffaterre makes a valid comparison to the “comic or tragic mask in Greek and Roman plays”, in which the reader or viewer has free reign to imagine the figure’s characterization, Hedge Coke extends our visual imagination beyond the mask and beyond a singular narrator through intertextual decentring, in reflection of the sacred site’s heteroglossic vocality. The personas inhabit the “huge sphere” of stories and language that one can “reach into”, and in *Blood Run* their kinetic “avenue of testimony” (Hedge Coke, “Returning”) is central to one of the goals of the verse play, to protect the site’s future from extraction, neglect and neoliberal development. Hedge Coke asks, “we’re going to create something that’s got lyric, got image, got musicality, characterizations, we’re going to create this space where these things are happening, and we don’t know where it’s gonna go? I think it’s kind of dangerous, it’s perilous to me”

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<sup>186</sup> Fontanier’s original French: “[...] ou tout au moins à les prendre pour confidents, pour témoins, pour garants, pour accusateurs, pour vengeurs, pour juges, etc. [...]” (*Les Figures du Discours* 404)

(Hedge Coke, “Returning”). In its multitude of voices rather than a confessional first-person, the verse play’s objective to protect the site’s complex interrelationality is all the more prescient.

### Intertextuality

Firstly, the voices of the Blood Run site reference each other in their monologues, and typically if a persona is referenced, that persona speaks in the subsequent poem. For instance, the voice of “Horizon” says, “Earth lodges perpetually lingering, caches / filled with paintbrush, roots, curative tea, / Corn, Squash, Beans, sustaining sisters—Sunflower” (16). These staple crops, the “Three Sisters”, are essential to the Haudenosaunee people as well as other native cultures, each providing the other with an ideal environment for growth. One creation story involves Sky Woman bringing the seeds to plant “the Three Sisters”, giving women the role of “cultivators” with control over the agricultural supply. Paralleling this reference to natural symbiosis, the voices “Corn” and “Sunflower”, which “Horizon” names, speak later as separate voices. Likewise, the voice of “Memory”, just prior to this poem, references “Horizon”: “Securing Horizon’s distant edges, / ledges premising reason, discord.” (15). The persona “Sun” refers to its sun dogs, “As I, my dogs, parhelic anthelion<sup>187</sup>, / loyal to me as I am devoted”, and the following poem is the monologue of “Dog”, worried about his “companion”, implying “Clan Sister”. In the third section, “Intrusions”, the voice of the “Ghosts” speaks of “Redwing Blackbird”, a character which also speaks in the collection: “With Redwinged Blackbird grace, / we raise red grass as we pass over field, hill, meadow” (47). These interacting voices, though each a distinct diacritic, are aware of one another and praise their inter-functionality.

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<sup>187</sup> The World Meteorological Organization’s definition of a parhelic circle is “a white, horizontal circle at the same angular elevation as the Sun. “Bright spots” that occur “a little outside the 22° halo” are parhelia, and are “often brilliantly coloured”. Spots can also “very rarely” be seen “opposite the Sun”, which is called anthelion (“Parhelic Circle”).

The voices' intertextuality is closer to Fontanier's understanding of prosopopoeia, in which characters are confidants and witnesses, rather than De Man's more simplistic conception of conferring a "mask or a face", as quoted by Riffaterre above (108). "Deer", for instance, another collective voice, explain their relationship with the Oneota community: "Shared our soul, our store, robe, / with every good heart [...] / Watched them approach us robed as ourselves. Took to two legs to move among them freely. / Sometimes advisory, sometimes exchanging" (36). This exchange is concomitant with the poem just before, in which "Clan Sister" says she "can feel" a rare herd of white deer closeby, "a miracle": "twenty-four / snuggle treelines / wintertime / camouflaged. / Sisters of mine (35). Her spare lines imply a quietness so that the deer herd, among her web of relations, remains undisturbed. As Jodi Melamed points out, the voice of "Corn" writes that the community used "deer, elk scapula" and "scraped soil" (24) to plant corn grains, further advancing the interdependent dynamics between not only deer and humans but deer and agriculture. The awareness of "Deer" and its relationship with other living things on the site provides a more conscious version of Durkheim's structural functionalism, as the fundamental interrelationships here are less mechanistic and more intentional (Brinkerhoff et al. 10). However, Hedge Coke's voices also refer to characters, by way of capitalisation, who do not speak in the collection: "Squatters" mention "Passenger Pigeon" and "Blackbird" in its list of animals they wish to exterminate (51), "The Mounds" refer to "Peregrine Falcons" (52), none of whom have their own poem. While "Early Interpreter" says "let the White men tell the Stories", suggesting that "Stories" is an entity, and "The Mounds" assert in the monologue immediately afterwards, "We sorely await Reclaiming", neither reference speaks in the collection, although a metapoetic discourse arises: "Reclaiming" is a retelling or restor(y)ing of inaccurate white settler

“Stories”, reasserting indigenous “intertribal geopolitics”, as established in “Before Next Dawning” (Stewart 60). As Anne Stewart notes, the razing and subsurfacing of earthworks by settler-colonial structures establish the grounds for a “capitalist mode of production”, which Mishuana Goeman calls the “settler-colonial grammar of place” (Goeman, “Disrupting” 236). In *Blood Run*, the white “Stories” vocalise this “grammar of place” or fixed discourse, insisting that the “savages” “have no learned appreciation / of possibility of a ripened, bountiful place”, which legitimises the excavation of the “merciless, barren flat” land into a wellspring of monetary “possibility”, “progress” and “personal greed” in the name of “providence” (51). This grammatical foundation for a plutocratic civilisation clearly contrasts the reverence of the non-colonial voices of *Blood Run*, which aims towards “Reclaiming” the language of indigenous epistemologies.

Other scholars have not commented on this supra-textual discourse *Blood Run*, including one reference in particular made by “Squatters”: the “Royal Historian of Oz”. L. Frank Baum, the author of *The Wizard of Oz*, and self-proclaimed “Royal Historian of Oz” edited the *Saturday Pioneer* of Aberdeen, South Dakota, in which he published editorials encouraging the “annihilation” of natives. On December 20th, 1890, nine days before the massacre of Wounded Knee, he wrote:

The proud spirit of the original owners of the vast prairies [...] lingered last in the bosom of Sitting Bull. With his fall, the nobility of the Redskin is extinguished, and what few are left are a pack of whining curs who lick the hand that smites them. [...] The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent, and the best safety of the frontier will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians... Why not annihilation? Their glory has fled, their spirit broken, their manhood effaced, better that they should die than live the miserable wretches that they are. (Baum, “Editorial” *Saturday Pioneer* 1890)

Then, a few days after the Wounded Knee massacre, Baum wrote: “Our only safety depends upon the total extermination of the Indians. Having wronged them for centuries we had better [...] follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth” (Baum, “Editorial”, *Saturday Pioneer* 1891). Hedge Coke infers that early “Squatters” would have not only been aware of these contumeliously barbaric editorials, but that they used them as fodder for their monologue which calls for the natives’ “timely ending”, echoing Baum’s violent intolerance reflecting the racist tension leading up to the Wounded Knee massacre. As I have outlined, Hedge Coke’s voices juxtapose the reverence towards non-humans and the harmonised, symbiotic relationships in *Blood Run*’s intertextual non-colonial voices, with the notion of “ownership” that Baum attributes to the land as a central misconception of the white “Story”. Indeed, Baum’s romantic rendering of the “proud spirit of the original owners of the vast prairies” is reciprocated in the voice of the “Squatters” in *Blood Run*, with their sense of entitlement to have the “untamed wilderness” “razed, obliterated” under “God’s will” (51). Taiiiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel refer to such environmental overhauls as “shape-shifting”; rather than referring to shapeshifting characters in oral traditions, the term describes the naturalisation and normalisation of colonial structures in the wake of ideologies such as Baum’s<sup>188</sup>, and in turn, the modification of the “terms of narrative production, political discourse, and the

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<sup>188</sup> A less murderous, but nevertheless capitalistic and domineering incentive is from H.C. Hyde, who wrote in 1873 that although Blood Run’s Lyon County was “one vast sea of green, varied in hue with myriads of wild flowers”, “in our soil there lies a sure foundation for future wealth and greatness [...] not only the source of abundant material wealth, but the capitalist, foreseeing what the future is to bring forth when the hundreds of thousands of our unplowed acres are brought under cultivation, will not hesitate to invest his treasure in the various enterprises necessary to our growth and prosperity” (“Blood Run National Historic Landmark” 24). Hedge Coke’s individual and collective prosopopoeia directly contradicts Hyde’s romanticised description which promotes profit.

physical environment” (Alfred 601). This is challenged by Hedge Coke’s narrative plurality; the non-colonial voices are emboldened as we are privy to the voices of the perpetrators. Through their supra-textual references such as the “Royal Historian of Oz”, their own shape-shifting “Stories”, and the species they plan on exterminating, we can orient their “conceptual horizons”—their capitalistic blindness—albeit indirectly.

Bakhtin writes of the “conceptual horizon”: “[what] I see can never be what you see, if only because I can see what is behind your head” (Holquist 15). Whereas characters such as “Early Interpreter” and “Squatters” can only see their neoliberal future of “progress” behind the indigenous conceptual horizon, the indigenous characters are highly aware of each other and their interdependent functions, even if they have individual perspectives. Hedge Coke translates these numerous perspectives to intertextually remap their distinct conceptual horizons: “Redwing Blackbird” recounts eating “Sunflower” seed at the end of summer, “Sunflower” recounts its cycles of “daily heliotropism” (26) in the world above the soil which the “Skeletons” cannot see, but ask those above to leave offerings “to tide us over” (69). “Deer” can see “Clan Sister” approaching, “Clan Sister” can’t see deer but “can feel them” (35), and “Morning Star” asserts its relationship to “Sun” and “Horizon” (20). The site houses an orchestra of voices that visitors passing through may not see or hear, although each character, as Hedge Coke renders them, is aware of the other’s distinct life forces and interdependencies. Even more, these supra-textual references to flora, fauna and human characters provide more than a comprehensive grammar for signifying indigeneity; they encompass conceptual horizons outside of the verse play’s textual boundaries, therefore “Reclaiming” the vital networks at Blood Run, which Hedge Coke’s text managed, in part, to achieve.

## Lists: Pleasure and Proof of Vitality

In this section, I will argue that Hedge Coke's use of lists heightens the kinetic interdependent relationships of non-human and human life at Blood Run beyond the scope of a categorical enumeration. Firstly, I briefly outline some theories of Western list-making in literature to highlight alternative effects of lists used in poems by indigenous writers, and then in more detail, in Hedge Coke's memoranda of plants and animals, which praise their abundance, relations and non-linearity, connections Hedge Coke calls "echo-wrinkle reverberations". My argument then turns to the lists in *Blood Run* as a counter-containment mechanism to measurements such as blood quantum. I then explore the intricate distinctions between the lists of native species on the site and the lists given by the colonisers' voices, including the Jesuits, whom Hedge Coke links to Blue Cloud Abbey in South Dakota, which faced sexual abuse allegations in the early 2000s. The latter lists are based on their Manifest Destiny ideology, which Hedge Coke uses to juxtapose the sacred abundance of life to the religion of capitalism. Finally, I outline some of the main qualities of Hedge Coke's list use: they are centred on pleasure and gratitude, which Swinomish and Tulalip photographer Matika Wilbur attests to, they strengthen her political aims, and they declassify humans as the hosts of the land, but instead as guests, without having to appeal to more attractive reasons to entice the government and public to protect sacred sites.

Another traditional configuration of prosopopoeia in poetry is the "siste viator" formula; an epitaph in which a voice, usually the tombstone, persuades the passerby to stop and listen, as in Coleridge's self-referential "Epitaph" published in 1834, which opens "Stop, Christian passer-by!" (Westover 87). Mary Thomas Crane notes that in the case of Ben Johnson's "Epitaph



on Elizabeth L.H.” (Epigram 124), in which he writes, “Would’st thou heare, what man can say”, the voice being attributed to a buried man and not the stone (Crane 34). A contemporary example is Sarah Manguso’s 2006 collection, *Siste Viator*, in which voices of the buried dead speak. However, most of the voices in *Blood Run*, with the exception of “Ghosts” and “Skeletons”, are not dead beings but include animals and plants which lived on the site pre-contact and continue to live there, as well as abstract or celestial entities whose ontological beginning and ends cannot be precisely calculated (“Horizon”, “Memory”, “Sun”, “North Star”), and people who, though they are dead now, represent once living humans who had either lived on the site (“Clan Sister”) or caused it harm (“Looters” and “Squatters”). *Blood Run*’s voices are, therefore, not objects meant for spectacle or to arouse curiosity, to “invite and exhort the world weary traveler”, as in other Romantic era inscriptions, such as Alexander Pope’s verses inscribed in his grotto under his Twickenham mansion (Hartman 35). Rather, the voices represent themselves through the kinetic, extensive life cycles that continue on the site, despite colonial erasure and nescience; the final monologue of “Clan Sister” in the epilogue for instance could represent a descendant of the “Clan Sister” who speaks throughout the verse play. One way Hedge Coke differs from the mournful *siste viator* address is through her extensive lists of life and their interconnected methods of thriving, which engage the reader more profoundly than a brief roadside entreaty.

A 2016 issue of the journal *Style*, published by Penn State University Press, was dedicated to lists and enumerations in literature. Eva von Contzen’s contribution discusses the possibility of a “listory”—a history of literary lists—towards a listology; “a systematic and diachronic study of lists”<sup>189</sup> (von Contzen, “Lists”) which are significant, existential—rather than

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<sup>189</sup> Von Contzen’s work is part of the research project “Lists in Literature and Culture: Towards a Listology” (LISTLIT) at the University of Freiburg.

actantial—elements of a narrative. Her almanac of lists begins with the catalogue of Achaean army ships in the second book of Homer’s *Iliad* and ends with modern narratives such as poet Les Murray’s list of strong men featured in *Fredy Neptune*. Von Contzen simplifies the definition of a list given by Robert Belknap—whom I will mention in reference to Walt Whitman further on—to mean “a set of items assembled in a formal unit”, and outlines how lists throughout the ages slightly deviate from the prototypical catalogue. In her “listory” within the Western tradition—a tradition which draws on the epic, was reinvented by medieval texts and again repurposed in modern literature—von Contzen concludes that lists have shifted from providing a categorical, textual authority to a deconstruction of authority through metapoetic references and a means of “playing with the audience’s expectation” (von Contzen 247). Hedge Coke, however, introduces another possibility; though she does use lists in their simplest definition, she also uses them to imply that cataloguing is not only a feature of the human consciousness, but that ecosystems and non-human species have their own catalogues of their surroundings, a type of cognitive or chemical system to denote other species, which take their shape as lists in *Blood Run* through the human tendency to do so. These catalogues provide a sense of agency in the non-human voices.

In addition, while von Contzen’s study is enriching, non-Western traditions of the list are not included in her essay. Traditional indigenous songs across many nations, for instance, include many forms of lists about movements, journeys and species—which, as Vizenor notes, are part of the aesthetics of transmotion; interpreting natural motion in creation stories and dream songs (Vizenor, *Native Provenance* 37). Diné chantways, and as Webster mentions, the “Dove Song” recorded and translated by Washington Matthews in the late 19th century, contain forms of lists

(Webster, *Explorations* 67). Webster names repetition as one of the prominent elements of Diné poetic techniques, but often these repetitions double as lists<sup>190</sup>. Ortiz writes that poems and songs are not parceled definitions, similar to the Western tradition of cataloguing, but consist of an “all-expansive” language (Ortiz, “Song” 38). Similarly, Hedge Coke’s lists are not unilateral but temporally and relationally expansive. I also argue that these lists contribute, as described in the previous chapters, to what Ortiz describes as the simultaneous “expression and perception” of the song which arises from personal and collective movements, a “completeness” rather than a breakdown of its parts (Ortiz, “Song” 37)<sup>191</sup>. Lists in the context of the kinetics of perception and the meaning of motion have been reinvented by many modern indigenous poets, including in Ortiz’s “Relocation”, Richard Van Camp’s “Calendar for the folks from my hometown of Fort Smith, NWT” (Hedge Coke, *Sing* 223), Gordon D. Henry’s “Simple Four Part Directions for Making Indian Lit” (*Sing* 212), N. Scott Momaday’s “The Delight Song of Tsoai-talee” (*In the Presence of the Sun* 16), and Laura Tohe’s “Japanese Garden” and “In Dinétah” mentioned in Chapter 1.

My attention to lists in Hedge Coke’s prosopopoeia is an alternative reading to other analyses of *Blood Run*, which focus on the mishandling and misinterpretation of anthropologists, insufficient repatriation rights, and the pitfalls of NAGPRA<sup>192</sup>. In their essay “In the End, Our

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<sup>190</sup> Webster uses the example of a chantway: “Wind will be beneath my feet, / Wind will be beneath my legs, / Wind will be beneath my body, / Wind will be beneath my mind, / Wind will be beneath my voice” (Webster, “Ałk’idáá” 240). Webster cites Matthews’s translation of “Wosh Wosh” (onomatopoeic expression for “dove”, or the “Dove Song”): Wosh wosh picks them up / Wosh wosh picks them up / Glossy Locks picks them up / Red Moccasin picks them up / Wosh wosh picks them up” (Webster, *Explorations* 67).

<sup>191</sup> Ortiz uses the example of a song arising from the motion of his father sculpting animals from wood: “He clears his throat a bit and he sings, and the song comes from that motion of his carving, his sitting, the sinews in his hands and face and the song itself. His voice is full-toned and wealthy, all the variety and nuance of motion in the sounds and phrases of the words are active in it [...]” (Ortiz, “Song” 35).

<sup>192</sup> To quote Kelsey and Carpenter: “The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, signed into law in 1990, aims to protect Indigenous human remains, funerary objects, and sacred objects that

Message Weighs’: Blood Run, NAGPRA, and American Indian Identity”, Kelsey and Carpenter frame Hedge Coke’s verse play as a rectification for NAGPRA’s shortcomings and suggest that “NAGPRA’s current definition of American Indian identity” fails to comply with “sovereign tribal conceptions of identity and tribal responsibility for caretaking [of] ancestral remains” (56). Karen Poremski builds on their analysis, asserting that Hedge Coke reveals how the institution misunderstands “what constitutes Native identity” which is essential when “returning remains and objects held in museums, but also the land itself—places like burial mounds that need stronger protection from looters and developers” (Poremski 4)<sup>193</sup>. Poremski, Kelsey and Carpenter’s focus on federal disengagement is relevant to the verse play: “Burial Mound” warns that “It’s tenuous releasing / what belongs below us” (46), and is much wearier the second time it speaks, its lists of life being reduced to a “lamentable” hill chiseled “to ruins” (58). Likewise, the “Skeletons” plea not to “unsettle” them (56), to release them “from / collections” (79), and that they are finally happy to have been “returned home”, “away from archeological scholar filings” (81)<sup>194</sup>. Hedge Coke also questions the “Strangers” in “Pipestone Tablets” who looted or ruined these objects: “What ill could wish such knowledge obliterated?” (42). Quarrying in the Blood Run area in the 19th and 20th centuries has unearthed many artifacts while destroying a

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have a ‘cultural affiliation’ with ‘presently existing’ Indian Tribes or Native Hawaiian organizations. It also prohibits trafficking of remains or sacred objects, creates a review committee to oversee the bill’s implementation, and mandates that federal and federally funded museums as well as educational institutions and agencies conduct inventories of Native remains and cultural objects in their possession and then share those inventories with relevant Indian tribes or Native Hawaiian organizations” (Kelsey and Carpenter 58).

<sup>193</sup> Currently, the U.S. government determines whether or not a group of indigenous people can be defined as a “tribe” according to federal standards, which NAGPRA uses in discerning repatriation rights. This limits repatriation to federally-recognized tribes, failing to address the “complex intertribal formulation of identity” of Blood Run’s multi-tribalism (Kelsey and Carpenter 58).

<sup>194</sup> Lee Schweninger’s article “‘Lost and Lonesome’: Literary Reflections on Museums and the Roles of Relics” lists Gerald Vizenor, D’Arcy McNickle, Susan Power, Thomas King, Gordon Henry, Anna Lee Walters, Greg Sarris, and Jim Northrup, who have all engaged with the issue of remains and repatriation. Poremski also notes Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s assertion in *Decolonizing Methodologies* that “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (Poremski 3).

considerable amount as well: “Thousands of artifacts have been dug out and then spread along with gravel over county roads, destroying forever the stories those objects could have told” (“Blood Run History”, State Historical Society of Iowa). However, Hedge Coke’s listology and range of lexicon and non-human perceptions are beyond the scope of NAGPRA and a solely anthropological, repatriatory framework; although the mistreatment of indigenous remains is certainly evoked in *Blood Run*, pitting this issue as the cynosure of the collection overlooks Hedge Coke’s insistence on privileging survival over the loss of what’s been looted.

Many of the lists pay tribute to the abundance and movement of life cycles at Blood Run, and the species’ interconnected relationships—represented in the interdependencies between lists in different monologues. Their implication is that the list continues beyond the contained text itself as these connections are unquantifiable, unlike the containment mechanisms of the federal government such as blood quantum and land parceling, as discussed below. I argue that Hedge Coke enlists what she calls “echo-wrinkle reverberations”, a term she uses in the title poem “Streaming”, which opens her eponymous 2014 collection. These consist of kinetic causes and responses of events through “time, space” and “curvilinear space”, the “confluence” of multiple time frames, happenings, and recurrences “throughout elements, earth / animal, plant” (*Streaming* 5). Often these relationships are subtle: “I want the connections to happen to the reader, so they come into it through what it is, instead of a didactic or linear sensibility”, Hedge Coke notes (Hedge Coke, PI). “The Ghosts”, for example, plead to leave “amaranth, goosefoot, / lamb’s quarters, knotweed, anise, / Ree tobacco<sup>195</sup> if you meander long” (47). As the list extends,

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<sup>195</sup> According to Joseph Winter, “Ree’s tobacco” or *pana’nitachani* was the name the Lakota gave to the tobacco they obtained from the Hidatsa people, another Siouan tribe (Winter 20). The generosity of sharing tobacco also aligns with Hedge Coke’s own Cherokee heritage; a Cherokee adage says “Smoke Ta-lo-neh (tobacco and dried red sumac leaves) from the same pipe with a Cherokee and you will be friends forever” (Parker, *Changing* 250). See also Pauline Danforth’s account in *Sister Nations* of her

our concept of biospheric variety extends, even representative of the movement of “The Ghosts”, who appear to travel with the wind—“The swirl, our motion / wobbles leaves” (47)—echoed in the poem’s “swirl”-like indented lines, a design to free “ghostings [...] through lingual and geometric presence” (5). The movement of the poem’s form reflects both the imagined movement through the grasses as each plant is listed, and the movement of plant growth in the rich soil that the dead inhabit; death facilitates the generation of new life, recalling the Passamaquoddy word for “soil”, which translates to “the molecules of our ancestors” (Newell)<sup>196</sup>. Similarly, in the adjacent poem, the voice of “Burial Mound” recites its own list, going “From oak-cedar woodlands, bur oak savannah, / floodplains, onto mixed grass, prickly-peared flats” (46), reinforcing a natural autopoiesis<sup>197</sup>. The tree pictured on the cover of the collection, symbolising the character “Tree at Eminiya Mounds”, also grows from a burial mound, which serves as an example of Hedge’s Coke’s concept “echo-wrinkle reverberations”, as it is a “channel flow” of “nourished life” which “causes sustenance” (*Streaming* 5). While a traditional *siste viator* appeals to a passerby to decry death or call out in mourning for the loss of life, these speakers’ listologies highlight the eruption of life which grows from the dead, translated lyrically in the visual rhymes of “woodlands” and “floodplain”, and the line “when white ash bud fresh green”, whose monosyllabic pulse emphasises the tight capsule of a new bud growing. These catalogues coalesce mortality and vitality in a conflux of time spans.

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Ojibway relatives sharing and trading with Finnish settlers in northern Minnesota (Danforth 15). Hedge Coke’s list evokes generosity within and between communities, which the “Ghosts” suggest is a reciprocal gesture.

<sup>196</sup> The Passamaquoddy nation is based in present-day northern Maine and New Brunswick, Canada, and not on or near the Blood Run site.

<sup>197</sup> From the Greek *autos* meaning self and *poiein* meaning to produce, thus a system of self-(re)production.

Another memoranda is in the first monologue of “Memory”, which also contains an extensive list of plant life: “big bluestem / little bluestem, switchgrass / fever stem, mint / butterfly weed / breathing root / goldenrod / pasque flower, / deer medicine purple-bloomed—/ positioned amid plenty” (15). The appeal of “Memory” to list the variety of plant life on the site recalls the Latin *monere*, and the list itself serves as a device against forgetting, not for practical or didactic purposes, but to be more deeply immersed in the vitality, multiplicity and diversity of the ecosystem as well as in language. Its lists are not bound but rather expansive to encompass, as Ortiz envisions, both expression and perception. Likewise, each plant is not intended to be itemised as separate units but as part of an expansive whole, as Ortiz notes, which is emphasised by Hedge Coke’s dactyl-based rhythm throughout the list above. Hedge Coke’s lists of plant names recalls Louise Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, in which, as Kelli Lyon Johnson notes, Nanapush contrasts the white European tradition of maps, where places are named after “men—presidents and generals and entrepreneurs”, as opposed to the Ojibwes who, as Erdrich writes, “name places for what grows there or what is found” (qtd in Johnson 103). In another example, “Redwing Blackbird”, among its detailed memoranda from “bulrush” to “Silver Maple samaras” (clusters of seeds that renew the “Prairie Horizons”), lists its change in diet as “summer closes”: “dragonflies, damselflies, butterflies, / mosquitos, moths, spiders, crickets” are replaced with “grain, seed, Sunflower” (25). Some of these references inhabit or pollinate, in the case of the butterflies, the plants listed in “Memory” above. The voice of “Moon” lists “a thousand fluttering crow”, “white owls’ heads”, “prairie chicken”, and “Burial Mound” lists “Buffalo—days spent / gathering saplings, black and golden eagles, / one crow, one

swan, buffalo skin, shell disk, kettle—” (46)<sup>198</sup>. Nominal specificity of non-human species therefore details the abundant networks at Blood Run and reverses the poetic gaze from psychologically inward to ecologically outward. The lists counter the “offshore demented dream” as Berger calls it: the “Nowhere” of de-localisation through globalised resource-driven capitalism, which undermines “the status of and confidence in all previous fixed places, so that the world becomes a single fluid market” (Berger 27-28). With Hedge Coke’s lists, however, the reader is oriented towards the ecosphere’s plenitude and indeed “echo-wrinkle reverberations” in Hedge Coke’s terms; she replaces the dislocated neoliberal geographies established by early “Squatters”, with a distinct local “Somewhere”, by naming the species particular to the site.

These voices employ lists which are not simply loco-descriptive, nor do they express a “convergence of graveyard and nature” (Hartman 34), as in the *siste viator* tradition, where the burial ground blends allegorically with the pastoral. These lists also indirectly counteract containment mechanisms still in place which use lists, such as blood quantum, as well as historical census lists for ration allocation, or account ledgers which documented all business transactions linked to individual accounts, as Céline Planchou notes of the Lakota nation in particular (Planchou, “Ledgers”). Anishinaabe/Zhaaganaash scholar Elsa Hoover writes that decisions determining blood quantum often “represent products of missing records, political feuds, and typos made a hundred years before” (Hoover, “Bloodless”). These federal lists, the tribal rolls overseen by agents and superintendents of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)<sup>199</sup>,

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<sup>198</sup> Buffalo skins, brass or copper kettles, marine shells and objects including marginella beads, clamshells and mussels, were all found in mounds at Blood Run, supposedly brought by the Ioway, Omaha and Ponca from indirect contact with European settlers in the east (Henning, “Article” 523).

<sup>199</sup> As Teves et al. assert, blood quantum has a “dual function”; it is “a racialized means to administer Native populations”, embodied in the federally administered Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB), as well as a potential protection for “Native communities from the theft of benefits and resources by non-Natives”, for instance admission to universities, institutions which, as Diaz mentions in her quote at



which was established in 1824, imposed colonial measurement and containment mechanisms through a series of eugenicist approaches: listing only federally-recognized individuals, often listing their blood quantum, which would then determine, if they had “adopted the habits of civilized life” (“Transcript of Dawes Act, 1887”), whether they were eligible for land allotments—although, as Audra Simpson asserts, most states conducted their own land sales and litigation “with and on behalf of” native populations, regardless of the acts in place ensuring federal arbitration (“Under the Sign” 113)—and which would eventually lead to fewer enrolled members and other complications, including literary decisions<sup>200</sup>. Eastern Shawnee writer Laura Da’, in reference to a journey to the Ohio Valley, the Shawnee ancestral homelands, discusses how quantifying techniques like “measuring the land”—non-native surveyors sizing up property on indigenous land, which her ancestors resisted—and blood quantum or, as for the Eastern Shawnee, membership by proven lineal descent determined by the tribal rolls, exemplify a controversial issue of identity and tribal citizenship within and across indigenous nations, and a trauma that “ripples across the generations”. Da’ writes: “I have a government document that shows the percentage of my Shawnee blood, which is to say that the government has broken me into parts on paper. Because I have read that paper, my mind has been assaulted by this severing”

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the beginning of this chapter, can also be containment mechanisms in that they uphold and approve certain types of knowledge over others. Cedric Sunray also acknowledges that native nations have adopted the blood quantum criteria. This can lead to clashing ideas about “authenticity” and discrimination towards those who have lower blood quanta, which Sunray calls “blood policing” (Sunray 209). While the status is required by nations to different degrees for citizenship, blood quantum was first used in 1705 to exclude indigenous populations, but nationally imposed in the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs.

<sup>200</sup> In Harjo’s introduction to the anthology *When the Light of the World* [...], she writes: “Because we respect indigenous nations’ right to determine who is a tribal member, we have included only indigenous-nations voices that are enrolled tribal members or are known and work directly within their respective communities. [...] We editors do not want to arbitrate identity, though in such a project we are confronted with the task”. Among the identity complications today, Harjo notes “Pretendians”—non-indigenous people assuming an indigenous identity—and DNA tests, which might prove indigenous ancestry although the person is not culturally indigenous (4). Hedge Coke, for instance, whose Grandpa Vaughan never enrolled in a tribe (*Rock, Ghost* 5), was not included in the collection.

(Da', "Taking Measure"). In line with Diaz's poems discerning land as a body, Hedge Coke's lists of plant and animal species are modes of defending non-human bodies and interrelations while wondering through—rather than apathetically *wandering*, to use Diaz's word choice (Diaz, "New Poetry")—listening to, and respecting the ecosystem's innumerable forms of movements rather than allotting, quantifying, and dividing as blood quantum has. Even the name the "Final Rolls", also known as the Dawes Rolls—the registration of the "Five Civilized Tribes" (Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles) from 1898-1914<sup>201</sup>—professes a hegemonic conclusiveness which Hedge Coke resists. Hedge Coke's listology speaks, then, to the present controversies surrounding such measurements, which parallel the federal system of parceled land-as-capital, beginning with the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887. This gave the government the right to divide communal indigenous land into private allotments for the heads of families, and thus it sought to determine a measurement for "nativeness", in which the physical body is racially quantifiable and therefore diminishable and estranged from ancestral lands<sup>202</sup>. In this light, too, is Alexander Posey's (1873-1908) poem "To Allot or Not Allot", a satire of Hamlet's soliloquy about divvying up allotments on reservations as private land, with the tax burdens and ideology of land "ownership" that come with it: "To allot, or not to allot, that is the / Question; whether 'tis nobler in the mind to / Suffer the country to lie in common as it is, / Or divide it up and give each man / His share pro rate, and by dividing / End this sea of troubles / To

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<sup>201</sup> To access the Dawes Rolls, see the National Archives:

<https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/dawes/tutorial/intro.html#about>.

<sup>202</sup> Teves et al. outline that some scholars have differing interpretations of the Dawes Allotment Act; while Annette Jaime believes that blood quantum was enforced through this act, John LaVelle argues that the blood quantum criteria does not in fact appear in the legislation, and it was only later, in 1917, that blood quantum was used to determine "eligibility" for allotments ("Blood" 201). Joanne Barker agrees with the latter, but notes that after the Dawes Allotment Act, the "United States and tribal governments" were more "motivated to establish membership criteria" and thus the "federal government developed administrative protocols related to blood quantum in order to determine Native identity" (Teves et al. 202).

allot, divide, / perchance to end in statehood; / Ah, there's the rub!" (Posey 373). Hedge Coke's lists rather "instruct us in how to care for (and build with)" the land (Hoover, "Bloodless") not as a parceled unit inhabited by cardholders with parceled blood measurements, but as a fluid, kinetic system of connected individual living beings. They achieve this by providing a "counterpoint", an expression that poet Tyehimba Jess used in reference to his contrapuntal lists in his 2016 collection *Olio* (Jess, "Voicing Counterpoint"); they act as metatextual voices within the text's prosopopoeia, as if each list is a voice that can continue on as an underlying, kinetic drone beneath the character's monologue, using language far beyond a "functional mechanism" (Ortiz, "Song" 38).

Through these ecological memoranda, traditional expectations of prosopopoeia and even Western list traditions are replaced with an enduring awareness of an expanded, "curvilinear" chronology (Hedge Coke, *Streaming* 5), not unlike what James Wood calls "aesthetic noticing",<sup>203</sup> which draws on John Berger's phenomenological approach to artistic perception:

To draw is to look, examining the structure of experiences. A drawing of a tree shows, not a tree, but a tree-being-looked-at. Whereas the sight of a tree is registered almost instantaneously, the examination of the sight of a tree (a tree-being-looked-at) not only takes minutes or hours instead of a fraction of a second, it also involves, derives from, and refers back to, much previous experience of looking. (Berger, "Drawn" 150)

The "aesthetic noticing" in the poem-monologue "Tree at Eminija Mounds" shifts the gaze from the "tree-being-looked-at" to the tree's subjective ubiety over a period of decades, and its long-term spatial liberation: "Rooted below, outstretched above—open—What in last life failed me, / in this life liberates" (75). Similarly, the lists of the species that burgeon from "Burial

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<sup>203</sup> Wood defines "aesthetic noticing" as the capacity "to see better, to look again at our surroundings, natural and manmade, to look more closely at the body, to open the pores of our senses and feel the world" (Wood, "Serious Noticing").

Mound”, and those which the “Ghosts” name, represent the time spent observing, more than “minutes or hours”, but days, seasons and lifetimes, as suggested in the description of seasonal cycles, “when white ash bud fresh green” (46). The lists coupled with non-human noticing substantiate the perception of non-human time, an ecosystem’s calendar.

Occasionally, lists of thriving species at the Blood Run site are juxtaposed with the lists of species threatened or those killed off by colonial development. This latter form is seen in “Portend”, the final section of the verse play, when “Clan Sister” lists plants which have been, since the 1940s in America, treated with synthetic pesticides. In tandem with the coal and gas industries, these toxins engendered their own consumer-driven dependencies. Instead of sharing enough “to rerun plenty”, the colonisers’ “crazed impulse” for Sunflowers “grown for sales” (88), reduced the ecosystem “to cash crop” (87), and poisoned “Blackbird, redwing, yellow-headed, / grackle, Great Black-backed Gull, / pigeon, crow, raven, magpie, / Baird’s Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur” (87). “Blackbird” also lists destructive machines, “plow, till, dozer, crane” (27). These counter lists again suggest off-stage voices of certain birds, particularly emphasising those whose populations are dramatically declining<sup>204</sup>. Excess consumption and toxic propagation, Hedge Coke concludes, blinds capitalist projects to see profit rather than species: “Blackbird has pockets cash-lined” (88). Hedge Coke’s emphasis on cash crops evokes Bruno Latour’s assertion that “the economy is a very narrow and limited way of organising life and deciding who is important and who is not important”. Latour invites us,

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<sup>204</sup> The American Bird Conservancy website labels the Redwing Blackbird, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Chestnut-collared Longspur, and Baird’s Sparrow as either declining or decreasing (see for example the Baird’s Sparrow profile: <https://abcbirds.org/bird/bairds-sparrow/>). The Minnesota Conservation plan from 2014 notes that the Yellow-headed blackbird population in Minnesota declined 86% from 1966-2012 (Pfanmuller 13), and the estimated total population in the U.S. and Canada was reduced by half in just eight years, from 2004 to 2012 (Pfanmuller 9).

therefore, to become “efficient globalisation interrupters”<sup>205</sup> (Latour, “Imaginer”). The lists in “Clan Sister’s” final poem serve the *telos* of *Blood Run* as a globalisation interrupter; not to interrupt global, intercultural exchanges but to denounce large-scale networks of exploitative capitalism which dictate value, and to inspire others to promote ecological protection and care for sacred monuments.

In contrast to these lists above, the “Squatters” list each “nuisance” they are determined to destroy for their own “purposes” to more efficiently profit from agriculture: “Netting Passenger Pigeon; blasting buffalo; exterminating / bear wolf; lion; poisoning coyote, prairie dog, cottontail, jackrabbit, gopher, vole—Blackbird—” (51). The species in previous lists now has extirpative intentions; the “personal greed” (51) of the “Squatters” is deaf to any of the monologues previously performed. Indeed, the voice of the “Skeletons” notes they will only be heard by “those who have ears” (48), recalling Joy Harjo’s poem “Rabbit is up to Tricks”<sup>206</sup>. The “Squatters” consequently make the reader question what is the real threat, the “nuisance” plants and animals or neoliberal privilege from colonial othering? Have ecosystems, seen as threats against capital, been drastically altered for my own eventual urban or suburban comfort?<sup>207</sup> Hedge Coke’s lists result in antipodal multiplicities; the budding rhizomes, to re-engage the term, of thriving life versus the rhizome of destruction and its effects.

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<sup>205</sup> Translated from French by Stephen Muecke from Bruno Latour’s website:

[http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/P-202-AOC-ENGLISH\\_1.pdf](http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/P-202-AOC-ENGLISH_1.pdf).

<sup>206</sup> In Harjo’s poem, Rabbit, a trickster, creates a clay man (an inverted personification) and teaches him how to steal things. Finally, when Rabbit tried to call the clay man back, he “realized he’d made a clay man with no ears” (Harjo, *Conflict Resolution* 8-9).

<sup>207</sup> I expand here the intimation in one of Terrance Hayes’s sonnets from *American Sonnet for my Past and Future Assassin* in which the poet presents a list exemplifying tropes of whiteness which invite us to consider them as alphabetically arranged (apart from his last word “disease”) threats in America, including things that could somehow contribute to his death.

Likewise, they further juxtapose two belief systems or religions: capitalism—the ineradicable impetus for and mutual exclusivity with colonisation, which in creating the new must destroy the old—and indigenous ecological knowledge. In Giorgio Agamben’s development of Walter Benjamin’s essay “Capitalism and Religion”<sup>208</sup>, in which Benjamin labels capitalism “a cultic religion” because money requires meaning in its cultic consummation, Agamben contributes that capitalism aims at “guilt” rather than redemption; it’s less interested in the “transformation of the world” than its “destruction”, which we see in the voice of Hedge Coke’s “Squatters” (Agamben 18). Its faith (which Agamben equates to monetary “credit”, and the etymological link *creditum*, that which we believe) depends on the idea that “God is money” (18). In other words, money is a commodity of itself, a system that exists because of the agreement or faith in its value. Indeed, Hedge Coke bridges this connection in the voice of “Tractor” in *Blood Run*, whose job is to “turn earth to something / my master thinks precious”, so that it becomes a metonymy of money, and thus a god: “Worship me, know my truth” (53), it proclaims. It is because of this, Agamben adds, that capitalism is “incessantly in the grip of a crisis”, because it is anarchic; it has no “archē, neither beginning nor foundation” (23). Hedge Coke exemplifies this anarchic quality of capitalism with the anarchic language of the “Squatters”: “Manifest Destiny guarantees our rights. / We are the chosen self-appointed lordly hosts” (original spacing, 51). Their faith in destruction for “progress” (51) and newness—as Agamben says, the system must constantly deem a new item as a commodity—is the same collapsible faith divested in “God’s will”, “destiny” and “providence” (51). Hedge Coke makes this clear in her lists; the lists recited by the inhabitants (human, non-human or

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<sup>208</sup> Fragment 74, entitled “Kapitalismus als Religion” from Volume VI of Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedmann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 100-103.

metaphysical) of Blood Run are not commodified, but rather revered for their kinetic complexities and human dependency, whereas the list of the “Squatters” is purposefully destructive, based on the cult of capitalistic faith. As John Berger notes in his defense of Marxist principles against devastation, that many people “have lost all their political bearings. Mapless, they do not know where they are heading” (Berger, *Hold Everything* 26). Indeed, the “Squatters” and their lists lack an intimate ecological map or archē of Blood Run; they are reworking the “untamed wilderness” under the credo of “progress” and “possibility”, creating manipulative road signs planted “to confuse local populations, confuse them about who is governing whom, the nature of happiness, the extent of grief, [...] to persuade people that being a client is the ultimate salvation” (28). The “Squatters” settle with the ultimatum that the “savages” either be “tamed” or, as their “Royal Historian of Oz” Baum called for, exterminated.

Even more, missionaries in the area had an ideological agenda for erasure and provide their own dogmatic list. Hedge Coke’s “Jesuit” missionary, who speaks in quatrains rhyming ABCB, loyal to their European influence, questions the pagan antiquity of the place, but ensures that “Blue Cloud Abbey”—an actual Benedictine monastery founded in 1950 in Marvin, South Dakota, which was at the heart of widespread sexual abuse cases at its boarding schools for natives<sup>209</sup>—will invest in their mission to “honor Benediction”: “pray, work, study, soul” (49). This short list’s accentual meter—as in nursery rhymes—makes the strictly enforced doctrine all the more sinister, while the final noun “soul” is presented as a verb in this list of verbs, as if

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<sup>209</sup> The Benedictine monks at Blue Cloud Abbey were missionaries to Sioux tribes on the Yankton reservation. From 2004 to 2010, dozens of former students from St. Paul’s boarding school, run by Blue Cloud Abbey, sued the Sioux Falls Catholic diocese (twelve miles from Blood Run) for child sexual abuse they experienced there by monks, nuns and school workers. Although the lawsuits fell through because of a change to the state’s statute of limitations in the 2010, an article in the *Argus Leader* from December 2019 names native victims who continue to speak out about sexual abuse they experienced in the 1950s and 60s within the diocesan schools in South Dakota (Anderson, “Native American Victims”).

“soul” is an enforced discipline. The list recalls Baum’s dehumanising words quoted previously, in which he called indigenous people “untamed and untamable creatures” (Baum, “Editorial”, *Saturday Pioneer* 1891), resurfacing the Valladolid debate centuries earlier, suggesting that one must “soul” to be rational and assimilated.

This juxtaposition of principles, actions or non-actions, and belief systems in Hedge Coke’s lists parallel the poem “Up the Washita”<sup>210</sup> written by Henry B. Sarcoxie (Lenape) in 1900, published in the anthology *Changing is not Vanishing*:

The crook’dest road I ever saw  
Was that road up the Washita,  
Where grapes and plum and cherries,  
Wild currants and gooseberries  
Grew thick on every hand, and luscious,  
And people dreamed of metal precious. (251)

Hedge Coke’s mirrors Sarcoxie’s lists of natural abundance and “luscious” food sources, juxtaposed with the dream of copious “metal precious”, as well as his inverted syntax (as in “cash-lined” at the end of “Clan Sister” above”), to emphasise the *creditum* in metal, exemplifying the cultish nature of capitalism. Hedge Coke’s lists of thriving species, contrasted with the above lists of ecological effacement, therefore also pay tribute to earlier native poets resisting the increasing encroachment of imperialist projects which uprooted and unmapped human and non-human relationships.

Indeed, these lists are, as Hedge Coke writes, an “accounting of experience and gathered knows” and support an “experiential knowledge gained” (Hedge Coke, *Sing* 15), which is “new, yes, in a contemporary sense, but with far-ranging particles of legacy” (9), and secondly a sense

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<sup>210</sup> The note accompanying this poem in *Changing is Not Vanishing* explains that the Battle of Washita River in Oklahoma took place on November 27, 1868. The 7th U.C. Cavalry, led by Colonel George Armstrong Custer, made a surprise attack at dawn on a Cheyenne village, which was led by Peace Chief Black Kettle (251).



of pleasure and gratitude in speaking “through the vessel despite the self, to image the land, the animal and plant life able to vicariously bear witness [...]” (4). In her essay “Deep Sustainability: ecopoetics, enjoyment and ecstatic hospitality”, Kate Rigby builds on Freya Mathews’s ethic of “bio-proportionality”, under which Rigby adds “bio-inclusive hospitality”, or an attempt to reach an unconditional hospitality towards non-humans. Bio-proportionality, Mathews’s response to our present Anthropocene, is “based on respect for living things in themselves, rather than simply as service providers for humans”, and promotes the “optimisation of populations of all members of those multi-species collectives (in which humans play a role) whose dynamic interrelations engender ecosystemic flourishing” (60). To achieve this, Mathews suggests “ontopoetic” practices as a novel approach within a “new, ‘ecological civilisation’” (61) which encourages “the deeper pleasures of interactive self-actualisation, or co-becoming [...] with more-than-human others and those places in which we might meet with them” (62). These forms of relationships and humility, however, is the fundamental message Hedge Coke expresses in her lists and interdependent intertextual prosopopoeia founded on indigenous knowledge and experience, which are not novel but have continued for thousands of years. I argue that in these lists, Hedge Coke represents indigenous practices centred around ancient intentions of gratitude and established long before the terms “ontopoetic” or “bio-inclusive hospitality”. In Hedge Coke’s own life, for instance, these intentions were demonstrated by her father:

His way of being in the world was to learn as much as you can of a person’s language. Bring gifts and adjust to the people. The rivers know them, the trees know them and the birds know them. So if you do things in their way, respecting that, you’ll be recognised and have an easier time. We were always taught this, learning songs as well. From him, I feel a sense of mutual respect, and allowing ourselves to see things in a different way, being in a place to take things in as opposed to always bestowing. (Hedge Coke, PI)

Hedge Coke's English term "echo-wrinkles" evokes this integration of tradition, rather than an exclusively new "bio-inclusive hospitality". In the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving address, for instance, after each statement of thanks, one recites, "There, then let it be that way in our minds" (Wilbur, "ThanksTaking")<sup>211</sup>. Swinomish and Tulalip photographer Matika Wilbur explains that at the salmon festivals of nations in the Pacific Northwest, they give thanks, make an offering, and announce themselves before getting onto the water in canoes, before cleansing in the water, and before harvesting. This gratitude, based on the land as the host rather than humans, "takes away that sense of entitlement", what Wilbur and Keenes call "Thanks Taking", "[...] that is deeply rooted in manifest destiny, that is actually rooted in white supremacy". Wilbur believes we cannot overcome these mechanisms of entitlement or "really be in good relationship with one another" until we practice humility by giving thanks, which shifts our daily relationships to non-humans in a physical, practical way, a process antecedent to "bio-proportionality", and one which goes beyond "respect for living things in themselves" by completely declassifying humans as the hosts. Giving thanks is not a straightforward process because, as Matika notes, "it takes time": "thanking things from the sky beings all the way down to the inner creatures of the earth takes time, it takes practice" (Wilbur, "ThanksTaking"). Hedge Coke textually devotes time and attention by listing the herbs, plants, animals, and cosmological knowledge that enabled Blood Run communities to survive, and is what communities today can return to.

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<sup>211</sup> This is an English translation of one of the Mohawk versions of the address, read by Wilbur in the *All My Relations* podcast. Another version that reads "Now our minds are one", was published in 1993. This English version by John Stokes and Kanawahienton (David Benedict, Turtle Clan/Mohawk) and the Mohawk version by Rokwaho (Dan Thompson, Wolf Clan/Mohawk), inspired by Tekaronianekon (Jake Swamp, Wolf Clan/Mohawk) (Stokes 1).

Of course, Rigby rightly notes that “biodiversity conservation and ecological restoration” will struggle, with human-induced global warming, to facilitate the maintenance or rehousing of species to their now disturbed habitats and thus “new models of environmental sustainability are needed” (57). Indeed, Hedge Coke’s belief in a new “dawning” does not mean a romantic return to pre-contact eras, rather, she revisits colonial history in order to decolonise contemporary spaces of ongoing extraction and erasure, reinvigorating ancient, beneficial relationships to land today—“going back to original selves” as Diné activist Kim Smith says—to reframe indigenous self-determination and ecological praxis when facing recent threats. Rigby also suggests it’s more likely that—given the “ecophobia” as Simon Estok calls it (perceiving nonhuman others as threats “to our own existence”) in privileged, epicurean, communities (Estok 131)—a more attractive promise of a pleasurable experience in nature may be needed to lure people towards engaging in “deep sustainability” (Rigby 61). Hedge Coke challenges this appeal to the pleasure principle: the text achieved legal protection for Blood Run without an alluring guarantee of material or emotional benefits for humans, suggesting that civilian and artistic intervention can influence legal decisions on the principle of subsidiarity, which could have local and potentially national benefits<sup>212</sup>. The personas’ interactive lists allow the reader to more profoundly tune into the networks of a balanced ecosystem, particularly through her naming of species.

Finally, Hedge Coke’s abundant non-human lists are also pleasure-centred. Deborah A. Miranda (Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation) outlines three categorisations in critical discussion

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<sup>212</sup> Similarly, because of the protests at Standing Rock against the DAPL and the legal action against the pipeline, a federal judge ruled in March 2020 that “the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers violated the National Environmental Policy Act by approving federal permits for the Dakota Access Pipeline”. This was accomplished without enticing the epicurean government with benefits they could reap if the DAPL project closed. The Standing Rock Sioux nation also filed a legal brief asking the Federal Court to shut down the DAPL while the USACE completes an environmental impact study (Conley, “Standing Rock”).

which harmfully tokenise authors or label them out of context: “a) a generalized grief; b) ‘nature writing’ in which the Indian ‘connection to the land’ is highlighted; and c) ‘ceremony’ or description of a ritual event” (“Dildos” 139). These categories contribute to the historical starvation of pleasure—Miranda discusses more specifically the “erotic starvation”—by the “dominant culture” (140). I argue that the pleasure found in Hedge Coke’s prosopopoeia is more complex, preventing *Blood Run*’s neat placement into any of these three categories. Pleasure of non-humans is ubiquitous in *Blood Run*; in “Prairie Horizons”, a sound symbolism list (“crevices, creases, puckers, plunk [...]”) urges us to see the prairie’s “bounty pleasures” (77). Hedge Coke’s lists are proof of the pleasure of vitality; the list of actions in “North Star”, for instance—“gazers divined, trailed / flashing phenomena, approximated eons, / cleared space with deer mandible sickles, raised spherical jars [...]” (29)—provides a kinetic momentum of pleasure, representing the “historical presences under constellations” which lead indigenous communities “on the travels and migrations” they’d “made over eons”, and re-embodies ontological pleasure in communal acts, mapping “traveling people returning to a cosmos center” (Hedge Coke, *Sing* 4). Whereas the American conquest of space was driven by self-interested taxonomy and development (Goeman, “Land” 83), Hedge Coke goes beyond apathetic hypernyms, using hyponymic lists to mark life cycles and the communal concept of space.

Pleasurable lists are infamously entangled with Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, in which the strophic rhetoric of assemblage is most often foregrounded, though eliciting much scope of opinion. Emerson wrote that rather than make the “songs of the nation”, he simply “made the inventory”. M. Jimmie Killingsworth notes in *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study of Ecopoetics* that Whitman eschews the clinical precision of scientists, accountants or botanists,

and “makes lists casually” or even haphazardly (137), while Robert Belknap agrees that Randall Jarrell’s description of Whitman’s lists as “little systems as beautifully and astonishingly ordered as the rings and satellites of Saturn”, was fitting. Belknap observes, however, that Whitman’s lists, which rival no other writer according to Belknap in their variety and extent (76), ultimately evoke a sense of wonder in the reader, and “display the pleasurable infinitude of language” exploited in various facets (2); non-human species (“There Was a Child Went Forth,”), mountain ranges (“Salut au Monde”), dwellings, and even the names of indigenous nations (“Starting from Paumanok”). What separates Hedge Coke’s pleasurable lists from those of Whitman’s? One principal distinction worth raising is that Whitman, in his accruing of items and materials to mirror his perspective of multitudinous America, reverts to the singular “I”, his own voice as a vessel. Even if “the individual suggests a group, and the group a multitude, each unit of which is as interesting as every other unit, and possesses equal claim to recognition”, as Belknap notes via Edward Dowden (Belknap 74), *Leaves of Grass* nevertheless orbits around the songs of himself: in “So Long”, he writes “[...] this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man” (*Leaves of Grass* 455), whereas Hedge Coke, if she were to mimic the phrase, might write, “who touches this book touches the past and present lives of *Blood Run*”. That is to say, although both poets produce “literary lists” in that their “components need not rigidly adhere to the rubrics that order information” as in practical lists (Belknap 89), Hedge Coke’s decentres from the self by speaking for many selves, so that each persona’s list overlaps and intertwines with another’s. Belknap defines the list as being “simultaneously the sum of its parts and the individual parts themselves”, which is valid for Whitman’s many catalogues and as a “device of the pastoral lyric” (Belknap 16), yet Hedge Coke’s interweaving of meaning within and among her

multi-perspective lists allows for each list itself to be an individual part of the sum of *Blood Run*'s collective voices, which exceed the confines of the book.

#### Artifacts: Layers of Movement and Active Space

Another aspect of *Blood Run*'s counter-containment naming within the framework of prosopopoeia is seen in Hedge Coke's reinterpretation of Oneota artifacts that have been looted, collected and catalogued by archeologists, or simply lost<sup>213</sup>. Among these personas is "Cupped Boulder", a boulder on the site that has been intentionally chipped, resulting in many circular indentations. According to anthropologist Kevin Callahan, these rocks "were not considered inanimate objects, but the occasional dwelling place of spirits", and may have been used in mourning, vision quests, or for couples wanting to conceive. The kaolin, or white clay, produced from the cup marks had medicinal uses (Callahan 10). Indeed, in "Before Next Dawning", Hedge Coke writes that "Medicine boulders" were "etched in accordance" to "cosmology principles", and the granite dust made "ghost-white face paint for mourning" (5). To mirror these ceremonial and curative meanings, the "Cupped Boulder" is able to "vicariously bear witness" as aforementioned (Hedge Coke, *Sing* 4): "From me lives were earmarked / blazed, blessed, eternized. // From me medicine saved cherished lives" (41). Her staccato, alliterated suffixes and half-rhymes in this phrase are phonic mirrors of the visual cup-marked dents, and the percussive

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<sup>213</sup> As many indigenous nations believe such artifacts to be alive and not inanimate, it is appropriate that sacred objects in *Blood Run*, such as "Pipestone Tablets", speak. As Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy write in *The Ecology of the Spoken Word*, "In the community of Sapo Rumi, the petroglyph, which features carvings of seven distinct frogs, is considered to be a living being, an ancient source of power and life that "watches" over the community" (Uzendoski 158). This account correlates with Hedge Coke's pipestone tablet, whose carvings tell the story of "presence, patterning, purpose" (42). Also, Daniel Johnson's (Kootsnoowoo) recounts how his community spoke directly to a repatriated canoe piece, granting it status as a member of the tribe (Poremski, quoting Graham and Murphy 117).

sound made to produce them. Furthermore, she uses seven short couplets, a play with the notion of a cup mark, or indentation.

A pipestone slab is another real artifact found on the site recorded by F.W. Pettigrew in 1901, with numerous engravings of animals including birds, (Henning and Schermer 409). In *Blood Run*, it's represented by the voice of "Pipestone Tablets": "Birds bless ages, / track daily presence, part, whole. / Outlaying movements, momentum, / recording ritual, rudimentary toil" (42). This is an example of Vizenor's sense of transmotion, recalling the "cosmototemic artists" who "created the first memorable scenes of presence, natural totemic motion, and survivance on the slant of stone", images or "spirited shadows" of animals which "dance forever on the contours of the ancient stone" (Vizenor, *Native Provenance* 43). Emphasising this patterned, eternal movement, as in her use of "eternized" in "Cupped Boulder" above, Hedge Coke compares ritual bird migrations to the community-built mounds; each flock or human community is made of individuals, each marks cycles and knowledge of survival, and daily presence and body regionalism. "Pipestone Tablets" highlight the ritualistic movements, migrations and markings or stories of ubiety as an echo of non-human cyclical movements: "Buffalo markings trace comings, goings upon these slabs / a language according to the symbolic design" (42). Hedge Coke's asyndeton in "part, whole" and "comings, goings" also enhances these kinetic parallels of time and space, or "echo-wrinkles" as Hedge Coke has established; the two sets of words, stripped of conjunctions, approach and coalesce despite their presumed opposition, and thus almost textually overlap, representing the collective animal behaviour of bird flocks and the scale of buffalo movements throughout millennia.

The actual pipestone tablet found on the site is also charged with overlapping movement as in this textual representation: Carrol Moxham of the Midwest Archeological Center scanned composite images on the “Ageson tablet” which highlighted superimposed engravings of many different animal motifs including two birds (one perhaps a thunderbird), a buffalo, a serpent (or what could also be seen as part of the buffalo), a bat-like image, and what appear to be crocodiles, or “water monsters” (Henning et al. 347). These images, therefore, involve four scales of cyclical movement: non-human movement, human activity in response to non-human movement, the act of recreating these movements on the palimpsest of images on the catlinite tablet itself, and Hedge Coke’s act of writing to bring them to our attention through the voice of the artifact, “to reveal deeper implications of the significance” of the site and the “multitudes of gatherings there” (Hedge Coke, *Sing* 4). As the poet explains, each persona is “capturing a moment but having the breadth of history, the breadth of the future, all encompassed in one moment, one shot”, and the intertextuality of these artifacts as personas expands this breadth (Hedge Coke, “Returning”). For instance, “Memory” is aware of the tablets in its monologue placed two poems prior—“Marking our bird-print presence. / Buffalo marks on Pipestone Tablets, / on boulder stone, / on the belly of the earth / on every raised ridge, / seasonal hide, come winter” (original spacing, 40)—providing a list of expressive cultural insignia. “Cupped Boulder” also mentions “Thunderbird”, a motif which, as recorded by Henning and Schermer, is present on a catlinite object as well as on a “neck sherd” of pottery from the Blood Run site<sup>214</sup>. The superimposed pipestone tablet motifs depicting life cycles—which also represent the

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<sup>214</sup> The Thunderbird—a spirit in the belief systems of numerous nations (Sauk and Fox, Winnebago, Ojibwe)—was the motif used by the Ho-Chunk or Winnebago nation (one of the nations believed to have been present at the Blood Run site) to sign the “Great Peace of Montreal” or 1701 (Havard 252). A bird effigy mound, said to be a thunderbird by the Sauk County Historical Society, is at Devil’s Lake Park in Sauk County, Wisconsin.



passage of time as they were physically etched on stone (mirroring the poet's own poetic inscription)—are echoed in the cross-millennial interspecies activities referenced by the personas.

The poet also underscores the more complex meanings of these symbols—that the motifs “bless ages”, outlay “movements, momentum”, as well as “restore balance” (42)—to complicate accounts such as E.G. Squier's in the February 1849 publication of *The American Review*. Squier writes, in reference to John Heckewelder, a missionary to the Lenape nation, that the scope of “picture writing” (of the Algonquin and Lenape nations) includes passing on intelligence, recording events and recording songs, but that the system “has not been generally understood nor fully recognized” by non-native anthropologists (Squier 276). He also professes that the pictographs' “rude system of representation” was a primitive base from which one can trace “the process of human invention to its highest and noblest achievement, the present perfected form of written language” (193). Squier's insistence that pictographs are far inferior to the “present perfected form of written language”, the presumed pinnacle of progress, is challenged in Hedge Coke's focus on the pictographs' kinetic symbolism, which is not separate from the life cycles marked by the complex ceremonial and burial mounds on the site. In the final stanza of “Pipestone Tablets”, Hedge Coke writes, “All tests,        generations bear” (42). This gap—Hedge Coke calls it an “in-line caesura breath (inhalations/exhalations or rhythmic pause)” (Hedge Coke, “Szeism”)—signals yet another pattern: the cycle of inherited colonial challenges which generations bear today.

I have elaborated on Hedge Coke's spacing as a replication of peaceful societal balance in “Before Next Dawning”, and in the next sections, I will address how other in-line gaps create

meaning. In this case, Hedge Coke typographically broaches the inverse of what I will call Dickinson's gap, not in reference to Dickinson's spacing itself, but because of her suggestion of what must fill a space. In her laconic poem "To Fill a Gap", likely signifying God, the gap of spiritual doubt, Dickinson writes: "To fill a Gap / Insert the Thing that caused it— / Block it up / With Other—and 'twill yawn the more— / You cannot solder an Abyss / With Air" (Dickinson 647). However, the gap in "Pipestone Tablets" suggests that exploitative issues similar to the destruction of Blood Run broaden with each generation due to the cyclical gap of unacknowledged colonial history and authoritarian interests which benefit the federal government, built into the "national political economy" (Oliver-Smith 191). Each generation's pleasure, celebration, balance and survival may be tested, and each new generation bears the accumulation of each test. Yet, soldering this gap of disacknowledgement—akin to what, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Vedantam calls "historical myopia"—will be achieved not by reinstating disacknowledgement, but its opposite; knowledge itself and imaginative forms beyond colonial paradigms, for instance, Hedge Coke's voicings of the site's artifacts. This approach to the gap aligns with the first principle of The Red Nation, which the coalition reiterates in their aforementioned Red Deal: "What Creates Crisis Cannot Solve It" ("The Red Deal: Part 1" 12). Unless new environmental policies such as the Green New Deal do not explicitly divest in fossil fuel extraction and end the exploitation of native communities, drastic ecological imbalances risk being soldered with precisely what caused them; the sacrificing of indigenous bodies and lands for new forms of capitalist benefit<sup>215</sup>. The emphasis on "bear" in Hedge Coke's signature

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<sup>215</sup> Senator Edward Markey and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez released a resolution for the Green New Deal in 2019, which the Red Nation notes is "a step in the right direction to combat climate change and to hold corporate polluters responsible" ("The Red Deal: Part 1" 10). However, the Red Deal pushes this initiative further by proposing "a call for action beyond the scope of the U.S. colonial state [...] for Indigenous liberation, life, and land—an affirmation that colonialism and capitalism must be overturned

syntactical inversion underlines that each generation can bear “any how” to use Nietzsche’s words (Nietzsche 254). Thus, this gap denotes the weight of colonial tests inherited from generation to generation, the new decolonial practices which are born from this burden, and also reflects a space to persist, to breathe. Hedge Coke’s intertextual artifact-personas enact the kinetics of “kinship and pattern” (Hedge Coke, *Sing* 2) based on interspecies dependencies and the parallels of “traditional work and contemporary work, time upon time” (5), and spatially insinuate both the challenges and possibilities of intergenerational decolonial struggles.

#### Decentring: “Szeism” and Non-human Voicing

Having explored some principal examples of the layers of movement in Hedge Coke’s intertextuality, lists and voiced artifacts on the site, in this section I analyse forms of decentring in the poet’s prosopopoeia, a component of what Hedge Coke calls “Szeism”. I will refer to some of her techniques that propose a decentred or “less egocentric position of a self”, which she attributes partly to Arthur Sze’s instruction at IAIA, and which I connect to his resistance to the label “ecopoetics”, in favor of the recognition that poets simply “need to write what they need to write” (Sze, “Contemporary Practices”). I outline ways the term decentring has been previously addressed and defined, and how Hedge Coke’s details of small-scale and macrocosmic kinetics for which she uses the metaphor of a funnel-shaped awareness, her perceptions outside of the standard human gaze and the indications of shifting seasons, all contribute to elements of what one can call a decentred poetics. I contrast Hedge Coke’s decentred, aesthetic renderings of non-human voices to conceptions put forward by Ryan and Braidotti, who are definitive about

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for this planet to be habitable for human and non-human relatives to live dignified lives” (“The Red Deal: Part 1” 11).

what non-human voicings should or shouldn't be. Finally, I consider how her decentring provides an inverted lens towards the reader, and not simply the non-human.

At a forum called “Contemporary Practices of Ecopoetics” at the New School, Sze builds on Robinson Jeffers’ idea to “uncenter”, quoted by Jane Hirschfield on the same panel, to disrupt the experience of “linear-unfolding time”, or apparent vision of clear cause and effect. He elaborates on simultaneity—noting the Jungian acausal connection and contemporary chaos theory—and the seen and unseen nexus of a web-like structure (he uses mushroom mycelium as an example) to describe how collisions of simultaneities in time deny privilege to one over the other. In decentring, he says, “all sorts of possibilities open up; the syntax of the poem, the shape of the poem, [...] destroying a kind of hierarchy of languages [...]”. He adds that “this has been done from the very beginning, it’s not like we need “ecopoetry” or that kind of label to give us permission to do that” (Sze, “Contemporary Practices”). However, he notes that the label does welcome conversations and questions beyond a singular, all-knowing voice. I will frame Hedge Coke’s decentring in relation to other contemporary ideologies addressing some issues of translating the non-human. Self-reflexive texts, Vizenor writes, recount personal visions and memories which enact survivance (he quotes Momaday, Hogan, Luther Standing Bear, Diane Glancy and Janet Campbell Hale as examples) as opposed to seeking “dominance”, those who claim adoptive tribal identities (Vizenor names Kenneth Lincoln for instance), which Vizenor calls “simulations” (*Shadow Distance* 173). Vizenor also quotes George Steiner’s introduction to Kafka’s “The Trial”: “nearly all mature aesthetic form” is self-reflexive, and “tells critically of its own genesis” (180). Hedge Coke’s personas allow for multiple representations away from a singular authorial vantage point, yet the narratives all point to Hedge Coke’s beginnings.

Firstly, Hedge Coke's attention to non-human perspectives stems from her observations and writing on the Blood Run site itself (Hedge Coke, "Returning"), as well as the interest in non-anthropocentric indigenous belief systems of the Oneota peoples, and of her father's Cherokee influence. Hedge Coke writes in her memoir *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer* that the understanding of non-anthropocentric values from her Cherokee and Huron ancestors were passed down by her father, who often recounted these values in stories while he taught his daughters traditional beadwork. From her father's Cherokee ancestors, she was taught about "relatives of deer [...]", stories about "otter, bear, and birds; of corn, squash, beans and berries; of ball games and Little People; of sky vault and the world beneath the water" that "this land had life and spirit just as we do" (3). Many of these entities Hedge Coke lists appear as personas in *Blood Run*. Her father also imparted stories of the land "physically marking our occurrence in the world"—a phrase directly echoed in *Blood Run*, in which the voice of "The Mounds" say that they "mark worldly occurrence" (5)—and told her of the "mighty and many mounds" her ancestors "built for burial and prayer" where the "bones of our Cherokee people furnished" the "rich black soil and luxuriant flora greening topsoil [...] with nutrients and fertilized all that we reaped from its bounty" (4). In fact, as she says in an interview in *Mississippi Quarterly*, *Blood Run* was her first collection that wasn't "Carolina specific", and if she didn't have the "Carolina background"—her southeastern ancestors being moundbuilders themselves—she "wouldn't have worked so hard to protect those western mounds" (Arnold et al. 96). These belief systems in which the landscape is the progenitor and revered as ontologically central to life cycles, including the regenerating presence of burial mounds, have thus been present in the poet's life since childhood. Later in life, Hedge Coke acquired an understanding of complex ecosystems

during her work as a sharecropper before a car accident forced her to stop; she witnessed the industrial shift to more machine-driven farming techniques and was sprayed by pesticides on the job, experiences which materialise in *Blood Run*.

Hedge Coke's decentred prosopopoeia could be interpreted as being in line with Val Plumwood's call for an "animating sensibility and vocabulary" (qtd by Rigby 53), which, as Kate Rigby writes, "recognises other-than-human creative agencies, communicative capacities and ethical considerability" in order to "make visible whole new interspecies dialogues, dramas and projects, moral consideration of all non-humans" (53). Monika Bakke also upholds Plumwood's belief that "the ability to apply ethical concepts to earth others" should begin by "discerning others as autonomous intentional systems, rather than in terms of an instrumental and mechanistic system of individuation" (qtd from *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 138), in other words, a "less anthropocentric attitude toward nonhuman others" in seeing them as intentional (Bakke 130). However, Hedge Coke shows in each of her personas that the "intentional stance" is not "new", nor does it necessarily "open up" a novel ethical framework; her non-human personas, including the mounds, remind the reader that while recent non-native nominations for an "other-than-human" "ethical considerability" may be useful in certain contexts, indigenous ideologies have been grounded in matriarchal, non-anthropocentric practices in North America for millennia, and continue to provide these structures despite the drastic ecological effects of neoliberalism. Rather than approaching Hedge Coke's multiple voices as "enacting a new materialist, trans-corporeal, posthuman poetics" (Milne 100)<sup>216</sup>, I examine the decentring effect of *Blood Run*'s prosopopoeia as a poetic gesture which probes the

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<sup>216</sup> Heather Milne's book *Poetry Matters: Neoliberalism, Affect, and the Posthuman in Twenty-First Century North American Feminist Poetics* (2018) is one of the recent studies that adopts these ecocritical trends, following Timothy Morton, Rosi Braidotti, and Stacy Alaimo.

complex kinetics of non-human and human relationships expressed in indigenous worldviews, praxis, and Hedge Coke's own heritage, and as an intertextual chorus of voices which furthers the poet's aim to protect the site itself.

Hedge Coke's decentring also shares its disposition with the Barthesian "death of the author" and the "funeral service" Italo Calvino holds in his essay "Cybernetics and Ghosts" for the cultish "anachronistic author" who can finally "vanish" (Calvino, "Cybernetics" 16)<sup>217</sup>. Of course, this authorial vanishing doesn't mean, Calvino reminds us, that the writer's existence disappears, but that the authorial "I", the "bearer of messages", is replaced by "a more thoughtful person" (16), one who has "dismantled and reassembled" the mechanics of language (15). However, *Blood Run* differs from other poststructural frameworks in which the term "decentring" is often used. Andrew Wiget, for instance, hints at Barthes's rejection of the author-as-capital in his essay on Leslie Marmon Silko, a "bicultural" writer, who, in *Ceremony*, tries to negotiate her ethnicity between the voice of the pre-existing "muse", Thought-Woman, and the narrative of Tayo. Wiget's oversimplification that native writers "necessarily" participate in two worlds is the basis, in his view, for Silko's "decentred" narrative (Wiget 262). Yet, this outlook deepens native and non-native binaries, compartmentalising the author solely according to a struggle of straddling identities, rather than forefronting poetics, which teeters towards the biases that Diaz critiques in "The First Water is the Body". David Moore uses the term "decentring" to describe the rhetorical strategy of Pequot writer and Methodist minister William Apess (1798–1839), whose rewriting of Puritan colonial events and Manifest Destiny served as a

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<sup>217</sup> Calvino's lecture, though less referenced, echoes the same theme and was delivered in Turin in November of 1967, the same year Barthes's "Death of the Author" was first published in English translation, in *Aspen Magazine* 5/6 (Fall/Winter). Barthes's essay was published in French as "La Mort de L'auteur" in *Mantéia* 5 (1968, 12-17).

precursor to postmodernism, which, Philip Harper argues, “always concerned marginalized constituencies” (Moore 4)<sup>218</sup>. While Hedge Coke’s personas do deconstruct an anthropocentric epicentre, her decentring is not inherently postmodern, poststructural, or post-human, but rather it reaccentuates a pre-colonial attention to microcosmic and macrocosmic relationships and in turn creates a simultaneity between movement and stasis—a “magnetic” pull as Sze calls it.

The poet explained her displacement of the “I” to me in reference to her class with Sze at IAIA, as the following:

We learned about (Chinese) radicals to translate them. I would do one literal and one poetic translation, and there was a famous translator named Arthur Waley (who would always use ‘I’). And I said ‘I, I, I’, British ‘royal we’, it’s never in the Chinese. So to translate the Chinese, I’d use Lakota first, then Cherokee, then Wyandotte, then English, to get to what I wanted it to be. So that I didn’t have the ‘I, I, I’. When I want to discuss the ‘I’ in poetry, [...] I come there when there is an opening, after everything is in place. [...] And a lot of times you don’t need to, or maybe you’re doing something that is very large, universal, and then finally you come to an ‘I’, [...] then you can think of it having a funnel shape. (Hedge Coke, PI)

The Chinese radicals Sze had them work with lacked the “I”, but were added to Waley’s translation in coherence with anglophone confessionalism. Hedge Coke’s transmission of Chinese via Cherokee and Wyandotte allowed the poet to guard the non-individualistic focus before finally arriving at an English translation, and transfers to *Blood Run*’s pared-down precision in its heteroglossic voices, away from the self<sup>219</sup>. Thus, for the readers—the imagined

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<sup>218</sup> Thomas Gannon similarly uses the term in reference to the post-structuralist breaking up or deprivileging of homocentrism through “a radical ecocentric egalitarianism”, for instance, Peter Singer’s “animal rights attack on speciesism” (Gannon 16), or Michael Branch’s post-structurally based “ecosophy” (24). Heather Milne reads Yedda Morrison’s *Darkness* (2012) and Marcella Durand’s “The Anatomy of Oil” (2008) as commentaries on “imperialism and resource extraction” which decentre “the human from the frames of reference” (Milne 30). This is not unlike Mbembe’s Sartrean call for non-humans to be “unshackled from the gaze of humans, in their being-for-themselves”, and therefore “a decentring of the human” (Mbembe, “Decolonizing” 43).

<sup>219</sup> See also Margaret Noodin’s translations of Sappho directly from the Greek into Anishinaabemowin, for which she privileged “ambivalence” rather than “equivalence”:



visitors of Blood Run—and to physical passersby, non-humans are seemingly static and yet they contain, even in their small-scale perspectives, a universe of movement. For instance, “Sunflower” collects water in its “broad head”, turns in “daily heliotropism”, and its “pulvinus” “motor cells” “flex stem / below bud until flower opens” (26). The flower is immobile to the onlooker, though Hedge Coke’s tightly rhythmic sibilance demands the reader’s attention to its precise, miniscule kinetics at a daily, molecular level, the nonlinear clockwork pulsing to stay alive. In another microcosmic funneling, “Corn” is “dropped dried / into wet earth” (24) in its seed form, displaying a mode of consciousness even as a pre-germinated kernel. In her alliteration and repeated spondees (“scraped soil”, “dropped dried” and “wet earth”), Hedge Coke tapers our attention to the minuscule, which is inherently self-reflexive as it relates to her deep observation. Yet, at the other end of the funnel, to use her word, is the macroscopic; in the same poem, “Corn” reminds us that “You can figure the phases of the moon by my sprouting tassels”<sup>220</sup>, relating cosmic time scales to miniscule shifts in individual plants. Research conducted by Mackenzie et al. on Traditional Ecological Knowledge shows that indigenous systems of time are often incongruous with the “industrial standardised Gregorian approach to time”; “Clock and Calendar Time” for instance does not have the same appropriations for activities, such as “the management of resources, ceremonial life, or the ebb and flow of seasons” (Mackenzie et al. 41). Other scales that observe indigenous knowledge are seen in “Clan Sister” who follows the cosmic “starry lead each night”, and the “North Star” persona which guides human “paths to come, go”, and speaks of the “seven fiery points” with which

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<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/146717/miidash-miinawaa-zakaiyan-sa-and-yo-u-have-set-me-on-fire>.

<sup>220</sup> The phases of the moon in the month of July for the Cherokee people—who are part of Hedge Coke’s indigenous ancestry but not part of the Oneota group—are called Nvda *utsi’dsata’* or corn in tassel moon, when the corn begins to show its tassel (Gyllenbok 273).

communities “mapped star roads”, a reference to the pleiades cluster. Heliacal cycles are also of importance in ecological time keeping: “Morning Star” “fringes Earth / each dawn before Sun breaks Horizon” (20). Thus, another aspect of decentring is funneling outwards towards non-human markers of time, and an attention to seasonal shifts.

In fact, this seasonal representation introduces another correlation with Asian poetic influences: the kigo, or seasonal word cue, from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese haikai or hokku tradition (Shirane 176); the comprehensive saijiki, seasonal almanacs listing the kigo in the Edo period (xii); the Chinese “Four Seasons” song poems of Zi Ye (or “Lady Midnight”) of the Jin dynasty (3rd and 4th centuries); and the T’ang period’s cyclical stages which cannot be described other than in terms of the seasons, according to John C.H. Wu (Wu 120). While “Corn” mentions its tassels as a lunar and seasonal calendar, “The Mounds” describe, in the section “Intrusions”, the “wintering of our world” (71) and “Clan Sister” criticizes the colonial “tertiary tenant”, describing harsher weather: “hail pummeling” and “detritus winds” (68). In a cyclical restoration however, spring comes back in “Portend”: “Prairie Horizons” mark the arrival of spring with “waters from faraway melt” that eventually trigger the walleye to spawn (77). Poet and translator Robert Hass also correlates an Aristotelian suspension of awe<sup>221</sup> and wonder with Japanese haiku masters who express a solitary experience in the face of the natural world, for instance, upon viewing Mount Fuji<sup>222</sup> (Hass, “How Poetry”). Notation of time markers outside of the human psyche—which Hedge Coke’s personas articulate—opens up to other perspectives: as Basho

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<sup>221</sup> Hass attributes the origin of a suspension or isolation of awe to Aristotle’s notion of catharsis in tragedy, aroused by both pity, terror and moral ambiguity, due to the tragic flaw or hamartia of the character (Stinton 221).

<sup>222</sup> Wonder as spring emerges, for instance, is a common theme. As Hass says in his lecture, Basho writes of awe even in not being able to see Mount Fuji: “in the misty rain / Mount Fuji is veiled all day — / how intriguing! (Ueda 374).

writes “Deep autumn, my neighbor, how does he live, I wonder?” (Hass, “How Poetry”). Hedge Coke’s decentred wonder as a poet engages the non-human experience through cyclical, seasonal shifts. Even more, “Corn” is cyclical in its address; its use of “you” suggests both the communities who occupied Blood Run and their descendants, as well as the reader—“Dance for me. / There will be plenty / here for you / again, again” (24)—thus detaching the text from a strict chronological context.

I do not imply that, by evoking small-scale and cosmic-scale kinetics, Hedge Coke wishes to do the impossible and escape the human voice entirely and embody the plant, as some ecocritics problematically suggest is necessary. For instance, in “In the Key of Green?: The Silent Voices of Plants in Poetry”, John Ryan sets his own boundaries for what “plant voice” should and should not be: the “internal voice” and “phytoacoustics” of plant voices need to signify something “beyond human language”, while the human “external voice” or “phytopoetics” must not be “speaking for plants” or “representing plants as thinking and sensing beings” which would be an unethical objectification (283). He argues that we should look beyond the assumptions that voice is limited to “sonic terms”—our notion of acoustics being produced by vocal chords—as giving voice to a plant is only figurative and dependent on “human subjectivity” (Ryan 280). Ryan gives the example of Louise Glück’s Pulitzer-prize winning collection *The Wild Iris*, in which she also writes from the perspective of plants, although other critics have evidently noted the collection is “inescapably mediated by the human voice” (284). In contrast with Ryan, I argue that insisting on non-human, non-sonic “phytoacoustics” neglects the possibilities for innovative poetic expression, typography and decentring, through an attention to non-human movements. Thus, rather than prosopopoeia being

morally objectionable unless following a set of rules, Hedge Coke allows for poetic freedom, and furthers the poet's grounds for political action towards this site's protection, as well as other ecosystems. In *Blood Run*, the voices through the poet's decentred observation, as "Sunflower" and "Corn" above, describe an awareness of their microscopic kinetics interactive within the larger ecosystem, and trace the juxtapositions of invisible, microscopic and collective movement.

One comparison would be in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's poem "How to Steal a Canoe", in which one of the canoes on display in a museum, or "warehouse / of stolen canoes", speaks to the character kwe (woman in Anishinaabemowin), telling her to "take the young one and run"<sup>223</sup>. Kwe takes the canoe out of the museum and drives it to Chemong, a lake in Ontario, to be released (Simpson, *f(l)ight*). Simpson doesn't seem concerned with appropriating the canoe with a human voice, but rather with sending a message of decolonising its captivity and enabling its mobility; the voice asks kwe to act, juxtaposing the intended movement of the canoe with its stagnant existence in a museum collection<sup>224</sup>. In other words, the first-person personas in *Blood Run*'s prosopopoeia do not use the human voice to unethically colonise whatever a plant's "voice" might sound like, but rather they embody the poet's attempt, repeating Hedge Coke's note, not to write personal poems but to write "through the vessel *despite* the self, to image the land, the animal and plant life able to vicariously bear witness [...]" (my emphasis, *Sing 4*)<sup>225</sup>. Chadwick Allen cites this quote as well in relation to LeAnne Howe (Chocktaw) and Monique

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<sup>223</sup> While the lyrics are from the recording on Simpson's second album, *f(l)ight*, I use the spacing as seen on the 2015 Reader's Choice publication in Arc Poetry Magazine: [http://arcpoetry.ca/2015/03/16/draft-readers-choice/#steal\\_canoe](http://arcpoetry.ca/2015/03/16/draft-readers-choice/#steal_canoe).

<sup>224</sup> Simpson writes that instead of its "dehydrated rage" and "dry skin", as if hanging still like an animal carcass in an abattoir, the bark of the canoe is meant to be mobile, for "pitching and floating and travelling" (*f(l)ight*, 2016).

<sup>225</sup> One is reminded of Pessoa, who believed, in reference to his heteronyms, that he was "the empty stage where various actors act out various plays": "to create, I've destroyed myself" (Pessoa xxii).

Mojica's (Guna and Rappahannock) collaboration and their "Indigenous artistic research methodology" (Mojica 219), but Allen doesn't comment on its authorial significance. In the poet's careful word choice, the verb to "image" the site's life is distinct from "imagining": we are not confined to the poet's subjective psyche, but granted a collective image. The microcosmic and macrocosmic relations—funneling out from the "I"—imagistically free these entities from being ideas to being, as Noodin writes in the introduction to *blood Run*, "invisible souls perceived" (x) "through lingual and geometric presence" (5). Their interactions with each other become, as Hedge Coke says of the work, "musical" (*Sing* 5), in line with the quote previously cited: "music is the sound of consciousness (Hedge Coke, PI). Her decentred method is facilitated by an attention to "how things come together, [...] the movement within it sometimes articulates more intense periods" (Hedge Coke, PI). One can return to her concept of "echo-wrinkles", a harmonisation of her "familial and personal knowledge" and childhood "migrations" and the movements of the site itself. Hedge Coke's work is more concerned with kinetic complexity and biospheric relationships for the purpose of protecting the ancient, sacred site. The poet isn't deterred by Braidotti's monistic critique of "compensatory humanism", which warns against instating anthropocentric hierarchies and legal rights to plants "under the aegis of species egalitarianism" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 79). Prosopopoeia is a form of translation, not necessarily with the aim of incarnating or extracting an "internal voice" but rather a translation of movement from the most infinitesimal occurrences such as the kernel-sized experience of "Corn" or the Holubian molecular "pulsing" in the heliotropic head of "Sunflower". In fact, the poems are "trying to merge with the voice" musically, or "enact the voice that it hears" as Li-Young Lee says (Lee, "A Conversation"). Because temporality (overlapping or "curvilinear"

time periods) and spatiality (microcosmic and macrocosmic details) dissolve the antecedence of the “Author” as Barthes suggests, Hedge Coke herself is not the “Author-God” of the voices, but rather is “simultaneous” with the voices, as one can extrapolate from her image of the bilateral funnel, which may be understood as a meta-poetic metaphor.

Hedge Coke’s decentring also reaches a “third place”, a term which, as I have elaborated on in the first chapter, Bitsui uses to refer to the potentiality of bilingual writers (Navajo/English in particular), and which Diaz uses in “The First Water is the Body”, echoing John Berger’s thoughts on translation. Here, I’ll use Li-Young Lee’s metaphor in his poem “A Final Thing”, in which he hears his wife’s muffled voice on the other side of the wall reading to his son. Because the story itself is unintelligible, he understands the language as part of a “greater telling that goes on in the universe”, in which “everything is discourse; trees, leaves, mountains”. Lee professes that when the voice is obscured or imperceptible, “you know you’re in the presence of a telling”; the constant movement and sonority of discourse is perceptible whether we hear it or not (Lee, “A Conversation”). Similarly, Hedge Coke’s decentring to represent “Cupped Boulder”, “Corn”, “Pipestone Tablets”, “Memory”, “Redwing Blackbird”, for instance, translate the sounds of natural discourse and interrelationality from a third place, behind the wall of our human perception, “the greater telling” of non-human kinetics.

One way Hedge Coke’s decentring represents this presence of a “greater telling”, a story or song happening outside of the self, is through—in contrast with her all-encompassing lists—a stripped anaphora and article omission, as in the lines in “Sunflower”: “to / raise me full glory to greet / strengthening summit—daily heliotropism” (26). She reaches the borders of normative syntax, stretching language and perception to its edges, thus decentring further from a

confessional singularity. In this way, Hedge Coke's personas resemble the animal perspectives used by Australian poet Les Murray. In the second section, "Presence", of Murray's *Translations from the Natural World*, he writes non-human voicings in a similar pared-down locution. In "Eagle Pair", for instance, directions are capitalised as other entities: "All night / the limitless Up digests its meats of light [...] and meats move or are still on the Down" (Murray 15). Murray's capitalisation of "Up", "Down", and "Egg" in this poem are akin to Hedge Coke's capitalised entities; both imbue intangible phenomena with importance from the non-human view, although Murray's capitalised entities are often adjectives, due to the "selected perceived qualities" of the animals (Bouttier 159). Likewise, Murray chooses to pollard the speech of the eagle pair: his language is terse—in rhymed couplets, which as Sarah Bouttier writes, are metonymies for the pair of eagles—with unusual word choices ("circle-winged") and grammatical shifts ("it is power and Up, as we free it from load") similar to Hedge Coke's personas. Murray elaborates that language becomes syntactically innovative because of the constraints in adapting to non-human physicalities: "no hands, no colour vision if they are mammals [...] not much metaphor or sense of time, no consequences, no mercy, but no vindictiveness either, etc." (Bouttier 158). His perceptual constraints are the result of the scrupulous attention to how other living entities perceive their surroundings, mixed with his inherent human experience. Bouttier explains that Murray's last line, "the rebound heat ribbing up vertical rivers of air", is a further defamiliarisation of human perception through its oxymoronic juxtaposition; the birds' physical awareness of aerial verticality—the currents of air which carry them—coupled with the horizontal axis of the river, reflecting typical human perception, a "mixture" that allows the non-human to be all the more perceived (Bouttier 166). Hedge's Coke's voicing of "Prairie

Horizons” exhibits similar perceptual constraints, and exceptionally constrained asyndeton, which emphasise this non-human/human mixity. “Prairie Horizons”, who remember the days of the pliohippus, begin their monologue by describing the ice that melts into “welling rivers, streams, swelling swirls slipping wile”, through which a walleye, a large freshwater fish, rushes “as if to spare themselves on / Sioux quartzite quick edge, leaving breathing haven, / for pummeling pivot, bulleting from cerulean to blue, into / butterfly wingroom shock, red rock surrounded space” (original spacing, 77). Firstly, the intensified alliteration (“streams, swelling swirls slipping”) and internal rhyme in these lines (“welling”, “swell”, “themselves”, “shock” and “rock”) translate the soundscape and sonorous activity of the “Prairie Horizons”, the “greater telling that goes on in the universe”, as Lee says “in which everything is discourse” (Lee, “A Conversation”). The poem emphasises the spectrums of movement throughout millennia, as we have seen in “Pipestone Tablets”, when ancient species of horses such as “larger equus” lived there “from a million to at least ten thousand years ago”, as well as the water’s movement which continues daily. More specifically, Hedge Coke’s cinematic precision and consonance in this snapshot above, the fish leaping into the air and its likely collision with butterfly, is another example of her decentring through “perceptual constraints”, as seen in Murray’s “Eagle Pair”. While the alliteration in this imagery (“streams, swelling swirls slipping wile” and “crevices, creases”) appeals to the reader’s auditory experience, the walleye’s concern with its “pivot” out of the water to avoid the “quartzite quick edge” (77), and within this millisecond, the flash of “red rock” and a leap into the “wingroom” of a butterfly, puts the reader in the imagined world of the fish’s kinetic experience. The gap in the line after “quick edge” also visually indicates its



supra-aquatic leap; for the onlooker, it may last a millisecond, but for Hedge Coke's walleye, it is a significant, calculated propulsion.

The poem "Esoterica", a seven-part voicing of different plant "medicines" as Hedge Cokes says, is the only passage in *Blood Run* in which there are anonymous speakers. However, unlike Dickinson's playful and usually evident guess-whos, these aphoristic monologues suggest that one should not strive to define them, one does not need to grasp indigenous knowledge that, as in Diaz and Bitsui's untranslated translanguaging, sometimes is kept private as a decolonial practice. In the sixth voice of the "Esoterica" series, Hedge Coke writes: "Perfectly square lengths / char smoldering / Incense offering infants / sleep, dreams, peace" (34). Hedge Coke explains that she preferred anonymity in this series "rather than identify or speak about something that's really close and personal" (Hedge Coke, "Still Life"). These seven voices whose names are not divulged, echo Linda Tuhiwai Smith's critique of scientific research being deeply implicated in forms of colonialism, the mastery and possession of knowledge rooted in the orientalism of the other. Smith argues that indigenous knowledge has been dismissed as "irrelevant and ignorant": "[...] we had a language that enabled us [...] to make sense of the world we lived in. [...] How can we revalue our knowledge, but also think about knowledge and research as ours again?" (Smith, "INQ13"). Hedge Coke's guarded poem "Esoterica" responds to Smith's question of how to restore knowledge and reframe it, or as Natalie Diaz says, how to "steal it, take it back, protect it" (Diaz, "Episode 13"). While "Esoterica" holds knowledge as private, other voices articulate both decolonial thriving and wounds that be can be public (the pleasure of "wondrous revelations" in "Clan Sister", or the disquieting, self-righteous voice of "Squatters"). The latter intention to be public reflects, as Theodor Adorno says in his imagining

of a humane post-war ethics, the “condition of all truth” which is to “let suffering speak” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 17-18), or as Diaz says: “I’m not hiding this anymore, I want you to be uncomfortable with it” (Diaz, “Episode 13”). Therefore, Hedge Coke’s heteroglossic decentring, from “Corn” to “Squatters”, is a polyphonous coexistence of letting “suffering speak”, letting pleasure speak, and finally in “Esoterica”, using “the effects of opacity” to “frustrate the promise of transparent access to a unique and singular lyric ‘I’” (Dowling 8). Hedge Coke’s decentring then not only explores the “greater telling” beyond monovocality, it turns the lens on the reader as visitor, observer and potential protector. Indeed, Hunkpapa Lakota artist Dana Claxton uses the term “decentring” to describe this inverted lens towards the viewer, or reader, who is invited to reflect not on the author but to “think about who they are in relation to what they’re looking at” (Claxton, “Portrait”).

Hedge Coke’s prosopopoeia and intertextual naming and listing of meaningful flora, fauna, and artifacts, as I hope to have shown, accomplishes a rhizomatic textual stratification beyond loco-description. Hedge Coke’s impetus in her decentring intertextuality was to “expand an idea or notion so that some point or understanding can be obtained” about cultural and ecological protection in the present, not a time capsule of Oneota heritage (Hedge Coke, “Returning”). Hedge Coke’s decentring towards polyphonous, heteroglossic personas is less concerned with the aforementioned boundaries of plant voice, than with expressing the musicality of interrelationality from multiple spatial and temporal perspectives, praising the kinetics of the site and surfacing a reflection on dispossession. As Joy Harjo writes in “Grace”, “I know there is something larger than the memory of a dispossessed people. We have seen it” (Harjo, *In Mad Love* 1). More than advocating to change NAGPRA’s policies as other readings

have suggested, or making the reader become “coaxed into appropriate cultural behavior” (Allen, *Trans-indigenous* 62), these complexities provide a heteroglossic and lexicon-centric approach to decentring from the more frequent confessional lyric.

### Typography of the Mound Personas

Hedge Coke’s elevated form and content in her persona poems is particularly seen in her mound poems, which speak multiple times throughout the verse play. Although Eric Anderson notes that Hedge Coke’s textual representations of earthworks are not “objects”, but “carry complicated experiences and memories” (Anderson, “Earthworks” 12), this reading is still peripheral, without showing *how* Hedge Coke is able to manifest their presence on the page. In “Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism”, Jodi Melamed discusses Hedge Coke’s mounds as a tool to introduce non-indigenous readers to the “culture / land conceptual bind” (186), because mounds are both “products of human endeavor but are still nature” (205), however, I believe more elaboration is necessary in discussing the textual mounds’ visual iconicity. I discuss the mound poems’ deliberate, symbolic typographical forms from shape to spacing, which replicate the precision of the actual mounds, as well as, in some monologues, the desecration of the mounds, and how they provide an alternative notion of grief. I then explore their theatrical contributions to the narrative through their collective voicing, touching on both Greek traditions and indigenous narratology or as LeAnne Howe notes, “tribalography”.

The “Ceremonial Mound”, for example, is stacked vertically with seven couplets and two tercets, mirroring the mound’s particularly elevated access to the cosmos while guarding contact

with the earth. As a collective voice, “The Mounds” intervene seven times, not unlike Greek chorus interventions, reflecting Hedge Coke’s experimentation with reawakening classic oratory forms in epics, as Sze encouraged at IAIA (Hedge Coke, “Szeism”). Indeed, Hedge Coke’s own categorical blurring in her designation “verse play” permits not only monologues but songlike repetitions, as seen in “Clan Sister”—“I have come to pray / I have come to sing”<sup>226</sup>—as well as typographical visual forms, as an actor or storyteller echoes or reenacts content in mime or gesture. Hedge Coke’s mound voices in particular recount the past and future significance of the mounds’ structures and the network of connections between the buried humans and the plants that grow from them, held together in their present forms. This is in line with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s description, in conversation with Natalie Diaz, of Simpson’s novel *Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies* (2020), in which the very setting of the story is “the past and the future collapsing on each other” (Simpson, “Leanne”). This collapse is what allows the story, or even necessitates the story, to be told in multiple occurrences, settings, and perspectives, which is why the mounds speak multiple times. As Lee Schweninger comments on Vizenor’s recurring characters and motifs, “Ever changing, ever new, ever challenging, the stories must be told and retold; they must not become static” (Schweninger 166). Because the collective voices of “The Mounds” are consistently retelling their stories, their narrative avoids fixity, and although many have been flattened or excavated, they are still telling.

The first time the mounds speak, they outline, and typographically display, the communal efforts needed to strategically pile up the soil:

Rising from earth-black, rich-fresh soil  
lifted, hauled for multitudes in woven baskets

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<sup>226</sup> This musical repetition resembles Joy Harjo’s “Eagle Poem”, “We pray that it will be done / in beauty / in beauty”, (Fuhrman and Rader 140-141) or Ophelia Zepeda’s repeated final phrase in “In the Midst of Songs”: “We hear a beautiful song in the distance / It has come near us” (Hedge Coke, *Sing* 98).

piled one on top of another, again, again, laid down  
upon overlaying ground base, allowing drainage, for long-term care,  
until we appear as small, circular, sloping hills to untrained eyes beholding. (17)

Of the seven times “The Mounds” speak, their monologue is in the form of a plateau five times, embodying the shape of the raised earthworks. In this first monologue, there are three stanzas, each beginning with shorter lines which elongate as the stanza progresses to create the raised structure, “hauled for multitudes”. In the next stanza, gaps appear within the line, as mentioned in the opening poem “Before Next Dawning”: “Created by cultural duty, by love for The People” and “Prepared to preserve proper burial of loved, cherished” (original spacing, 17). Firstly, her linguistic clarity, especially her use of asyndeton (“loved, cherished”), echoes the positioning of mounds in accordance with “constellation rise, cyclic phenomena, lunar cycle / solar event” (17), as does her tightly contained sibilance and assonance in the lines spoken by “The Mounds”, “Our cityscape stellar—splendid. / Design mirroring universe—divine” (52). Bakhtin insists that the only “latitude” given to poetics is in “satiric and comic genres”, or, if voice is indeed given to characters, it is of “objective”, “depicted things” and not “in the capacity of another language carrying its own particular points of view”<sup>227</sup> (286). However, Hedge Coke avoids a unitary discourse by deliberately distinguishing the diction of the colonial speakers compared to that of “The Mounds”. Their diction contrasts with the dismissive voice of the “Looters”; “Nothing is sacred in this world. Nothing. /Artifacts? They’re not using them anyway. / What practical good are they to the dead?” (57). The conventional sentence structure and the contraction in “They’re” make this language deliberately less compact, less lyric, and contribute

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<sup>227</sup> As Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*: “The world of poetry, no matter how many contradictions and insoluble conflicts the poet develops within it, is always illumined by one unitary and indisputable discourse” (285).

to the persona's agitation. Because of this shift in tone and syntax, the poems act not only as monologues or speeches, but pieces crafted in the mentality of the personas themselves.

Furthermore, Hedge Coke's spacing between "duty" and "love" seems to mark the ritualistic physical space—"our earthly womb"—occupied by ancestors and artifacts buried within the mound. If we couple the carefully constructed physicality of the mounds reflected in Hedge Coke's form—their previous height, intentional placement and presence today, even if most have been destroyed—with the lists, autopoiesis, and the ecosystem's continued interrelationality in *Blood Run*, Hedge Coke provides the opposite of Timothy Morton's analysis of artist James Turrell's installation at Rice University, *Twilight Epiphany*, which Morton likened to Silbury Hill, "a grass-covered pyramid" (269). In conversation with Turrell's installation, according to Morton, are, among other elements, "minimalism and ancient indigenous grief ritual" (Morton, "The Liminal" 270). There is "a feeling of housing the dead, old human stories mixed with the stories of bones and stone. A barrow or pyramid or mausoleum is a place where grief, the imprint of another entity in one's inner space, is housed". Its "very form announces that it speaks the past, a story—its form is in a sense the past [...]" (269). Hedge Coke's mounds in fact perform the inverse; they speak in the present, are still present even if appearing as small hills to "untrained eyes" as quoted above (17). Neither do they house the "inner space" of grief; the force required to build them shows ceremony, celebration of life, community, and protection. Hedge Coke's form rather suggests that, because of the kinetic relationships between the human and non-human personas, there is also a kinetics of grief: it cannot be housed or fixed, but exists and perhaps even moves inside and outside of the entities involved, both human and land, as do memory and pleasure, even if the mounds eventually "appear as small" (17).

This effect of pulling grief out of stagnation is shared with Long Soldier's diamond-shaped poem—one could even see this as a pyramid, its shape inverted as a mirror image—"Obligations 2" discussed in the previous chapter. The word "grief" is the keystone repeated throughout her poem; it may appear that, as Morton says, "grief" is "housed" in such a form which "speaks the past" or is itself the past. Yet, if read vertically, we see that grief occurs through life, in "the future", "the past" and "the present", whether we "embrace" or "resist" any of these time frames. Grief is not encapsulated, but moves; it is an occurrence "we shift", "we wield", and/or "we bury", as Long Soldier's next line reads, sometimes all of these actions at once. If grief is also retold, sometimes shifted or wielded, but never housed only in the past, then it can inform our actions outside of a text, because it itself exists outside of art's liminal spaces. Although the mounds may appear minimalist, Hedge Coke shows, in her spacing and mound-shaped typography, the complicated building efforts, ritual and cosmology, and ecosystems of renewed life which are relegated to the past but continue, and inform future descendants. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson asks herself and others, who will "be ancestors some day", "what parts of our culture will inform how we will respond when they need help and support? What does it mean to be an ancestor one day, when we stop acting like descendents?" (Simpson, "Leanne"). Echoing the prospect of ancestry, Hedge Coke says that a significant objective is to create "an incantatory situation within a book, so that people can [...] leave that space, that reading, whether it's public or on the page and feel different and feel invigorated and excited. The best, best hope [...] (is that) they pick up and run with it and do better than I did" (Hedge Coke, "Returning"). Hedge Coke's response in *Blood Run* is to elevate the still-present significance of the site through the voice and typographical alignment of "The Mounds", so that

even her own efforts can be returned to, retold and reenacted in the future; her text is not a captured artifact, but a way of becoming an ancestor.

In the previous chapter, in regard to Long Soldier's work, I have discussed Sze's leveling of hierarchies—"No word has any special hierarchy over any other"—which serves as the epigraph to Long Soldier's *WHEREAS*, and I noted his attention to charged white space in my analysis of "Ĥe Sápa". I would like to expand on the latter aspect of Sze's poetics at work here in the voices of "The Mounds". Firstly, while white space is the "counterpoint" to sound, as aforementioned—not occupied by text and thus not verbally recited—Sze notes that the "stillness and motion" in the act of writing Chinese characters is translated *into* the character itself, which the reader may not perceive from their exterior gaze, a juxtaposition of synchronous time. In other words, the tension in the movement in writing Chinese calligraphy—the pauses between strokes—represents the character in its final appearance and how one perceives it, creating a juxtaposition between movement and stasis. Hedge Coke's mid-line spaces similarly juxtapose stillness and movement typographically: the movement involved in the creation of the mounds (earth "lifted, hauled" "again and again") as well as the spaces left for drainage and burying loved ones, are synchronised with the mounds' mounted pyramidal form and reverent spacing. Hedge Coke reminds us that the text remains a text in its two-dimensional form: the typographical kinetics are constrained to the text itself. Her textual recreation of the mounds forms, if one observes closely, a similar juxtaposition as Sze describes between stasis and movement, a tension which could charge the reader's active participation beyond this typographical positioning.



However, the third time “The Mounds” speak in the third section”, “The Mounds” long for a lost reverence, they have been flattened out, farmed over and scavenged by “Looters”, although they insist they “were not formed to be forgotten” (55). “The Mounds” are then visited by an “Interpreter”, who fails to see the structure in its balanced, sacred intricacy and fails to imagine the space the dead occupy within it. Consequently, the mound-like construction in the previous monologue has become, in the passage below, more condensed, restrained and less exemplary of its raised scale:

Interpreter, socialite,  
doesn't hear us like the others.  
Merely recites as she's been told.  
Instructed to carry out measure  
without recognizing balance, blood stopper. (64)

Form continues to embody content here; “The Mounds” are treated as antediluvian mysteries, “gathered dusts” that were “vanished, / so very long ago” (63), prodded by the non-native interpreter like a lifeless object, and in turn the pyramidal form evaporates.

In order to contrast this modern numbness or even well-intentioned misinterpretation, Hedge Coke's mound voices also express their movement as part of cyclical life processes: “Long ago, we were well-clocked, monument raised”, but now their “still held pride” goes unacknowledged by “Early Interpreter” (64). Another connection occurs here with Barthes's distinction between Author-God and the author as not central to but simultaneous with the text. In Greek tragedy, the text is “woven with words that have double meanings”, and, Barthes continues, each character understands them

unilaterally (this perpetual misunderstanding is precisely what is meant by “the tragic”); yet there is someone who understands each word in its duplicity, and understands further [...] the very deafness of the characters

speaking in front of him: this someone is precisely the reader. (Barthes 54)  
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Although the “Early Interpreter” and other non-native voices perpetually misunderstand the site and its multiple meanings “unilaterally” as Barthes suggests, and therefore take advantage of it, the reader understands the characters’ “deafness” because of the precision and reverence in the “The Mounds” monologues (Barthes 54). Hedge Coke’s language is what “speaks” kinetically; “The Mounds”, now seemingly static, insist on movement: the shifts in the ranges in height, their appearance across the landscape as wavelike when they “appeared pleated, puckered”, “design mirroring universe—divine” (52), to their flattened state. The text is just a text, but the intricacy in which it is presented asks us to take the Blood Run site, as well as native tradition, ritual, and similar sites, very seriously, and to actively defend them beyond the page.

Moreover, as a collective voice, “The Mounds” also fulfill another dramatic quality of the Greek chorus, a function which, as Albert Weiner quotes H.D.F. Kitto, was invented by Sophocles. In the classical Greek tradition, the chorus is “an integral part of the whole” (Butcher qtd in Weiner 205). Weiner asserts that mid-20th century theorists agreed that “the more closely the chorus is integrated into the fabric of the play, the more it resembles a ‘collective character,’ the better” (206), which is why Aristotle preferred Sophoclean choruses to Euripides’ choruses. Weiner, however, distinguishes “dramatic” as the opposite of “theatrical”; dramatic elements are functional literary features charged with telling the story and developing the plot, whereas

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<sup>228</sup> Barthes writes in the original French: “des recherches récentes (J.-P. Vernant) ont mis en lumière la nature constitutivement ambiguë de la tragédie grecque ; le texte y est tissé de mots à sens double, que chaque personnage comprend unilatéralement (ce malentendu perpétuel est précisément le « tragique ») ; il y a cependant quelqu’un qui entend chaque mot dans sa duplicité, et entend de plus, si l’on peut dire, la surdité même des personnages qui parlent devant lui : ce quelqu’un est précisément le lecteur (ou ici l’auditeur)” (Barthes, “Mort de L’auteur” 66).

theatrical elements are “concrete”. Hedge Coke’s mound voices, which resemble the Sophoclean collective character as they have the most interjections, are at once theatrical or “concrete” in typographical form and dramatic in their development of *Blood Run*’s narrative. The chorus was placed in the orchestra, which means “dancing place” in Greek—one can assume dancing was a main part of their function (Weiner 201), as well as singing lyric odes. The actual mounds, as we see in the poem “Before Next Dawning”, served as loci where “feathered ones danced / skyward” (5) in celebration. Likewise, “Clan Sister” recites, “I have come to sing / to dance before you // Call you to rise / again” (14). The actual mounds and the voice of “The Mound” therefore parallel the dancing and singing function of the Greek chorus, which provides, as Weiner asserts, “an interlude” during which the audience can “stop feeling and begin to think” (211). Indeed, “The Mounds” serve as a lyrical witness who incite intellectual reflection: “We were meant to make matters meaningful [...] For you, learning has begun. / Let your mind be mindful” (82).

And yet, the representative typographical shapes animate the collection as a coordinated narrative network—reflective of indigenous collaboration and Hedge Coke’s own background—further distinguishing *Blood Run* from collections in which each poem is disparate from the others, as if housed in different train cars. Firstly, the narratology of “The Mounds” suggests the influence of Hedge Coke’s Cherokee, Huron, and Creek oralities, in that their typographies represent a space for reflection mentioned above, and their height facilitates a relationship with the cosmos which aligns place and presence. Hedge Coke uses the metaphor of preparing grass for a camp or dance:

If we’re in tall grass and we’re going to need to make a camp or dance, or anything, the tall grass is better if it’s flat, and if we’re going to sleep on it, it’s even better if it’s flattened in a way that it’s woven. So there’s a

stepping process that we learned as kids to make a camp in tall grass, and it has to do with laying down your feet so the grass turns into a weave, in a circle. Basically, when you're done it's a mat. That coordination is very much like dancing because it's very orchestrated, and it sets you up to lay on your back under the sky. So there are stories for all of that, there are stories for things that are happening in our place here and how they come into the world. [...] Insomuch, when you're weaving the grass and the earth, and you're setting yourself up to look at the sky, the origins that we connect with in the world bring up the origin story. [...] So everything is part of understanding that placement, how things become part of us and there's an immersion within the place, of all of these things coming together, and that's where we find ourselves. (Hedge Coke, PI)

In the poems recited by “Ceremonial Mound”, “Burial Mound”, and “The Mounds”, their content regarding communal gathering, the textual space and mound-shaped lineation suggest that the mounds had similar functions to that of Hedge Coke’s rhythmic mat-making, which she replicates linguistically; the mounds’ voices form an orchestrated interaction—human construction and human burial (“how things become a part of us”, as Hedge Coke notes above) mineral, earth and plants which grow from it—which establish the origin story of the site until the present. This mat-making/mound-making technique therefore forges a narrative fabric made of non-human landscape and the kinetic interactions humans have with it, from which the other stories speak, and from its origins to the present.

Even more, as Hedge Coke conducted extensive research of and on the site, it is intriguing to note that anthropologist Colin Betts suggests the surge in mound building at Blood Run in the 17th century coincided with European contact, suggesting a revitalisation movement marking an affinity with the land in response to population loss and cultural extermination (Betts 102). In correspondence with Betts’s hypothesis, Hedge Coke similarly revitalises the mounds’ form at the very end of the section “Intrusions”; the mounds reenact their heightened “posture”

in their typographical shape which holds their expanding list of what they've witnessed. The second stanza of this monologue reads:

We've seen  
passages—livelihoods—  
scattering doe, bird, larger herds.  
We've seen hustle, Chunkey play,  
fast comings, deadly unspeakable enemies,  
chomping teeth devouring us—take all we've known.  
Here, in this wintering of our old world, this harboring-time—  
we've become another marker, one who must bear mortal memory. (71)

As Blood Run's mounds and other earthworks across the country are systematically overlooked, Hedge Coke's prosopopoeia bears witness to both cultural celebration ("Chunkey play" and in the first stanza, groups who "harmoniously live in prosody with Water" for millennia") as well as the colonial destabilisation of ecosystems. Here, not only is the concrete, typographical quality of the mounds at its strongest, thus correlating to Betts's theory, but "The Mounds" are also strongest as a collective voice. The four repetitions of "we've" and the emphasis on "our world" remind us of the poet's intention that each monologue is to be orally narrated. In "Before Next Dawning", she writes, "Yes, this is a story of Blood Run, of sudden / regional mound culture departure. It is a story" (8). Building on Simon Ortiz's thoughts on language as beyond textual representation—beyond, also, capitalism "as an immense accumulation of images" or mere representations, rather than direct experiences, as Guy Debord suggests—I believe the mounds' heightened typography confirms the text's flexibility and intended orality as a verse play:

Oral language compared to written language is much more immediate and intimate; that's the only way language and culture can actually be lived [...] you can't 'write' the language down; that's a representation of it, a photograph of it. Actual language is what you and I are talking, words, sounds, body and facial and eye language. We are involved in and participating in the act of language. Language and literature are a form of participation. Story, I think, is participatory. There's not just one way of

telling a story. Story is a manifestation of flexibility. (Ortiz and Purdy, “A Conversation” 8)

In their use of the collective “we”, which could be orally performed through many different modes, “The Mounds” exhibit this participatory intention; their multiple interventions, along with the other voices, expand the flexible modes and perspectives of telling Blood Run’s stories and enhance our intimacy with them, instilling “self-assertion”, which Ortiz believes is a necessary part of the decolonisation process in literature (Ortiz and Purdy, “A Conversation” 3)

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Ortiz’s “participatory” communication and “self-assertion” reflects what LeAnne Howe calls “tribalography”. Quoted in Eric Anderson’s “Earthworks and Contemporary Indigenous American Literature: Foundations and Futures”, Howe explains that “tribalography” involves native stories in any form which “seem to pull all the elements together of the storyteller’s tribe, meaning the people, the land, multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieus” (Anderson 3). The visual element of tribalography is developed in Howe’s essay “Building, Ball Games, and Native Endurance in the Southeast”, in which she discusses how earthworks and effigies can take months to build, such as the red-tailed hawk effigy in Poverty Point, Louisiana, thought to be 3,600 years old. The time

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<sup>229</sup> For a more comprehensive reading of how non-native literary translations of indigenous oral narratives and songs in published anthologies allowed for the “invention” of “Native American literature” in the 18th-20th centuries, see Kimberly Blaeser’s “Cannons and Canonization” and Robert Dale Parker’s *The Invention of Native American Literature* (2003), as well as his anthology *Changing is Not Vanishing* (2010) and Taylor’s article “Not Primitive Enough to Be Considered Modern”. Since Parker’s book, many native anthologies edited by native writers have been published: Hedge Coke’s collection *Sing: Poetry from the Indigenous Americas* (2011), *Native Voices: Indigenous American Poetry, Craft and Conversations* (2019) edited by CMarie Fuhrman and Dean Rader, and *New Poets of Native Nations* (2018), edited by Heid E. Erdrich, and the Norton Anthology of Native Poets edited by Joy Harjo, *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through* (2020), all of which integrate writing which blurs boundaries between traditional and modern expression, including influences from Arabic verse forms, Malay verse forms, transcriptions of conversations or songs, and internet colloquialisms.

invested in building these effigies creates a narrative so that the earthworks embody a story. The hawk effigy in Louisiana, for example, took three months to build, which Howe has equated to the period from gestation to the flight of the hawk; from the spring equinox when they mate until the summer solstice, around the time hawks are ready to leave the nest (Howe 75). The effigy faces west, towards the setting sun, perhaps a symbol of the continual narrative and cycle of the bird's life. Similarly, "The Mounds" in Hedge Coke's verse play symbolise the creation of the mounds, their significance, and their destruction, each monologue forming a type of pictograph, a form of visual communication as seen on the stone tablets recovered from the mounds.

The mounds in *Blood Run* are much more than textual renderings of mathematical patterns and their parallels on other indigenous sites. Their voicings are the foundation of the collection's topographical typography, embodying Hedge Coke's notion of "presence in place" through her metaphor of making a camp in the grass, they suggest a creative approach countering non-native colonial histories and, through Hedge Coke's assertion and participatory construction, they narrate their own culturally significant presence which has been neglected.

#### Hyperbaton in the Invisible "Snake Mound"

One of the destroyed earthworks on Blood Run is said to have been a serpent effigy, perhaps similar to the 2,300 year old Cahokia Serpent Mound in present-day Ohio (Herrmann 117) or other snake effigies in South Dakota<sup>230</sup>. The supposed effigy was leveled by the

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<sup>230</sup> There are only two other documented snake effigies in the area: one 360-foot long effigy made of stones (known as Medicine Knoll in Hughes County, South Dakota about 220 miles from Good Earth State Park), and the other an earthen serpent embankment mapped by T.H. Lewis in 1883, near the mouth of Pipestem Creek in present-day Jamestown, North Dakota (about 350 miles away from Good Earth State Park). Henning notes that the sketch resembles a "series of linear units joined at angles to one another" (431). Two of the mounds associated with it were oval, two were round and one was a linear structure over 225 feet long. A survey in 1989 states that "one of the five mounds is no longer visible, one has been damaged by looters and that [...] the effigy has been partially destroyed by gravel operations,

construction of the short-lived Northern Railroad between Rock Rapids and Sioux Falls, which had been completed in 1886 (“Blood Run National Historic Landmark” 25). The evidence of the serpent mound lies in early maps of the site, although remains undocumented, or unseen, on many anthropological visits. According to Dale R. Henning and Shirley J. Schermer’s archeological study of Blood Run, N.E. Getman, an optometrist, visited the site in 1889 and described the snake mound in his notes. Its presence was also acknowledged by Dr. Charles Keyes, director of the Iowa Archeology Survey, in 1926, and corroborated by Nils and Martin Johnson—long-term residents of Lyon county—who said that the effigy was once “one to two feet high and could be plainly seen” (Henning 414). Henning and Schermer also detail F.W. Pettigrew’s excavation of about five mounds, in which he found copper serpents and copper bracelets wrapped around the arm of skeletons (408). Indeed, in her essay “Streaming” (eponymous with her 2014 collection), Hedge Coke writes that at Good Earth, “Copper bracelets were taken from graves overturned by looters for generations before the site was protected. The bracelets formed serpents. Elders said they represent the river, her life-form, serpentlike” (“Streaming”, Hedge Coke). “Clan Sister” also references them in the fourth section, “Portend”:

Snake curls us here [...]
induced in ghostly coppers.

Melding ore, knife
to ornament,
to cast her image,
adorning adoration.

She remakes herself
in each made thing.

Winding our wrists, arms [...]
Her inimitable presence stippled,

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reducing it to about half its length” (431). Henning suggests that this could be similar to the Blood Run serpent embankment.



patterning our world  
She River, we revere. (80)

The snake's image ceremoniously stippled and copied on copper is echoed in Hedge Coke's winding, repeating assonance in "ore", "ornament", "adorning adoration" and "River", "revere".

In Hedge Coke's verse play, *Blood Run*'s razed Snake Mound speaks only once:

Present invisibility  
need not concern.

My weight remains  
heavy upon this land.

Winding,  
weaving, incurve,

mouth undone,  
for egg swallow.

Though my body  
suffered sacrifice  
to railway fill,  
my vision bears  
all even still.

Be not fooled.  
Be not fooled.

I will appear again.  
Sinuous, I am. (31)

Again an example of James Wright's "poetic occasion", which initiates "listeners of any kind to accept some of the music" (Wright 45) as discussed regarding Long Soldier's *WHEREAS*, "Snake Mound" speaks as if one of the archeological mappers of the site, a local, or an outside visitor is passing by the abandoned railroad, and asks him or herself what was once there. The disembodied non-human voice of "Snake Mound" provides the answer. Hedge Coke is thus engaging with the audience through the context she creates with the musical repetition of "Be not

fooled” as well as the rhymes “fill”, “still”, and “will”. In “Serpentine Figures, Sinuous Relations: Thematic Geometry in Allison Hedge Coke’s *Blood Run*”, Chadwick Allen concentrates on decoding a set of numerical patterns throughout the collection, focusing on this poem in particular, which, while providing a detailed analysis, overlooks its literary complexity. Through these numerical patterns, or a “thematic geometry” (Allen, “Thematic” 820), Allen parallels the Snake Mound with the Great Serpent Mound in southwestern Ohio, in referencing the mathematical precisions of Octagon Earthworks—a perfect octagon which maps the 18.6 year cycle of the moon’s rise and set points on the horizon—in what is now Newark, Ohio. Allen further divides the seventeen lines (or eight stanzas) of the poem and the number of statements as either being prime numbers, or sacred numbers. He argues that the “seven gaps of white space between stanzas” also mirror the seven curves of Serpent Mound in Ohio likely built by the Adena culture ca. 300 BCE. However, I argue that these corollary mathematical divisions bypass alternative readings of the poem’s form and its significance in terms of narrative. Indeed, perhaps just as mathematical as Hedge Coke’s patterning is the narrative of *Blood Run* itself; as Calvino discusses, although there are “prefabricated elements” in narratives, especially passed down through oral traditions, they allow for “an enormous number of combinations” (Calvino 5). As *Blood Run* contains many characters, those who speak multiple times and even those that are invisible like “Snake Mound”, Hedge Coke allows the reader to imagine the innumerable circumstances in the lives of these beings and the infinite number of things each of them might say, triggering a “combinatorial analysis” that allows for more linguistic “potentialities” than a set mathematical structure (Calvino 5).

In terms of form in “Snake Mound”, the poem’s narrowly stacked shape reconstructs the effigy’s once visible weight, that “remains / heavy upon this land” (31). However, the poem’s form does not replicate the “Winding / Weaving incurve” of a “serpentine shape”, as Allen suggests (“Serpentine” 819-820), but rather, it seems to appear as the rectilinear railroad tracks that replaced it, in its mostly rail-like couplets. Alternatively, Hedge Coke’s form also resembles Henning’s notes of a possibly destroyed earthen snake effigy in North Dakota, constructed in a “series of linear units” which are not “joined at angles” (Henning and Schermer 431). Thus, the mention of winding copper snake bracelets in her essay “Streaming” in which she writes “a twin of the serpent mound in Ohio once reined prairie”, as well as the last line in “Snake Mound”, suggest the mound at Blood Run was likely a winding structure at one point, and therefore the poem’s linear strips suggest the short-lived railroad that it became.

Again in contrast to Allen’s focus on numerical patterns throughout, I argue that Hedge Coke’s anastrophe, or inverted syntax<sup>231</sup>, in “Sinuous, I am,” accomplishes numerous gestures which contribute to the themes of prosopopoeia I have previously outlined. As with the other personas, the effigy speaks in the present tense, despite having been destroyed: “Be not fooled / Be not fooled. // I will appear again. / Sinuous, I am” (31). This once again removes the focus on the poet as “Auteur-Dieu” (“La mort de l’auteur” 65) in Barthes’s terms, thus expanding the heteroglossia outside Bakhtin’s own insistence on the “unitary and singular Ptolemaic world” of poetry (Bakhtin 285)<sup>232</sup>. Secondly, the present tense is complexified by both the past

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<sup>231</sup> The inverted syntax of “Sinuous, I am” is repeated when the “Ghosts” speak in the fourth section, “Portend”: “lifting miracle commotion, / phenomena now we” (76).

<sup>232</sup> Barthes writes that there is thus no need to make up for this “*retard*”, by which he means the writer’s thoughts as coming before the text. “Retard” is translated as “gap” in Richard Howard’s translation, and can be compared to Bakhtin’s gap in “assimilation”, the distance between the writer’s intention and “the words—which are always someone else’s words—we speak to articulate them”. In the case of “Serpent Mound”, the gap dissolves because, in the present tense, the author and utterance are simultaneous.

tense—“though my body suffered sacrifice”—and the future tense—“I will appear again”, an intertextual reiteration of “Clan Sister” describing the snake as able to “remake herself” in other forms. The final inverted assertion “Sinuous, I am” solidifies its existence and “weight” despite being destroyed and decentres a linear perception of time. According to Barthes, time “is no longer the same” when we think of the author as dead, “diminished like a tiny figure at the far end of the literary stage”, as the writer does not precede the book (she should not be conceived as “le passé” of her own book). This is an aspect of “polychronography” in the previously cited publication *Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing Within the Anthropocene*. Author Christopher Cokinos defines polychronography as:

temporalities smeared across various stylistics in order to reveal and investigate material flows and networks perceived through the sequential process of writing and reading from an individual point of view. To overlay and to loop, to name and to elaborate, to clarify by deliberate mash-up. To name measurements of time reflexively and make awareness of multiple flows incantatory—a poetics of temporal and temporary reverie. To embed personal events within human and more-than-human temporalities. To make referents slippery, to let action in one time flow become a current in another. To use sounds as connectives across temporalities. To body time. (Russo et al. 55-56)

Hedge Coke engages in such a polychronography in her revealing of the snake’s previous form textually, and the intentional “slippery” and “more-than-human temporalities” explicit in her “sounds as connectives”, for instance, her alliterations (“weaving, winding”, “suffered sacrifice” and “sinuous”) as well as rhymes which signify overlaid or looped temporal embodiments (“still” and “fill”). Thus, Hedge Coke’s prosopopoeia in “Snake Mound”, especially in the affirmative utterance “Sinuous, I am”, presents a verbal syntax in which the “action in one time flow” becomes “a current in another”, a narrative example of Hedge Coke’s own notion of “echo-wrinkles”.

According to Allen, the “biblical syntax and tone” of “sinuous” “slyly suggests Snake Mound’s assertion of its central role” that activates the “spiritual life of Blood Run” through which “life-giving breath will return” (822)<sup>233</sup>. However, I argue that the last line’s verbal quality is not biblical—on the contrary, as I have established, Hedge Coke writes that early Bible-touting “Squatters” believe in a God-given “Manifest Destiny” which “guarantees” (51) their rights to obliterate the retrograde, “blasphemous” culture, the land and its animals, and mentions Blue Cloud Abbey to prompt us towards discovering the abuse at missionary schools committed in the name of Christianity. Hedge Coke is not only careful to distance the native voices from Christian doctrine, but even the word “spiritual”<sup>234</sup> risks supporting “the easy stereotype of the Indian mystic” as Kimberly Blaeser (Anishinaabe) notes in her work on poet Ray Young Bear, who opted to use the term “artistic interlacing of ethereality” instead, as it carries “less New Age baggage” and subverts the expectations put on indigenous writers (Moor qtd in Blaeser, “Cannons” 222). From another perspective, then, just as Shakespeare’s verb-ending hyperbaton<sup>235</sup>, this last line in “Snake Mound” deviates not only from modern speech, but also subverts common stereotypes imposed on writers of indigenous backgrounds by using syntactic strategies associated with Elizabethan contexts, pivoting towards the verb and in turn articulating the rhythm of the text (“again” echoes “remains”, and “Sinuous, I am” echoes “heavy upon this land”). This “I am” therefore highlights the verb, as Bitsui and Diaz do, to emphasise the effigy’s

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<sup>233</sup> He also suggests that the voice of “Stone Snake Effigy” “resonates not only with the Old Testament but “is suggestive of the story of Christ’s recognition at Easter as presented in the Gospel of Luke (“Serpentine Figures” 827).

<sup>234</sup> Allen calls the voice of “Clan Sister” a “spiritual guide” (Allen 813).

<sup>235</sup> For instance, in Act I, Scene ii of *Romeo and Juliet*, Paris says, “like her most whose merit most shall be”, and in *Measure for Measure*, Act II, scene i, Escalus says: “Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall”, dramatising the motion of “fall”, rhyming with “and forgive us all” in the preceding line and retaining the iambic pentameter.

ontology; its carefully designed material is not gone but transferred, or as Long Soldier suggests in “Obligations 2”, grief can “shift”. One therefore returns to Young Bear’s “ethereality”: as Blaeser notes of his poem “His Breath”, “a momentary understanding” in which we are “within the range” of “Snake Mound’s” shadow (Blaeser, “Cannons” 223). Hedge Coke’s “Snake Mound” similarly pivots from reverence to earthly, “between balance and disruption”: “I am” is the declarative culmination of its weight “heavy upon this land” despite its ethereal “invisibility”. It is its own surviving witness, although “marked by [...] what has been endured” (Forché, “The Lost and Unlost”). If we adopt Diaz’s belief that language and speech can actuate things into being, the declarative “I am” encourages an “occasion for ethical awareness” (Forché, “The Lost and Unlost”) off the page and on the ground.

Finally, the “écriture multiple”, or multivocal decentring in *Blood Run*, not unlike Bakhtin’s dialogism, is not to be “deciphered” or decoded to mine its origin, as Barthes states, but is a space to immerse oneself, to observe, and reflect upon (Barthes 66)<sup>236</sup>. In this way, *Blood Run* provides a linguistic parallel to Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) or “counter mapping”<sup>237</sup> which documents oral knowledge about landscapes and allows for communities to control their own representations of themselves, their territories, and their own rights to resources (Mackenzie et al. 42). Hedge Coke’s *Blood Run* personas, especially the mounds in their real life topographical symbolism and typographical representation, broach all of the five categories of counter mapping established by Peter Poole: “1) recognition of land rights; 2) demarcation of traditional territories; 3) protection of demarcated lands; 4) gathering and

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<sup>236</sup> In the original French, Barthes writes, “Tout est à démêler mais rien est à déchiffrer”, and “l’espace de l’écriture est à parcourir, il n’est pas à percer” (64).

<sup>237</sup> “Counter-mapping was coined by Nancy Peluso in “Whose woods are these? Counter-mapping forest territories in Kalimantan, Indonesia”, in *Antipode* 27(4), pp. 383–406, quoted here by Mackenzie et al.

guarding traditional knowledge; and 5) management of traditional lands and resources” (Poole qtd in Mackenzie et al. 42). Thus, I argue that, rather than through the decoding of the text’s mathematical patterns as other analyses have done, Hedge Coke’s verse play is most engaging when read as a textual, ecological remapping of interrelational human/non-human relationships, through a decentred orchestration—prosopopoeia—which charts the intricacies of Blood Run’s mounds and non-human bodies within the “present global chaos” of “de-localisation” (Berger 27). As Kiernan Mackenzie et al. assert, in modern legal systems, “Indigenous peoples are often put in a position where there is a need to demonstrate their ties to the land to non-Indigenous peoples” (42), which, although it shouldn’t have been the case, is precisely what Hedge Coke had to demonstrate to South Dakota’s Game, Fish & Parks Department. Yet, she achieved this by decentring from the self as an observer, disrupting the singular narrative. The voices aren’t to be extracted and bypassed, as the mounds were by anthropologists such as Pettigrew, or “The Looters” in the section “Intrusions”, but rather, through her formal and syntactical intricacies, be more closely approached.

#### Stylistic Singularity: Formalities, Storytelling, and Conceits

Hedge Coke’s *Blood Run* stylistically incorporates a ritualistic or formal diction through syntactic experimentation and obscure word choice to encourage the protection of the site and others alike. This style—in addition to the collective prosopopoeiac approach—distinguishes the verse play from the use of modern slang, dialectics, text speech, abbreviations, and 21<sup>st</sup>-century neologisms in poetry. Indeed, Hedge Coke noted that a younger native writer once said her writing has “Indian” ideas in it, and the writer was against that. Hedge Coke’s response was that she thinks it’s generational, stemming from the desire to tell family stories, the traditions she’s

learned from elders, or the other native nations she has married into, which naturally “comes out when you need it” (Hedge Coke, PI). Her active defense of Blood Run exemplified a time when telling the site’s story in a more traditional tone was effective; the combined voices of the verse play resemble oral narratives and the mounds describe their own creation story.

While Hedge Coke’s *Streaming*, for instance, which is accompanied by a recording featuring White Mountain Apache violinist Laura Ortman and guitarist Kelvyn Bell who use a variety of juxtaposing sounds to converse with Hedge Coke’s reading, engages in more modern artistic aesthetics, *Blood Run* carries influences which enrich her more formal diction<sup>238</sup>. This stylistic contrast, as she explains in her essay “Szeism”, reflects those who shared Sze’s mentorship, enjoying the “possibility and freedom on the page” to engage in an extensive variety of experimental techniques and subjects: “concise imagery; embodiment of silence and space;[...] poetic narratology; sustaining line, form, or gesture; meditative/obsessive witnessing; [...] translations; actual versus historical experience [...] supported by broadly based historical knowledge of the poetry field and its diverse movements, purposes and audiences, in the United States and in portions of Asia” (“Szeism”). In this final section, I elaborate on aspects of “Szeism” from Hedge Coke’s essay, and examine her formal syntax, omissions and obscure—even archaic—word choices, which contrast contemporary poetic tendencies to use modern slang, pop culture references, abbreviations and digital speech. I then compare Hedge Coke’s tonality to Heid Erdrich’s innovative poems on Kennewick Man in *National Monuments*, and finally, drawing on N. Scott Momaday’s ideas about storytelling as a “creative process” and

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<sup>238</sup> Harjo’s poem “A Map to the Next World” also shares Hedge Coke’s *Blood Run* in its attention to the loss of species but also loss of knowledge of the natural world, and at the same time, the hopeful uprising and survival of the non-human world.



Sze's influence on Chinese translation, I analyse the shifting forms of Hedge Coke's complex conceit, which is ubiquitous throughout the verse play: the *testa*, or shell.

Firstly, as I have already explored, Hedge Coke's careful omission of words and aphoristic precision in *Blood Run's* voices contrasts with the colloquial, apathetic style of the "Squatters", or "Looters": "Clan Sister" uses article omissions in her "wondrous" revelation in the presence of "Deer": "Sacred is the place / where gentle thrive" (80) and "When Meadow Lark / comes calling know / it is I in nearby" (50), the latter phrase "in nearby" is particularly striking, and "Guide us here / as do the stars each crossing. / Though I lead you here, / allow you privy / dare not exploit entry" (14). These clipped enunciations not only contribute to the heteroglossic qualities of the verse play, but they break from contemporary references in poetry—such as Diaz's "They Don't Love You Like I Love You" (*Postcolonial* 19), based on a song by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs which was sampled by Beyoncé<sup>239</sup>—to signal an attention to interdependencies and respectful relationships.

Another distinctive element in Hedge Coke's formal diction is the use of anomalous, archaic word choices. The "Prairie Horizons" for instance recall that "Meso, mio, pliohippus—/ larger equus", an extinct genus of horse which lived in North America "from a million to at least till ten / thousand years ago" (original space lineation), and most likely lived on open plains, which is why Hedge Coke describes them as "loping". Their extinction, however, was the cause of natural global warming, "not climate / interrupt, now dawned", in other words, modern human-induced global warming (77). This concise breviloquence underscores the extensive scale

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<sup>239</sup> Beyoncé's song "Hold Up" is on the album *Lemonade from Parkwood* (2016), and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs song "Maps" is on the album *Fever to Tell from Interscope* (2003).

of time witnessed by “Prairie Horizons”, and the line’s unlikely syntax maintains a character distinct from modern human speech, let alone the modern poetic lyric.

She also uses archaic expressions such as “nay embarrass” (64), used by “The Mounds”, which seems to anachronistically place its lexicon as medieval English. However, this form reflects precision, it condenses the gap between “bareness” before it and “embarrass” to emphasise the early interpreter’s lack of phenomenological depth, and blindness to the mounds’ diminishment due to colonial industry.<sup>240</sup> The voice of “Stone Snake Effigy” writes in its last line “Recognize me to free thyself” (65), which Allen suggests, as in his eschatological analysis of “Snake Mound”, is biblical in nature. However, Hedge Coke’s inspiration ranges “from new forms and experimentation to reawakening the epic (from classic forms in oratory), but with a unique contemporary spin and in-line caesura breath (inhalations/exhalations or rhythmic pause)” (“Szeism”). While both “nay” and “thyself” reawaken epic, oratory styles such as Christopher Marlowe’s translation of Ovid, they are accompanied by “in-line caesura breath(s)” (for instance, “Now these stones        still mark” in “Stone Snake Effigy” quoted above) and echo contemporary experimental contrasts in diction: Ted Berrigan’s “Awake my Angel! give thyself / to the lovely hours” in his expressionist poem “Bean Spasms”, or Yehuda Amichai’s line “Like thunder, nay, like guillotine” in “Killing Him: A Radio Play”, translated by Adam Seelig, which uses otherwise modern diction. Thus, Hedge Coke’s archaic word choices do not

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<sup>240</sup> F.W. Pettigrew wrote detailed notes of excavating a number of mounds in 1891, one fifty feet in diameter and six feet high, one sixty feet in diameter and five feet high (4018-409). In 1926, Keyes’s measurements of the larger mounds were sixty-seventy feet in diameter and three-five feet high, already two to three feet lower than some of the higher mounds three decades prior (413).

freeze the voices in the middle English era—which is of course, given the cultural context and location, impossible—but in fact make the voices harder to categorise.

The archaic tone and reverent, anagogic diction also enhance the extra-textual relationship between the storyteller and her audience, which N. Scott Momaday has called a “sacred relationship” and “an entirely creative process”, as the storyteller is able to “create” his or her audience (“N. Scott Momaday: A Slant of Light” 81). Hedge Coke’s surprising word choices in translating interrelationality constitutes her ability to form an alternative reality, “to be determined by the storyteller” (81), to which the reader also adapts; “attitudes, philosophies, beliefs” can be shifted as if temporarily taking on “another personality” (81). Momaday asserts that the storyteller also “creates” him or herself in this process for the story’s purpose, which in the case of *Blood Run*, is geopoetic activism<sup>241</sup>. Diaz suggests that traditional, inherited narrative styles are sometimes “a little bit primal but that’s what we need. Why not go back to that? Why not let poems carry the story like they used to carry the story?”. Story is a communal exchange, from which indigenous ancestors “learned how to take care of each other” (Diaz, “Episode 13”). Hedge Coke’s more formal and even archaic tone from the personas’ perspectives evokes a more traditional mode of carrying the story through the “creative process”, as outlined by Momaday, in response to the precariousness of many ecosystems and indigenous earthworks sites.

Other illustrious word choices include scientific terminology for natural phenomena such as the “parhelic anthelion” (21) described by “Sun”, the “heliotropism” (26) or the “pulvinus” motor cells of “Sunflower”, and the invented word, “dayblind” to describe the apparent “drifting

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<sup>241</sup> In the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Eric Magrane defines geopoetics as “the intersections between geography and poetry/poetics”. It may refer to the “use of poetry as a creative and artistic geographic practice, the interpretation of literary texts through geographic thought, or the theoretical consideration of earth-making as geophilosophy” (Kobayashi 107).

precession” (focusing on astronomical movement rather than using the expected word “procession”) of stars, continuing in the day even when we don’t perceive them, and even “after this world runs its course” (29). Her original lexicon enriches the kinetic interrelationality through non-anthropocentric decentring; a universe of movement is occurring without human involvement. Indeed, Hedge Coke relayed to me that although she hopes a global activism and ecological consciousness will occur “through something simple like a song”, which could induce widespread landscape recovery and interspecies survival, she also recalls her father’s assertion that when “she (the world) gets tired of us, she’ll shake us off, and we won’t be here, but the Earth will be a better place. It will be ok whether we make it through or not” (Hedge Coke, PI). In the final poem of the verse play, “When the Animals Leave This Place”, it is the weather and non-human creatures which reclaim dominance, their “power is beyond the strength of man” (90). Similarly, to revisit Szeism and Asian influences, Sze quotes a line from a Du Fu poem written in 757 CE, “Nation broken, mountains, rivers exist” (Sze, “Contemporary Practices of Eco-poetics”). “Dayblind” stars thus insinuate the continuation of universal movements and cycles, whether a human ecological revolution occurs or not.

As Poremski points out in “Voicing the Bones: Heid E. Erdrich’s Poetry and the Discourse of NAGPRA”, Hedge Coke’s ceremonial tone contrasts Heid Erdrich’s (Ojibwe) contemporary, playful and satirical voice in her 2008 collection *National Monuments*<sup>242</sup>. Erdrich’s poems—in particular “Guidelines for the Treatment of Sacred Objects”<sup>243</sup>—challenge

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<sup>242</sup> Erdrich’s collection can be compared with Simpson’s aforementioned poem “How to Steal A Canoe”, in which “akiwenzie” (meaning “old man” in Anishinaabemowin) “takes the sage over to the / security guard and teaches him how to / smudge the canoe bodies”. The “fake cop” however, “is basking in guilt free importance” showing the misunderstanding and indifference towards artifacts (Simpson, f(l)ight).

<sup>243</sup> “Guidelines” is, as noted by Poremski, a set of ironically specific directions for the correct behaviour of museum workers when treating artifacts or remains, which become unachievable or “overwhelming”, as these workers might not be properly trained to fulfill them, or they might be forgotten or wrongly performed

the objectification of sacred artifacts by non-native archeological and anthropological research, as well as NAGPRA's inadequate guidelines, and like Hedge Coke, gives human remains and artifacts a voice (Poremski 2). Both Erdrich and Hedge Coke disrupt the narrative that objects are fixed and acquired. In the short introduction to the poems, Erdrich writes that her collection was a "consideration of sacred spaces and the risks we humans pose to the landscape", particularly in terms of "the body" which is itself "the place of monument" (Erdrich 249). Erdrich's voicings in this respect are similar to Hedge Coke's "Skeletons", who plea "Do not unsettle us", but who are finally "returned home", "away from archeological scholar filings" (81), or the antipodal behavior of the "Looters", who believe the "skulls, skeletons" "will assist White students school in handling of the body" (61), what Erdrich calls "science's creepy needs" (251). However, Erdrich's vocabulary and tone are undoubtedly modern, reflecting the exploitative capacity of technology; her poem "eBay Bones" condemns selling bones online, particularly the "2005 incident in which a man who had taken a skull from a dig site in Hawai'i tried to sell it on the Internet auction site eBay" (23). Erdrich writes: "Her skull goes to the highest bidder" (251). In "Kennewick Man<sup>244</sup> Attempts to Cyberdate", Erdrich writes: "So when Cyber-date asks me what I look like, / I'm no liar. // Not like I expect to match a hottie. / Not looking for 'Barbie and Kennewick Man'— // But to smell a woman's neck again!" (250). Erdrich's situation of Kennewick Man as a bachelor looking for love, not expecting a "hottie", effectively humanises the bones by imagining him in our modern framework (Poremski 3). However, unlike Erdrich's

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(Poremski 13-14). This suggests that they should either be treated as sacred objects outside of museums and handled by native communities, or not at all.

<sup>244</sup> As Poremski notes, Kennewick Man is "an ancestor whose remains were discovered on the banks of the Columbia River in 1996", after which a debate ensued between anthropologists who wanted to study the body's remains and "Native people and others who wanted to rebury him" (Poremski 15).

poems, Hedge Coke's personas mostly narrate a formal experience with very few references to the 21st century (apart from "DRC1339 / Starlicide" and "cash-lined" (88) in the "Epilogue") and in fact, across a time frame so broad and unspecified that the narrative nevertheless remains modern, in the present.

Finally, Hedge Coke's syntactic and lexical formalities ask us to observe symbolic, extended conceits embedded throughout the verse play. Her clipped verse, formal lexicon, archaic expressions and obscure word choices all point to the strata of interwoven motifs in her personas. To demonstrate, I will finally discuss one of these major conceits: the seed. The third time "Burial Mound" speaks, it says "I was fine, broad hull, tremendous testa. / Far from distance, rivaling hills / lain like kernalled landscapes, ideal body. [...] Take pity upon me! I appeal. / Without my womb, they but dust." (58). Firstly, in this short excerpt, the poet uses an unusual word choice—"testa"—and omits the verb in "they but dust". "Testa", the outer shell of a seed, serves as a sphere of protection and draws our attention to other manifestations of this symbol in the collection. "Testa" echoes the word "testament" in "Before Next Dawning"; the testament of the site had been largely, before *Blood Run*, lost to colonial neoliberal earthworks and the "monstrous machines" which lift "the earth's very skin up" (9). The most etymologically parallel reference to "testa"—Latin for "shell", "brick, tile", or "earthen pot", with a shift to "skull" in Ausonius's epigrams in the 4th century AD (Cravens 53)—is the shell reference in "Before Next Dawning" (5-10). In reference to disease-ridden blankets coming from hordes of "Strangers", Hedge Coke writes: "These blankets preceded the coming through trade / amongst all The People living upon Turtle Shell" (7). "Turtle Shell" refers to Turtle Island, meaning the North American continent (as Hedge Coke writes in the poem, "comprising the

Northern body, this Hemisphere spanning / from Arctic to Antarctic”), originating from the Haudenosaunee creation story involving Sky Woman’s descent onto a turtle’s back, which grew as animals—in particular the muskrat who risked his life—added soil on top (George, “Haudenosaunee”)<sup>245</sup>. Here, the shell symbol is in its largest form as the entire continent, and could also allude to a turtle effigy made of boulders in Hughes County, South Dakota, about 200 miles west of Blood Run (Sheltrone 314). Many boulder circles are found at Blood Run; “Horizon” says that “turtle-headed guards linger on entryways. / Stone circles sign space”, and “Allies here laid stones”, welcoming those “on final journeys home” (16). In some cases, archeologists note, the boulders encircle the mounds, providing another protective shape (Henning and Schermer 432).

The shell or seed symbol recurs in the grain of “Corn”, as previously mentioned, which is dropped into the earth to provide “pollen, meal, kernel” (24). In the next poem “Redwing Blackbird” eats “grain, seed, Sunflower” (25) at the close of summer, thus sustained by the seed and “Sunflower” subsequently remarks in the following poem: “My seed plenishes” (26). The arcane form of “plenishes” is from the Latin “plenus” and the French “plein” or full, which echoes the lunar calendar alluded to in “Corn” just before. The moon’s circular shape not only resembles a shell, kernel, or indeed a luminous egg—the lifeblood of fertilisation—but the voice of “Moon” itself speaks directly after “Sunflower”, with an arcane elision and references to its shape: “My children were buried ’neath altitude, / [...] with painted faces resembling my spirit full” (27). Again, the notion of fullness is represented by the seed and likewise the birth motif, here reflected in ritualistic face paintings. Hedge Coke’s reformulated seed manifestations also

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<sup>245</sup> References to Turtle Island in poetry are numerous, including Dan Taulapapa McMullin’s “Turtle Island Poem” series in *Coconut Milk* (University of Arizona Press, 2013), the term also famously applied by Gary Snyder as a title for his 1974 collection (New Directions Press).

exemplify what is described as *Akiw8gon* (“the 8 is pronounced like the French *on*”), from the Abenaki word for “Land” which is “*Aki*” (also the Anishinaabe word for land), and the “basic concept of continual process, w8gon”, “in which everything has personhood” (Russo et al. 19-20). The character “Moon” also refers to its terrestrial twin shape, the egg, which is another manifestation of testa: developers trampled “prairie chicken nest eggs, downy phlox / [...] Before tampering Blackbird’s grain to poison” (27). Hedge Coke’s kinetics using this successive life-giving image, reiterated intertextually in shifting manifestations, emphasises the often overlooked material kinetics of non-human and human “ongoingness” and “continual becoming” (Russo et al. 20).

This proliferation brings us back to the burial mound’s self-declaration as a “testa” or “womb”, a shell for artifacts and the bones of the dead, including the testas or skeletal heads within this mound itself. This endogenous, prismatic effect of the replicated motif, both metaphorical (the shell as a protection of both life and death) and structural (the repeated image of the shape), recalls the “echo-wrinkles” or “streaming” connections which have been elaborated on throughout this chapter, grounded in Hedge Coke’s explanation of the stepping process to weave tall grass into a circle (Hedge Coke, PI). This weave is yet another “testa” and “testament”, an “immersion in place” which *Blood Run* replicates through the focality of the life-affirming seed shape.

The kinetics of this conceit also reflects the influence of Chinese poetics that Hedge Coke explored with Sze. J.P. Seaton gives the example of how, in the original Chinese, Li Po’s “Thoughts on a Quiet Night”—in which the first line, “Before bed, bright moonlight”—contains reverberating representations of the moon. In the Chinese pictograph itself, there are multiple



“moon” references; the “moon” itself is represented in the word, and another moon image is in the “compound ideograph” for “bright”, as well as resonating in the word “before”, a suffix in Chinese which also contains the “pictographic representation” of a moon. The effect of sequential moon imagery informs the poem’s content; Li Po “fills his poem with moonlight” to pictographically augment its luminosity (Seaton 6). Therefore, the fixed image of the moon nonetheless evokes movement in its stasis: Li Po is lost in “thoughts of home”, knowing that his distant friends and family can see the same moon from different conceptual horizons. Similarly, Hedge Coke fills her poem with movement through the allusion of the shapeshifting seed or shell motif; the shell or “testa” of the mound manifests as continent, moon, egg, seed, pollen, skeleton, and seed again, marking continuity and amplifying interspecies and cosmological connections. This regenerating motif resonates on a substratum level, underneath the syntactically formal and even archaic speech of the personas.

*Blood Run* is not only unique in its genre as a verse play; its intertextual complexity provides new spheres for prosopopoeia, particularly as poetic non-human voicings become more frequent as ecological crises worsen. The elements of decentring, the attention to the macroscopic and microscopic within her heteroglossic intricacies, in Bahktin’s terms, her polychronology reflecting Traditional Ecological Knowledge and what Bouttier calls “perceptual” and “linguistic constraints” (158), which have previously been overlooked, contribute to Hedge Coke’s singular poetic process. The collection’s non-colloquial lexicon, archaic expressions and surprisingly obscure vocabulary allow for what Momaday understands as the creation of both the storyteller and listener. Finally, Hedge Coke’s references to precise details from actual artifacts found on the site, to *Blood Run*’s mound structures, and to its local

plantlife, have achieved her geopoetic objective to engage citizens and the state of South Dakota to protect the site itself.



## Chapter Four: “How a Poem Moves”: Desire, Touch and Autonomous Relations in Diaz’s Poetry

*“Some day they will shatter, melt, or otherwise disintegrate. They will take new forms and become other things; of that I am sure.”*

*-Carol Edelman Warrior<sup>246</sup>*

### Introduction

#### Unfixing Knowability

While the writing of women poets of native nations is often read as an ideological tool of resistance in contemporary politics first and foremost, in this chapter, I argue that Natalie Diaz’s approach to the “autonomy of pleasure” and its textual and physical manifestations encompass more than a negation—a resistance *against*—but rather a resilient gesture *towards*, and an embrace of, the tensions that accompany desire. This gesture towards physicality—the body, the self, and its desires—is in conversation with the poet’s Mojave worldviews, relationships with land and water in particular, and disrupts the combined principles of Catholic sin and American “goodness”. Diaz’s linguistic gesture towards the reader, while celebrating poetry as a kind of “touch”, engages with the body’s desires using form, syntax, and the permeable relationships with the bodies of non-humans, land, and water.

Few contemporary poets have provided a more reflective philosophy about language and its physical manifestations than Natalie Diaz. Diaz challenges the assumption, which Yaqui/Chicana

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<sup>246</sup> From “Indigenous Collectives: A Meditation on Fixity and Flexibility”, p. 371. Sadly, Warrior passed away in 2018, when I began this research. I’m grateful for her writing and wanted to acknowledge her here.

scholar Elizabeth Archuleta also questions, quoting a call for papers for a 2005 University of Alberta conference, that “indigenous women and feminist issues remain undertheorized”. Diaz theorises, but theorises “differently”, not relying “on Western tools, worldviews, or epistemologies as methods of interpretation”, and her ideas are applicable in everyday life (Archuleta 87-88). Her mistrust of Western or white mores and individual words which encapsulate a certain “goodness”, such as knowledge, empathy, truth, witness, human (Diaz, “Between”), translates into poetic modes of kinetic morphosis, the search for an alternative notion or action that disrupts comfortably fixed definitions. This “unpinnability”, as Diaz calls it—a fusion of Borges’s embrace of the infinite and Salinas’s “turning over everything”, as I will explain—exists separately from the romantic idea that poetry itself must capture one moment or image. Commissioned by J.P. Morgan in 1906, Edward Curtis’s photographs of indigenous communities, which were often altered—an attempt to capture “vanishing” indigenous populations, including the Mojave, as misrepresented stereotypes fixed in faux-authentic antediluvian eras—shows that “knowledge” can be “extracted, it can be consumed, it can be again made sense of, it can be made to have value” (Diaz, “Between”), without necessarily being understood. The blurred self-portraits Diaz took for the front and back cover of her second collection *Postcolonial Love Poem* retheorise this Curtisian lens by questioning the certainty of what is knowable or graspable. Is the poet looking us in the eyes or not? Is she representing something “native” or is she satirising stereotypical tropes? Is she keeping us at a distance or inviting us closer? Diaz’s ontological and linguistic interrogations, in these self-portraits and throughout her poetry, insist on keeping us in the room of unknowability regarding her personal, cultural and linguistic relationships. Yet, as we are suspended in this *not* knowing, we come to find that it isn’t unbearable, but natural; we never fully know another’s experience, which one attempts to negotiate through

language. Thus, through the many manifestations of desire, Diaz expands the possibilities of kinetic poetics as a channel towards the body, but also introduces another form of kinetics; the pull between sharing and withholding information or emotions.

Echoing Diaz's critique of Western knowledge, Seneca scholar Penelope Myrtle Kelsey dubs "tribal knowledges, epistemology, and philosophy" as "tribal theory" (Kelsey 2). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson articulates that "theory" is:

[...] an explanation of a phenomenon, and Nishnaabeg stories in this way form part of the theoretical basis of our intelligence [...] generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community, and generation of people. Theory isn't just an intellectual pursuit. It is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence, and emotion. It is contextual and relational. (Simpson, *Land as Pedagogy* 151)

Likewise, in response to the process of acquiring institutionalised forms of knowledge versus the urgency of climate change action, Diné activist Kim Smith notes: "we're getting our PhD in a different way, ancestrally if you will. We're taking this different route of acquiring our ancestral knowledge, and trying to think things through a Diné lens because that's what's going to save us" (Smith, "Healing"). Following Diaz, Simpson and Archeuleta, I will explore Diaz's linguistic presentation of personal and cultural knowledge, sometimes explicit and sometimes withheld, which embrace the many kinetics of desire, pleasure, and autonomy. How do Diaz's poetics address land and non-human relationships and colonial power structures to "deconstruct existing methodologies" (Archeuleta 89) in everyday gestures, grounded in continually "regenerated" practices?

In addition to this outlook on indigenous theory, Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan), as Métis scholar June Scudeler points out, has also supported the idea that scholars must attend to "the culture from which it arises" and that "First Nations literature will be defined by First Nations writers, readers, academics" (Scudeler 7). Anishinaabe writer Kimberly Blaeser similarly "stressed the need

for ‘a way to approach Native literature from an indigenous cultural context’”, which should “arise out of the literature itself” (qtd in Scudeler 7)<sup>247</sup>, and involve a close attention to unfixed meanings, uncertainties, juxtapositions and parallels. Simon Ortiz also explains why he contests how his own writing is critiqued:

The [critical] works that I have read, have, unfortunately, I would say 90 percent, a limited perspective, a limited view of my poetry. By that I mean that too often their understanding of my poetry is based on their acceptance and judgment of what a Native American should write about. (Ortiz, “Interview” 115)

Following Ortiz’s appeal for less reductive and clichéd critiques, I will explore how Diaz’s iterations of pleasure mobilise the effects of language and relationality, both textually and “far outside of poetry” (Diaz, “Between”), in connection with her comments on Mojave thought, as well as non-indigenous influences such as Spanish poets Federico Garcia Lorca and Pedro Salinas.

Firstly, I will expand on Diaz’s use of form, in particular a close reading of her poem “Monday Aubade”, exploring how the poet’s suspension in ongoing desire breaks chronological norms of this chosen thematic constraint. In the second section, I examine Diaz’s juxtapositions of seemingly disparate phenomena—chimeras and beasts with gardens and tenderness—as representations of desire outside of colonial categories, and compare them to other contemporary notions of hybridity. This section leads to a reflection on Diaz’s many images of devouring and disappearing, and their relationship to what Diaz calls the “autonomy of desire” (Diaz, “A Lexicon”) or the “autonomy of pleasure” (Diaz, “The Verb”). I then explore how desire is reshaped through Christian symbols and Mojave cosmologies to assert the autonomy of the poem itself. In the section “Wounds: Elements of Lightness”, I analyse Diaz’s use of religious tropes and enlist Italo Calvino’s

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<sup>247</sup> Blaeser clarifies that “this is opposed to criticism applied from an already established critical language or attempts to make the literature fit already established genres and categories of meaning” (53–54).

theory of lightness to discuss the simultaneity of desire and wounds. Finally, I turn to Diaz's interrogations of human relationships with water in "*exhibits from The American Water Museum*" and "How the Milky Way Was Made" through innovative forms. I probe Diaz's shift from framing poetry as primarily a form of protest to asserting the tensions involved in the desire to live, the "unpinnable" qualities of poetry rather than a contained Brooksonian unity, and the intersections with ecological care and decolonisation in the United States.

### Beyond Resistance

Desire activates a space of possibility. As Diaz says, "[...] writing love poems is [...] me making myself possible" (Diaz, "A Celebration"). Possibility, in turn, allows for linguistic autonomy in which expression is not only defined by identity markers of a statistically framed minority, or exclusively in *resistance* to colonial forces, but is that which emphasises vitality, physicality, and our relationships with each other and non-humans<sup>248</sup>. In fact, Diaz has announced, "I am tired of my body always being in opposition. I don't want to know my joy as a resistance. I want my joy or my pleasure to be itself, to be part of the conditions of my life, not just the context I carve out to survive the American condition of my body" (Diaz, "A Touch"). This is a striking approach, as it diverges from the oft categorised poetry of resistance, framed as combatting and navigating through the traumas of oppression<sup>249</sup>. Poetry which resists colonialism, extraction and injustice is not futile, of course, as I have made clear regarding Hedge Coke's *Blood Run*. However, in terms of identity markers, Diaz asserts:

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<sup>248</sup> Here, I also do not refer to Agamben's argument of resistance as a potentiality "internal to the act of creation", rather than external forces (Agamben, "Resistance").

<sup>249</sup> See for example Tatonetti's discussion of the 1993 anthology *The Colour of Resistance: A Contemporary Collection of Writing by Aboriginal Women* or *Making Face, Making Soul* (1990), edited by Gloria Anzaldúa (Tatonetti 10)



I'm dumbfounded lately when I catch myself using the word PoC or WoC<sup>250</sup>—it's so ingrained in me I don't always catch myself, or worse, I'm willing to use it for the sake of clarity in institutional settings. What a terrible condition we are in, in which we call each other by this least part of who we are and who our people are. Identity tends to be used as a thing to pin us down and hold us still. It's not that I don't understand what identity means or how it functions, but I am imagining ways to become unpinnable. My partner and I come home from our days and we never look at each other and think, *you are a queer Black woman and I am a queer Mojave, Akimel O'odham, Mexican, LatinX woman*. That doesn't mean we don't talk about what it means to be us [...]. It's striking that many of us do not use these markers (PoC, WoC) in our communities or families. I use them most with people outside of my intimate world. [...] I think we can do a lot better at touching one another in language than these terms. (Diaz, "Ways To Become")

A new way of looking at poetry and language at large, then, requires a more flexible, kinetic approach beyond such markers, which, while they may be empowering decolonial markers in certain settings, are only the surface of one's ontology and of a poem's implications. Miranda, in her 2002 article "Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy: Searching for American Indian Women's Love Poetry and Erotics", wrote that "it is not that American Indian women have chosen to keep erotic writing closeted [...]. But our 'closet' has, indeed, been shoved into somebody else's apartment, and the inhabitants of that rental (or maybe they're just squatters!) cannot afford to crack the door just yet" (146)<sup>251</sup>. The door has since been swung open since Miranda's article, with the

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<sup>250</sup> "PoC" refers to "people of colour", and "WoC" refers to "women of colour". The former has been used since the 18th century in France (*gens de couleur*), and appears in an 1807 American legislative document about the prohibition of slave importation. The term largely replaced the use of "minorities" in the 1960s, and now "usually covers all/any peoples of African, Latino/Hispanic, Native American, Asian or Pacific Island descent, and its intent is to be inclusive" (Malesky, "The Journey"), although Diaz points out its pitfalls here. The term has been used by many indigenous scholars, for instance Bonita Lawrence (Mi'kmaq), and Maile Arvin (Kanaka Maoli). Loretta Ross traces the first use of WoC to the National Women's Conference in 1977, during which a group of Black women used it to replace the title "Minority Women's Plank". It has also been deemed inadequate, however; Donna Edwards and Gwen McKinney, for example, write that it's "an easy descriptor in a world obsessed with shorthand and acronyms. But, as Black women, we stiffen. The phrase evokes the subtlety and complexity of identities erased over the span of 401 years" (Edwards, "We Are Black").

<sup>251</sup> Miranda refers to Chrystos' reaction to the poor publication record and lack of critical analysis of indigenous erotic or love poetry: "American Indian writing is invisible; American Indian women's writing is more invisible; American Indian women's poetry, still more invisible. And Native women's love poetry and

help of Diaz<sup>252</sup>, who continues to navigate the multiplicities of desire in terms of indigeneity, and links linguistic expression with gesture.

Furthermore, while Hedge Coke's verse play had a directly activist role, Diaz writes, "I don't believe my writing is activism. It is a relatively safe act for me to engage in. [...] It is what I choose to do off the page, that I wish can be acts of resistance. Maybe the poems are just the practice field for my life" (Diaz, "The Pen Ten"). Indeed, her poems themselves are not activism against colonial violence, "ecophobia"<sup>253</sup>, or the capitalist powers that support ecological destruction, but they allow for these intertwined forces to textually play out alongside the affirmations of desire, so that desire, and thus possibility, can be more visible in the material world. Sisseton Santee Dakota writer Elizabeth Lynn-Cook takes this notion a step further; when a fellow artist said of a sculpture, "I see that as a resistance movement, as a resistant action", Lynn-Cook responded, "I hadn't thought of it that way. I don't think of my writing that way either, and I'm not naive enough to believe that we can change much. The changes will be slow and they will take forever. We just have to keep on going" (Cook-Lynn 39). As Diaz is one of the most discussed contemporary poets in the United States today, her writing has inevitably influenced her readership, even if it triggers only a slight shift in one's ecological questioning. Yet, her efforts "off the page"—for instance, recording and reviving the Mojave language and joining the water protectors at Standing Rock—are initiatives

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erotics are so invisible, so far back in the closet, that they're practically in somebody else's apartment" (Miranda 146).

<sup>252</sup> Other studies of the erotic by native scholars include Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm's *Without Reservation: Indigenous Erotica* (2003) and her essay "Red Hot to Touch" in Ojibwe playwright Drew Hayden Taylor's collection of essays, *Me Sexy* (2008); *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, and Lisa Tatonetti in 2011.

<sup>253</sup> In his essay "Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia" in *Material Ecocriticism*, Simon Estok states that ecophobia is "how we respond emotionally and cognitively to what we perceive as environmental threats and as a menacing alienness", which contributes to an "'embodied narrative' about how humans both materially and discursively construct such environmental alterity" (Estok 131).

which she regards as “acts of resistance” more than her poetry itself<sup>254</sup>. Nevertheless, Diaz holds that her second collection, *Postcolonial Love Poem*, asks “questions that would be asked in an ethnic studies program”, confirming that her text does demand political, cultural and ecocritical reflection (Diaz, “Vocarium Readings”)<sup>255</sup>, which I will approach in this chapter, alongside her embrace of the kinetic forms of pleasure and joy.

## Movement Beyond Form

### Notable Forms in Diaz’s Collections

To briefly reiterate Diaz’s interview with *Poetry London*, the poet examines the continuous nature of poetry as touch or “a happening”, which is “outside of time”; that is, not contained chronologically but suggesting “the energy that might yet become action” (Diaz, “A Taste”). How does the unpinable quality of Diaz’s poetry invite desire? Firstly, her concept of being “outside of time” is an essential aspect of approaching poetry as “a happening”, as she notes, or a kinetic gesture. However, distinct from the examples of perceptions of time mentioned in Chapter 1, Diaz’s connection between being “outside of time” and language as “touch” points us more directly towards the relationship between nonlinear movements, the embodiments of story, and the many physical manifestations of both human and non-human desire. This duality is the “happening” that a

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<sup>254</sup> In an interview with Rachel Zucker, Diaz discusses her involvement in the Standing Rock movement: “I went with Jennifer Forester, Louise Erdrich, Heid Erdrich, Joy Harjo, Deborah Miranda, and Layli Long Soldier. We started collecting native books and helped start a library there, we went and worked with the kids, I made a little zine workshop, we did some poetry with them [...] we’re helping to build a longhouse, we’re building a yurt”. She adds, “It’s a really disgusting look at America, but it’s one that’s not unfamiliar to me [...] none of this is new to most Native Americans, this is typical. It’s just now we have the gift of this lens to say, ‘hey, this is what’s happening’” (Diaz, “Episode 13”).

<sup>255</sup> She mentions this at her reading at Harvard University in February 2020, a few months after Dr. Garcia Peña was denied tenure despite her academic achievements. Protestors questioned the decision as racial discrimination, and criticised Harvard’s resistance to investing in an Ethnic Studies department (“Senior Scholars”).

poem engenders; the “real interaction” of words does not occur within their defined contours (as Diaz notes of certain identity markers like “PoC” above), but as the poet says, in “what I might *do* in relationship to that word, on my way toward it, or my misunderstanding of it, or the way it was handed to me” (my emphasis, Diaz, “Between the Covers”). This continuous, kinetic gesture or “way toward” is “unpinnable”; it demands “the imaginative leap of faith needed to embrace a different kind of sovereignty” (Andrews 152), and an attention to the alterities of pleasure beyond what’s signified.

This “unpinnable” quality surprisingly occurs in some of Diaz’s traditional forms—from the abecedarian to the pantoum—which typically suggest the contrary; a frame to maintain a poetic convention or ritual. Diaz’s use of form, however, does the unexpected: her all-inclusive language amplifies the possibility to move beyond a form’s set fixity, so that the poem’s containing mechanisms are on the verge of cracking open towards the body itself. Lucia Angelino argues that “movement in art takes philosophy back to the deepest and most secret meaning of movement”, referring to the ancient Greek notion of movement as unveiling an “underlying force” whose potentiality was *previously invisible*, what Heidegger has called a “bursting open, hatching [Ausschlag]”, rather than movement as physical displacement (my emphasis, qtd in Angelino 291). However, Diaz’s movement is also “outside of time”, and what she calls “a space compelled by sensation (the many ways of touch) and possibility (the infinite touches/touching that will possibly occur)” (Diaz, “A Touch”). In other words, linguistic gestures can suggest infinite potentials and infinite reorganisations of themselves, so that they are independent from established poetic categories, established Western chronologies, and even beyond the text’s contours. I will briefly outline some of Diaz’s poems in traditional form in order to establish this argument, before

discussing Diaz's "Monday Aubade", building on writers James Thomas Stevens, Deborah Miranda, and Carter Revard.

Diaz's poem "Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation" in *When My Brother was an Aztec*<sup>256</sup>, for instance, ironically mocks an anthropological study; the poem's deliberate misspelling of "anglikan" provides a satirical pinch of sacrilege, while illuminating the colonial "reservation" with its reclaimed "z", a nod to the common repurposed endonym "rez" (*WMBWAA* 5). The abecedarian was originally a spiritual device used in hymns and prayers, the first examples being Semitic, notably in the psalms of Hebrew Old Testament and in Latin—such as St. Augustine's psalm against the Donatist sect—while it also serves as a pedagogic function for teaching children language (Greene et al. 1). Thus, the poem's dismissal of divine intervention on the reservation in a seemingly pellucid alphabetic presentation is ironic given the form's religious origins. "Angels don't come to the reservation" (5), Diaz writes, but death does: "And death / eats angels, I guess, because I haven't seen an angel / fly through this valley ever" (5)<sup>257</sup>. The abecedarian's reliable pedagogic and spiritual structure here is reworked into the satirical unreliability of the Jesuit conversion on reservations; one cannot rely on angels for salvation, which was preached to so many nations, let alone as a muse for poetic inspiration—in any case, Lorca's advice was to "Reject the angel, and give the Muse a kick" (Lorca, "Theory"). The abecedarian thus suspends the tension regarding colonial missionary projects in North America in the 18th and 19th centuries—which lead to federal policies in both the United

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<sup>256</sup> To recall my indication in Chapter 1, in this chapter I will be referring to this title as *WMBWAA* henceforth.

<sup>257</sup> Interestingly, this lack of trust in the saviour angel translates to other colonised spaces. In Liberia, during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 and in the footsteps of Liberian comedians during and after the country's two civil wars, comedy duo Paul Flomo and Angel Michael acted in a skit in which God asks the archangel Michael to go to Germany and the U.S., which he happily obeys, but when asked to visit Liberia, the angel refuses (Charles, "Dangerous World of Comedy").

States and Canada designed to, as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, “destroy Indigenous governments, undermine Indigenous Peoples’ relationship to the land, and assimilate them into the white Christian mainstream of colonial society” (Simpson, “Listening” 125)—while complicating Diaz’s own Catholic upbringing evoked throughout the collection. The abecedarian suggests both its own anti-catechism, an explanation for the ultimate myth of Christianity in which the only “angels” are white indoctrinators (“Remember what happened last time / some white god came floating across the ocean?”), as well as a play on the supposed instructional pedagogy she presents, for instance, the elision “xactly” for the letter “x” (5).

Another notable form in *WMBWAA* is Diaz’s pantoum<sup>258</sup>, “My Brother at 3am”, a structure which allows for inversions and renewed interpretations each time a line is repeated in a quatrain, further intensifying the vulnerability of the moment between a mother and her son (representing Diaz’s brother), the latter of whom is having a drug-induced trip in the caliginous dead of night. For instance, the brother’s terrified plea, “O God, O God,” a vocative cry for safety against the vision of the devil, is repeated by the mother—wearing a nightgown, evoking an angel—who discovers that her son is in fact a vision of the devil, a drugged version of himself (43-44). Her repetition of “O God, O God”, because of the pantoum’s requirements, morphs into a plea for protection against this manifestation of her own son (43). Each line in every quatrain tapers to the right of the page, as if representing the image of the devil’s tail which deranges her brother, and heightens the tension until the mother’s ultimate realisation. The mother is a modern representation of Sisyphus in a skipping

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<sup>258</sup> The form is derived from Malay verse which became integrated into literature in the 15th century. Traditionally there is a prefatory couplet, the *pembayang* and a closing couplet, the *maksud* (Hirsch, *The Poet’s Glossary* 440). In contemporary versions, the poem has an indeterminate length of quatrains “in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next. This pattern breaks in the final stanza, whose second and fourth lines are recurrences of the first and third lines of the first stanza” (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics* 995).

movie reel: the pantoum gives us the impression that this haunting scene has happened many times and will happen again, perhaps in an infinite number of versions. Instead of being fated to push a rock up a hill only for it to roll back down for eternity, she is fated to open the door at 3am to see her son hallucinating. And yet, Diaz leads us outside of the pantoum's structure, asking us who is really suffering, and who is being betrayed, whose roles might be switched. The creation of these "personal mythologies", as Diaz calls them (Diaz, PEN DIY) instils a sense of infinity, as if colonialism triggered a perpetual dysfunction, an inherited wound that may never cease; as Borges writes, "the possibilities of permutation border on the infinite" (13-14). Her brother's meth addiction is so destructive that it seems to be hopelessly eternal as well, causing psychological turmoil within the family structure, pushing him to disillusionment. However, the same form, in its ritualistic repetition, represents—and in a sense fulfils—the desire to love her brother, which the poet admits she doesn't know how to do "off the page" (Diaz, "A Celebration").

In her poem "Downhill Triolets" Diaz uses the aforementioned Sisyphus myth as a metaphor for her father: "My brother is arrested again and again. And again / our dad, our Sisyphus, pushes his old blue heart up to the station" (52). Here, among the many shapeshifts and reversals in the collection, her parents have switched roles; her father becomes Sisyphus, who bears the burden of her brother's incessant arrests and violence, and is fated to push his own heart to the police station where his son is waiting. Diaz's "Downhill Triolets" enlists the rhyme scheme of traditional French triolets—ABaAabAB, the eight lines used as either a single strophe, or in Diaz's case, a stanza. She starts with a nine-line stanza (although triolets are typically eight lines, Wendy Cope's "Nine-line Triolet" is also nine lines), and the next two stanzas have 14 and 20 respectively, giving the poem the accumulative momentum suggested in her title: the reversal of Sisyphus's uphill climb and

relative loss of control. Thus, the constraints of form are precisely what unbridle the feelings of entropy surrounding her brother's drug use, poverty, and postcolonial trauma, and allow a place both for desire, despite constraints off the page, and to practice love beyond this form. Similar to these triolets is her title poem, "When My Brother Was An Aztec" (1), in which the indented lines in each stanza resemble Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill", or William Carlos Williams's triadic or stepped line, the "variable foot" measured in breath lengths rather than accentual syllables (Berry 364). A similar indented line, though not triadic, reappears in Diaz's "Cloud Watching", in which the lineation imitates both the movement of clouds across the sky, the zigzag lines in the Mojave Desert petroglyphs, or indeed, a redesigning of the patterns on Betsy Ross's flag which Diaz evokes in the first line.

#### The Ongoing Aubade

In light of the schismatic uses of traditional forms in Diaz's *WMBWAA* and *Postcolonial Love Poem*—the abecedarian, pantoum, ode ("Ode to My Lover's Hips"), and triolets—I will examine how desire—here romantic desire—moves within and outside her poem "Monday Aubade".<sup>259</sup> This particular aubade is a lament of the dawn rather than in praise of it, evoked by the narrator's desire to be with her lover again—the title suggesting Monday's torment and the wait until the weekend—in anaphoric lines: "To be next to you again," "to shut my eyes one more night",

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<sup>259</sup> Aubade comes from the Occitan and Spanish, *alba*, meaning "of dawn". Though it is not strict in meter or structure, it has a set theme; it is traditionally "a dawn song about adulterous love, expressing one or both lovers' regret over the coming of dawn after a night of love. A third voice, a watchman, may announce the coming of dawn and the need for the lovers to separate. An Occitan *alba* may contain a dialogue (or serial monologues) between lover and beloved or a lover and the watchman or a combination of monologue with a brief narrative intro". Because it is staged as secret love, the traditional *alba* suggested illicit attraction. In Occitan, the word "alba" is included at the end of each stanza, but otherwise it has no fixed form. English examples are John Donne ("The Sun Rising", "The Good Morrow"), and Robert Browning ("Parting at Morning"), Ezra Pound ("Alba"), W. H. Auden ("Aubade"), Philip Larkin, ("Aubade"), and Robert Creeley ("Alba") (Greene et al. 29).



“to be still again knowing”, “to have you a last time, at last, a touch away,” (83) and finally “to lie silent at your side,” (84). This anaphora creates a suspension, as in the aforementioned forms, of what “might yet become action” as Diaz notes. This potential is heightened by the restless prospect of touching the lover, whose body becomes numerous, or perhaps innumerable, access points to wider landscapes: “the door of your hip opening / to a room of light”, “the delta of shadows / between your shoulder blades”, “the bow of your spine, the arc of your torso—a widening road to an alabaster mountain, / a secret path to a cliff overlooking a sea” (83), and a “strange unicorn loose along the dim streets / separating our skins”, the latter of which, coupled with “Lorca’s horn of moonlight” in the preceding line, is evocative of a dildo<sup>260</sup>. The body loosening into a list of landscapes is undeniably influenced by Neruda, as well as Lorca, both of whom Diaz references in multiple poems<sup>261</sup>. The exploration and expansion of the landscape as well as the meridians of anatomy echo Neruda’s lines, “Body of a woman, white hills, white thighs, / when you surrender, you stretch out like the world. / My body, savage and peasant, undermines you / and makes a son leap in the bottom of the earth” (Neruda 18), and Lorca’s “A thousand Persian little horses fell asleep / in the plaza with moon of your forehead” in “Galeca of Unforeseen Love” (Lorca, *The Selected Poems* 159). In “Monday Aubade”, however, these physical geographies are desired to the extent that the landscape becomes the reality, and the body becomes the metaphor: “the bow of your spine, the arc of your torso [...] a caravel / crushing the swells, parting each / like blue-skirted

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<sup>260</sup> Diaz’s line echoes Lorca’s poem from “Moon Songs” translated from the Spanish by A. S. Kline, in which he writes, “The moon lays a long horn, / of light, on the sea. / Tremoring, ecstatic, / the grey-green unicorn” (Lorca, “Another Twenty Poems”).

<sup>261</sup> In *WMBWAA*, “Dome Riddle”, she writes “Borges’s other tiger licking the empty shell of / Lorca’s white *tortuga*” (80), a direct influence occurs in “Lorca’s Red Dresses” with a mention of “Lorca’s *Cante jondo*”; in *I Lean Out the Window* [...] she mentions “Lorca’s gypsy nun” (81); the epigraph to “Mariposa Nocturna” is Lorca’s line “*Esta luz, este fuego que devora*” (60) from “Llagas de amor” or “Wounds of Love”; in *Postcolonial Love Poem*, she cites Lorca’s “Romance sonámbulo”, and in “Ode to My Beloved’s Hips”, she references the Spanish bullfighter Manolete, whom, as Diaz writes in her notes, “Lorca wrote about in several poems” (98).

thighs—lay before me, another New World shore the gods / have chained me to” (83). Here, it is essential to probe into the colonial underpinnings of the “New World” and its connection to Rimbaud’s line from “Le Bateau Ivre”, “*the Dawns are heartbreaking*”, which Diaz adopts as the last line of this poem.

Rimbaud’s line in “Le Bateau Ivre”, or “The Drunken Boat”, written in 1871 when the poet was sixteen, appears towards the end of an Odyssean account of a boat set adrift after its crew is captured, a sequence of events which is widely interpreted as a metaphor for the young poet’s own escape from the reins of domestic and societal authority. In reference to the ship’s crew, Samuel Beckett’s translation of the opening stanza reads: “Redskins had taken them in a scream and stripped them and / Skewered them to the glaring stakes for targets”<sup>262</sup>. Rimbaud’s use of “Redskins” or “Peaux-Rouges”, may have been influenced, as Cohn suggests, by Chateaubriand’s “sensationalistic” representations of the Natchez culture in *Les Natchez*, in which “factitious stereotypes” lead to “sentimental, melodramatic [...] social critiques filtered through the eyes of a naïve foreign visitor” (Porter 159). Diaz reconfigures Rimbaud’s stereotypes of natives as savage and barbarous in her trajectory of desire; the shape of the lover’s body becomes both the “savage” weapon—the “bow” and “arc”—and the “New World shore the gods / have chained me to” (83), reappropriating the colonists’ desire to conquer land. Her description of the body as “a caravel / crushing the swells, parting each / like blue-skirted thighs” alludes to the 15<sup>th</sup>-century boats used by the Spanish and Portuguese for colonial exploration. The “Nina” and the “Pinta”, two of Columbus’s famous three boats, were caravels, similarly evoked by Bitsui: “the premonition—beginning with three masts and a cross” (*Flood Song* 68). Thus Diaz’s corporeal landscapes are not simply

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<sup>262</sup> These lines in the original French are: “Des Peaux-Rouges criards les avaient pris pour cibles, / Les ayant cloués nus aux poteaux de couleurs” (Rimbaud, *Oeuvres*).

harbingers of the final line about Rimbaud's unrestrained boat. Rather, the symbol of an intrusive colonial omen becomes one of autonomous sensual exploration, an inversion which suspends the reader's discomfort. Diaz reorganises "angers and rages" (Diaz, "A Touch") of colonial rupture—"the sky went to ash, undid its dark ribbons, / and bent to the ground grief-ruined"—into the pleasure of wanting the lover—"to have you a last time, at last, a touch away" (83). The result of the inversion transcends the body's impossibility—inhumane treatment in the imperial projects of discovery and propagation of indigenous incivility—and exemplifies possibility, the immense, autonomous desire for the lover.

On the other hand, with these refashioned tropes of colonisation, Diaz could be demystifying desire itself, suggesting that even love can colonise; after all, Neruda's "body of a woman" is stretched out "like the world", and in "Manhattan is a Lenape Word" Diaz writes, "*She is mine, colony*" (14). The parallel between colonising a people and colonising a relationship has been examined by Akwesasne Mohawk James Thomas Stevens, as he began exploring the act of renaming from the Narragansett lexicon into English:

When we speak of relationships in their early stages, we often hear, 'That was back when we/they were just discovering each other.' But did that discovery require a renaming of what already existed? [...] How quickly the other becomes my partner, my husband, my wife. Over and over, I see in my research that the point of exploration is the right to naming/ claiming. Do not "fashion the other" to suit your own needs. Let the simplicity of his/her design awe you. It is not an easy thing to remember, but the history of exploration and colonization on this continent is a constant reminder. (Stevens 186)

Perhaps, in Diaz's descriptions of the body as an uninhabited landscape, as well as the desire to claim it and to be claimed—"to have you a last time, at last" and "the city of you, where I am a beggar" (*WMBWAA* 84) or as a "Lambent slave to ilium and ischium" (*Postcolonial* 37)—Diaz is

also reminding us that even the well-intended lover might fall victim to obsession, recurring each dawn of separation in the case of the aubade. She yokes colonial claim with both the autonomous freedom of sexual desire as well as its trappings. While Andrews interprets Cree poet Connie Fife's work as a direct subversion of "hierarchical dominance as well as the right to dictate land ownership or the body's present and future uses" (Andrews 136), Diaz confuses these binaries, becoming both the explorer-lover and the chained lover. Thus, surprisingly, the poet suggests that the "cliff overlooking a sea", "caravel" and "New World" can be added to the body's many names.

As we have seen so far, the aubade's anaphora heightens the tension of this intoxicating state of suspension, triggered by the separation from the lover after parting at dawn: "but then, to not reach out / because my hands are dressed in scarves of smoke" (84). Diaz elaborates on this element of tactility, essentially renaming the poem as touch:

A poem is like a hand – the hand is never what it is, and in many ways is defined by what it is not. The hand is the hand in part because it is surrounded by touch, and so becomes touch. A poem is one of the myriad ways language touches. [...] Physics says we never actually touch, and what we sense as touch is the repulsion of electromagnetic fields. Touch, then, is a sense across the field, or a sense while crossing that field – a physical or emotional experience of the space between self and other, even if the other is the self [...]. Isn't this also how a poem moves? (Diaz, "A Taste")

Seeing the poem as "touch" in this light, as perhaps never truly a touch but a "repulsion of electromagnetic fields", the line "because my hands are dressed in scarves of smoke" (84) expands the "experience of the space between the self and other". It corresponds with poet E. J. McAdams's concept of the "desire line": "the way we want to go. often the shortest distance between two points" (original lowercase, Russo et al. 31)<sup>263</sup>. The "physics" or kinetics of touch and desire might be at

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<sup>263</sup> McAdams's definition continues: "[...] an expediency. a trampling and then an erosion. an accretion of many subjective individual decisions. Pavement-like soil, cracked. outlaw to the prescribed paths of the state or landscape architects. an ever-widening way. in need of care and restoration. the opposite of meandering, an antonym of lost. a microcosm" (original lowercase text, 31).

once a “*science individuelle*” in Desnos’s conception (if “the other is the self”),<sup>264</sup> and a relational one; the field between self, the lover, or the reader, so that the reader receives the poet’s language not unlike the addressed lover. Indeed, the suspension of pleasure speaks to Valéry’s worry that “intellectual and emotional excitement are overcome by the intoxication of speed: people go so fast that on their way they by-pass both thought and pleasure” (Valéry, *The Art of Poetry* 225), so much so that “we are very nearly speaking in initials” (223). Therefore, the aubade framework—a formal suspension of the moment until the lovers meet again—allows Diaz to gravitate around this pleasure via the *suspension* of touch, the movement of touch across the field, out of reach from the coloniser or the stereotypical body images of Rimbaud’s mythical “Peaux-Rouges”.

However, Revard warns us, as Muller points out, against misappropriating “outsideness”. To posit that oral cultures “exist outside history, in a perpetually-present realm of myth” risks projecting “literacy myths”, the implicit civilization of their phonetic alphabet, which, in Goody and Watt’s account, inaugurated the divide between orality and literacy and eventually justified the “civilizing effects of print literacy in English” and the American educational policies devised to excise traditional orality (Muller 43). Yet Diaz’s gravitation around desire and atemporal touch does “threaten the status quo of larger American concepts of history, mythology and nation” precisely because it insinuates physical forms of communication, “relationships based not only on injustice and trauma, but on celebration of pleasure and our humanity” (Miranda 146) as Deborah Miranda writes. Thus, alleviating Revard’s warning of “outsideness” and “literacy myths”, Diaz leads us outside the poem’s fixed temporality of dawn, and exemplifies the sense of being “outside of time”, in the tensions between “to have you a last time, at last, a touch away,” (83) and “but then, to not

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<sup>264</sup> Desnos writes “L’*érotisme* est une science individuelle” in his text “De l’*érotisme*”, quoted in Goujon’s *Anthologie* (15), and cited by de la Fuente in *Borges, Desire, and Sex* (49).

reach out / because my hands are dressed in scarves of smoke;" (84). Diaz invigorates Miranda's praise of erotics that "go far beyond the original intent of literacy for American Indians, the U.S. government's Indian boarding school 'education'" and reclaim an atemporal autonomy of pleasure "to articulate intangible possibility" (Miranda 146). Although an aubade is a somewhat affixing or straining mechanism, Diaz unfixes it from its thematic temporality.

Returning to Diaz's last line in the aubade, *the Dawns are heartbreaking*" (84), from Wallace Fowle's translation of Rimbaud's line "les Aubes sont navrantes" in "Le Bateau Ivre"<sup>265</sup>, Diaz turns Rimbaud's frustration with the dawn—its empty promise of freedom, wishes to sink ("O let me go into the sea!")—into a state of ecstasy: "in this city, this city of you, where I am a beggar—*the Dawns are heartbreaking*" (84), Diaz writes. This is the apotheosis of suspension and tension because of its suggestion of infinity; this aubade is not the experience of one dawn separated from the lover, but many. The ending also points us to Spanish poet Pedro Salinas, whom Diaz quotes in her conversation with poet Rachel Zucker:

[...] 'behind, beyond, so it's more than me'. He is talking about a woman but he could be talking about writing. You are even something beyond what I feel of you. If I can write this poem as if I were dying, for every line, I've given it all here, I've turned over everything, I've hurt myself as much as I can hurt myself on it, or risked even something so dangerous as ecstasy or joy on it. (Diaz, "Episode 13")

To have "turned over everything" is characteristic of Diaz—an influence of Salinas but also no doubt inspired by Lorca's *duende*<sup>266</sup>, and not unlike Louis MacNeice's "drunkenness of things being

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<sup>265</sup> Beckett's translation is "Dawns have broken my heart".

<sup>266</sup> Diaz's explanation of writing "as if I were dying", turning over everything and risking everything, even ecstasy and joy, is a close parallel to Lorca's definition of *duende*: "baptising all who gaze at it with dark water", *duende* "acquires a fatal character" but craves "to love, to understand, and be certain of being loved, and being understood". It "charges itself with creating suffering by means of a drama of living forms, and clears the way for an escape from the reality that surrounds us"; it is the "living style, of blood, of the most ancient culture, of spontaneous creation" (Lorca, "Theory").

various”, without pointing out the fact<sup>267</sup>. This unnamed state of immeasurability contributes directly to her out-of-timeness, and thus suspension: everything is risked—the violence of the colonial “New World”—but is also tender, so that language attempts to touch the sensuality of the body, which is, as Diaz writes, “beyond the six senses” (*Postcolonial Love Poem* 48). In fact, sixteen-year-old Rimbaud similarly described his poetic endeavours in a letter to his friend Paul Demy as a kind of sensual synesthesia, “summing up everything, perfumes, sounds and colors, thought latching on to thought and pulling”, which sprung from the synesthetic novelty of Baudelaire (Mendelsohn, “Rebel Rebel”). Even if Diaz doesn’t declare her poetry as a resistance against oppression, she is nevertheless “risking something so dangerous as ecstasy”, as a woman whose culture has experienced the oppression of beliefs, language, ideologies and communal activities. Diaz accepts Miranda’s credo that “we cannot be allowed to see indigenous women in all their erotic glory without also seeing and acknowledging all that has been done to make those women—their bodies and cultures—extinct” (145). Similarly, as Leanne Simpson writes, “there are all kinds of things we can’t do anymore and all kinds of those things can be thought of as ceremony, having a fire, sharing food, making love [...]” (Simpson, *This Accident* 50). Yet having “turned over everything” to arrive at the *many* dawns of desire in the final line, Diaz risks the “rebellion of love”, in Simpson’s words, because “everything that we [indigenous nations] are afraid of has already happened” (50)<sup>268</sup>. The poet commits to a fearless desire, as well as surpassing temporal and formal boundaries, bringing a Mojave sensibility to the aubade.

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<sup>267</sup> From MacNeice’s poem “Snow”, republished in the *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British & Irish Poetry* (337).

<sup>268</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, Kyle Powys Whyte also infers that colonialism was already a form of apocalypse, and thus indigenous peoples are “living *today* in post-apocalyptic situations” (my emphasis, Whyte, “Indigenous” 160).

Indeed, the aubade, which begins with a Botticellian or O’Keeffean celebration of the female body, if we consider O’Keeffe’s flowers and canyon-like shapes as a laudation to the vulva<sup>269</sup>—“the door of your hip opening / to a room of light / where a fuschia blouse hangs / in the closet of a conch shell / the silhouette of a single red-mouthed bell” (83)—alliteratively embraces non-heteronormative female erotics. The aubade therefore grants “autonomy” in its ongoing temporality, and its public declaration: “to say I’m not hiding this anymore, I want you to be uncomfortable with it” (Diaz, “Episode 13”). The Mojave notion of outside-of-timeness, as well as Salinas’s “behind, beyond, so it’s more than me”, drive the aubade’s unapologetic pleasure, an effect not unlike critic Brook Zern’s interpretation of Lorca’s *duende* which, he writes, “dilates the mind’s eye, so that the intensity becomes almost unendurable” (qtd in Maurer, ix-xx).

This is why Diaz’s elaboration on poetry as “touch”—that is, language as movement carried toward and received by the poet, the reader or listener, as one might receive bodies of land—is unusual: many poets, particularly female-identifying indigenous poets, feel that their writing is indeed a form of active resistance, and poetry is often approached this way by critics. For instance, in “‘I Give You Back’: Indigenous Women Writing to Survive”, Archuleta defines an “indigenous feminist ethos of responsibility” in literature which “compels women to share their stories and personal pain with one another to promote healing” (Archuleta 98)<sup>270</sup> from, and resistance against,

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<sup>269</sup> In Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, analysed ad infinitum, Venus is standing on a scallop shell, the symbol of the loss of virginity (the painting was a commission for a Medici wedding), and what is thought to be either the Hora of Spring or the goddess Flora stands at the right side of the Vesica Piscis image, holding pinkish (note the “fuschia blouse” in Diaz’s aubade) drapery to clothe Venus, forming a loop with her hand which evokes a vulva-shaped or conch shell-shaped fold.

<sup>270</sup> Meredith Privott applies this “ethos of responsibility” to Indigenous women water protectors of the #NoDAPL movement at Standing Rock, in that they “speak with authority through their identity as Indigenous women who acknowledge a belief in the interconnectedness of life and the sanctity in that holism; who acknowledge the ancient and sacred authority of women as life-givers/mothers to protect the water [...]” (Privott 77).



colonial traumas and ecological injustices within indigenous communities. Archuleta cites Kim Anderson (Cree/Métis) for instance, who says her book *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* names “the poisons that have infiltrated Native womanhood, documenting Native female paths of resistance and defining a positive Native female identity” (qtd. in Archuleta 93), and notes that Joy Harjo’s poem “I Give You Back” “exemplifies a strategy of resistance” (qtd. in Archuleta 100). Archuleta’s examples are no doubt valid and pertinent: indigenous women have “crafted oppositional knowledge designed to resist oppression” and to develop feminist discourse. Writing can be “a kind of political activism because they provide a commentary on Indigenous peoples’ resurgence and recovery [...] and the power to resist injustice” (110). And yet, Diaz—whose poetry *is* vehemently resistant to social injustices—points out poetry is not always “designed” for resistance. Such an emphasis can detract from the tensions of desire and the continuous observations of our human and non-human relations articulated in a poem, a space that should not confine the questions at hand.

Concerning autonomy, Diaz has developed her own understanding of it: “I can only be myself in relation to my family and my community” (Diaz, “The Verb”), she writes. Unlike Western notions of the individual in literature, beginning in the Renaissance or prior, as a self who “often lives the complex ideas of one unified, secure individual” (“The Individual”, *In Our Time*), Diaz’s notion of autonomy is formed in relation to “who and what” is around her (Diaz, “Poetry as Wonder”), and the endurance of her parents and ancestors on the Fort Mojave reservation which affects her poetic process: “[...] We’re not supposed to be here. I’m not supposed to be alive. I came from a reservation. Those places were not meant to foster art. But somehow, my parents and their parents, they found joy, they found pleasure, they kept getting up in the morning [...] I never realised

how much love you need to write a poem, how much love you need to have a conversation [...] (Diaz, Interview with Zucker). Diaz's account here, reminiscent of Chrystos's poem "I Walk in the History of My People"<sup>271</sup>, upholds that her aubade is an autonomous continuation of the capability her parents and their parents have achieved in finding joy. She confirms this, for instance, with a Rilkean revelation in her title poem "*Postcolonial Love Poem*": "*Wake up and ache for our life*"(1)<sup>272</sup>. Therefore, yet another metamorphosis takes place in this poem; while love seems centred on the "be-loved", it reflects just as much ancestral love and self-love. The idea of her parents being capable of "getting up in the morning" redefines the aubade: the poet's relational autonomy not only spurs her to get up each morning desiring the lover, but to experience each dawn loving *herself*, despite the fact that she is "not supposed to be alive" (Diaz, "Episode 13")<sup>273</sup>. Diaz delivers autonomy of the relational and independent poetic self; whereas political autonomy sought by native nations is "a double-bind situation", to use Audra Simpson's term (Simpson, "Under the Sign" 107-108), because acknowledgement must be "conferred" upon them by the government—as in Ortiz's line "no risk allowed without proper clearance and authorization from the state" (*Out There Somewhere* 9)—the sensual, kinetic reaching of the aubade does not operate under the recognition of a heteropatriarchal system and thus sets pleasure in motion beyond the page.

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<sup>271</sup> "My knee is wounded so badly that I limp constantly / Anger is my crutch / I hold myself upright with it / My knee is wounded / see / How I Am Still Walking." (Chrystos, "I Walk").

<sup>272</sup> The final phrase in Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" is "You must change your life".

<sup>273</sup> I am applying the feminist reformulation of autonomy, as explained by Natalie Stoljar. "Relational autonomy" rejects the notion that autonomy depends on self-sufficiency; "relationships of care and interdependence are valuable and morally significant" and thus autonomy must be conceived as "relational", or complimentary with valuing family and social relationships (Stoljar, "Feminist Perspectives").

## Monsters of Desire

### Devouring

Diaz's kinetics lead us to, as Neruda suggests, the infinite occurrences in which desire happens. In fact, Berger writes, "there may be as many varieties of desire as there are erotic encounters" (Berger, *Another Side* 28). In Diaz's poetry, one of these encounters comes in the form of monsters, beasts, or chimeras, which are never purely grotesque but rather sensual, hungry lovers. In this section, I will elaborate on some of these occasions featuring beasts and the act of devouring before a closer look at her poem "When the Beloved Asks What Would You Do if You Woke Up and I Was a Shark?". I argue that these "unpinnable" creatures—representing the "autonomy of desire" as metamorphoses of the poet's consciousness and physicality—challenge contemporary views of hybridity. Firstly, I will outline pre-established notions of aesthetic purity in the Western tradition, then I will explore how Diaz's multiplicities of desire disrupt these notions, including the ways in which devouring refers to the acts of desire for a lover, and the reformulation of "ecstasy" as an attention to human and non-human kinetic relationships. Then, with reference to John Berger and Deborah Miranda, I observe how Diaz's images of devouring and pleasure challenge accepted definitions of "human" at its colonial foundations, and how the disappearing element in the act of devouring in fact presents a form of visibility.

As "Monday Aubade" shows, desires and pleasures are "happenings" that unabashedly slip from containment, naturally crossing paths with colonial realities, domestic struggles, and increasing ecological distress in already disrupted environments due to colonial extraction. Mallarmé's axiom

that a poet's responsibility is to give "a purer sense to the words of the tribe"<sup>274</sup> or, in many interpretations, to provide a vacuum or trace of thought independent from political realities, is challenged by Diaz, who suggests there are advantages to the poet lacking a "well-defined social role" and instead embracing "unpinnable" *impurity*. At this point, it is useful here to recall the 20<sup>th</sup>-century notions of poetic purity, influenced by French symbolists, before examining Diaz's hybridity and entanglements of impurity in the following poems.

In 1927, Paul Valéry, in light of Abbé Henri Bremond's lecture entitled "Pure Poetry" (*Poésie pure*) two years earlier, adopted the notion that poetry must "give the impression of a complete system of reciprocal relations between our ideas and images on the one hand and our means of expression on the other", creating a state of mind that is "unconnected with the practical order", and, à propos of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Poetic Principle", free of didactic content (Hirsch, "The Ideas"). On the other hand, Diaz's embrace of impurity is an immersion in, rather than a distance from, the actual world; her surreal, fantastical shape shifts and metaphors are in fact representative of emotional truths that question the traditional Western purity vacuum. This includes the consideration of the reader's presence. As noted in reference to Long Soldier in Chapter 2, she practices Simon Ortiz's notion that "[The storyteller] participates in the story with those who are listening. The listeners in the same way are taking part in the story. The story includes them in. You

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<sup>274</sup> The phrase is taken from the more commonly cited translation by A.S. Kline of Mallarmé's "Tombe d'Edgar Allan Poe", which reads in the second stanza, referring to poets: "They, like a spasm of the Hydra, hearing the angel / Once grant a purer sense to the words of the tribe [...]" (Mallarmé, "Tombe" translated by Kline). The original French is: "Eux, comme un vil sursaut d'hydre oyant jadis l'ange / Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu" (Mallarmé, "Tombe"). Other translations suggest a slightly different implication: "They, like an upstart hydra hearing the angel once / purify the meaning of tribal words (Peter Manson's translation from *The Poems in Verse* 2013) and "Aroused like some hydra of the past, / when an angel proffered pure words to mankind", (Richard Wilbur's translation, *Poetry Magazine*, April 2006).

see, it's more like an event, the storytelling. The story is [...] occurring, coming into being" ("What Indians Do" 104). Diaz's inclusiveness, both that of the physical erotic and the open dialogue with and reaching towards the reader, breaks the poem's self-containment and embraces Pablo Neruda's defense of "a poetry impure as the clothing we wear, or our bodies, soup-stained, soiled with our shameful behavior, our wrinkles and vigils and dreams, observations and prophecies, declarations of loathing and love, idylls and beasts [...]" (Neruda, "Toward an Impure Poetry"). Like many contemporary poets, Diaz dismisses the purely internal world of Symbolism, yet unlike many contemporary poets, she upholds the sensual kinetics of desire and suspends its movements often misconceived as "impure" or "shameful". She also expands the simultaneities which both Neruda and herself pinpoint; the beast in the lover, or the violence in desire, which metamorphoses into a devouring will to exist. As Hedge Coke writes in reference to her lines in *Wyandotte*, "Y, yan, e, tih / kettle / Yah, re, sah Ya, yan, quagh, ke / beans, cornfield / Yat, o, regh, shas, ta // I am hungry" in *Streaming* (10): "that's what life really is, following our hunger; we're curious, we're looking introspectively, and our needs are so simple, we have a kettle" (Hedge Coke, PI). What may be read as fantastical scenes of devouring are reflective of the most essential needs and introspections.

Not only are Diaz's creatures—many of which are derived from Greek mythology—incarnations of desire, but their incessant appetite contributes to the poems' movement and unclassifiable metamorphosis, a hybrid kinetics epitomised by her line, "I arrive at you—half bestia, half feast", in "The Cure for Melancholy Is to Take the Horn" (*Postcolonial Love Poem* 77). In Diaz's self-portrait "I Minotaur" in *Postcolonial Love Poem*, for instance, she writes: "In my chest I am two-hearted always—love and what love becomes / arrive when they want to, and hungry" (55). Desire is hybridised, both tender and in the process of becoming a ravenous beast. In

the next stanza, “I know what it’s like to be appetite of your own appetite / citizen of what savages you / to dare bloom pleasure from your wounds—[...] I dream what is wet or might quench— / aquifers, rivers, cenotes, canals” (55). The body is a hungry hybrid that, as suggested here, desires both romantic love and non-human love, as it thirsts for the unextracted waters in ruined America, an unquenchable desire. In “Ode to the Beloved’s Hips” in the same collection, Diaz writes, “Maenad tongue— / come-drunk hum tranced honey-puller—for her hips, / I am—strummed-song and succubus” (original spacing 37), referring to the Greek maenads, who, inspired by Dionysus, are described as being in a state of ecstatic, intoxicated frenzy. Mythologised as mad women (maenad comes from the Greek maenades, meaning “mad” or “demented”), their rites—they were known to tear animals or people to pieces, as was the fate of the mythical poet Orpheus<sup>275</sup>—were so raving that they verge on hybridity, “half bestia, half feast” as Diaz writes above. In fact, one Mojave dream song as recited by Aspa-sakam and recorded by anthropologist A.L. Kroeber in 1905, tells of Nyohaiva, an insect who “comes into existence as a woman in the north end of Mohave Valley, at Miakwa’orve, above Fort Mojave” at the beginning of creation, when “the world was still wet” (Kroeber 27). The character reflects both femininity and war, according to Kroeber; she wears a skirt, but “she incites, she wants revenge, she kills” (27), recalling Diaz’s devouring beasts and the Maenads.

Similarly, in her poem “From the Desire Field”, in order to appease the monster of anxiety and insomnia, desire is transformed into a “beloved”: “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—” (12). Without fulfilling her appetite for desire, anxiety brews.

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<sup>275</sup> This definition is taken from the entry for “Maenad” in *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*.

When she gets her “horns in a thing—”, as if she is transformed into a beast, she thinks, “Let me call my anxiety, *desire*, then. / Let me call it *a garden*. // Maybe this is what Lorca meant / when he said, *verde que te quiero verde*” (poet’s emphasis, 12). The poet speaks here to Lorca’s “Romance Sonambulo”. In the 2005 publication of *The Selection of Poems of Federico García Lorca*, Stephen Spender and J.L. Gili’s translation of the poem’s first line is “Green, how much I want you green” (71). A.S. Kline takes a more liberal rendition, “Green, as I love you, greenly” (Lorca, “Fourteen Poems”), and William Bryant Logan’s is more literal, “Green, how I want you green”. They all use, however, a comma after “Green”, which effaces Lorca’s unpunctuated, erotic immediacy that Diaz echoes in a line appearing later in the poem, “Green vein in her throat green wing in my mouth” (13), and a reason why Diaz may have preferred to use the original Spanish in her poem. Diaz’s relationship with the bestial here is more than a binary figure. Firstly, she turns *herself* into a tender beast of pleasure, while transforming the “bestia” (beast or animal) of anxiety and insomnia into desire. Secondly, this anxiety is renamed “*a garden*”, which accentuates a textural, lush element of desire embodied in Lorca’s “*verde*” (green), and describes love as a mobile ecstasy occurring outside of the body as well as inside. Diaz asks, “is the ecstatic outside the body or inside the body? In some ways the idea of the love poem is an energy much larger than I am. I think the energy that has made itself, the literal world, from cosmos to dirt to mountain, that to me feels very ecstatic” (Diaz, “Between the Covers”). This renaming also points to the Mojave practice “*ich chuuvawve*”, which is the name of a teaching fellowship at the University of Arizona where Diaz teaches. “*Ich chuuvawve*”, the fellowship website says, “could quickly be interpreted as a garden, however, it is an action and practice more than it is a place—‘to place into the earth and to care for what grows there’”. It continues to explain that “though the human body is nourished by many knowledges, so

many centers of knowledge exist outside of the human body. How can we avoid the extractive nature and reaping of knowledge?" ("Ich Chuuvawve", Arizona State University). Thus, Diaz's attention towards caring for her anxiety as she cares for her lover is implicitly expanded in this poem to the "tending and caretaking" of non-human life and epistemologies as well ("Ich Chuuvawve"). Her poem embraces a series of inverted hybrids, the practice or action of a garden, not only its existence, as well as Lorca's influence: beasts are also tendernesses, fulfillment is also appetite. At the same time, acts of desire and ecstasy occur and are reconfigured through these devouring beasts, implying that language can reach closer to desire and care if it acknowledges their convoluted underbelly. In other words, becoming a beast and a garden, she unhinges Western definitions of "human" and "goodness", or the humaneness that these definitions demand—founded on America's imperial othering and which Diaz links to present-day white supremacy—because even a green shoot growing in the desert exists in its ravenous defense of surviving. (Diaz, "Between the Covers").

Indeed, devouring is a major happening in Diaz's poetry, and perhaps even a metaphor for poetry itself. As Valery wrote, "I lived among young people for whom art and poetry were a kind of essential nourishment impossible to forego, and indeed something more: a supernatural food" (Valery, *The Art* 219). Diaz, who doesn't need Rimbaud's prophesy that female poets will one day discover "strange, unfathomable things, repulsive, delicious" (Rimbaud, *Illuminations* xxxiii), confirms on her own terms: "I write hungry poems" (Diaz, "Existing, Loving" 14). As a comparison, Nelson reminds us that Louise Erdrich points to the linguistic similarity of the words for flirting and hunting in the Ojibwe language, suggesting that the desire "for flesh in food and sex may have a similar core root" (Nelson 239).



Similarly, devouring in Diaz’s poetry is almost always in partnership with sexual desire and correlates with the word for “hummingbird” in the Mojave language, *nyen nyen*. Diaz notes the word’s verbal quality, similar that of the aforementioned phrase “ich chuuvawve”, the practice of caring for a garden: “it doesn’t mean bird—it is a description of what a hummingbird does, moving into and out of and into the flower”. It is also the word for sex: “*Mat ‘anyenm* translated to English means the body as a hummingbird, or to make a hummingbird of the body” (Diaz, “If What I Mean”). These Mojave associations exemplify Nelson’s reflection that native languages “do not cut humans off from nature and our bodily functions”, but rather “celebrate our fun and funny body parts and honor human sexuality as a sacred process” (234). Thus the meaning—“body, sex and hummingbird all at once”—implies both a type of metamorphosis parallel to non-human movement, as well as the fulfilment of hunger, from which Diaz’s associations of “syrup, iridescent, nectar” emerge (Diaz, “If What I”). To make a comparison with Hedge Coke’s work, the hummingbird is used in her poem “Harp Strings” to reflective sexual desires:

Sweet rain on old growth sweeps past in fanning sheets  
 this morning each veil brings joy, like someone strumming  
 mist releasing song, falling to branch above hummingbird  
 dashing in, out, grabbing nectar in the wet, wet, music.  
 Dashing in, out, grabbing nectar, in the wet, wet music.  
 Mist releasing song, falling to branch above hummingbird  
 this morning each veil brings joy, like someone strumming  
 Sweet rain on old growth sweeps past in fanning sheets. (*Streaming* 137)

The poem is balanced in an inverted form; it has two mirror-image quatrains, almost a palindrome, as if two bodies are merging in the middle. Hedge Coke’s repetition of “Dashing in, out, grabbing nectar, in the wet, wet music”, evokes a rhythmic sexual intimacy and uses the hummingbird which is fed by the flower, and the flower in turn is pollinated, a similar network of relations to Diaz’s themes of frenetic devouring.

In “Ode to the Beloved’s Hips”, for instance, Diaz writes, “I never tire to shake this wild hive, split with thumb the sweet / -dripped comb—hot hexagonal hole, dark diamond— / to its nectar-dervished queen” (*Postcolonial* 37). Diaz’s assonance in “wild hive”, her consonance in “hot hexagonal hole, dark diamond”—an apotheosis of female genitalia—and especially the striking use of “nectar-dervished”, enhance the poem’s trance-like euphoria. Thus, her English leans towards but cannot fully carry the Mojave meaning of *nyen nyen*, here taking the shape of a bee, although its phonic underpinnings at play. Similarly, in her poem “If I Should Come Upon Your House Lonely in the West Texas Desert”, she writes: “I will lie down in you. / Eat my meals at the red table of your heart. / Each steaming bowl will be, Just right. / I will eat it all up.” (*Postcolonial* 81). Devouring is not only synonymous with oral pleasure here but with penetration, which is echoed in other poems: “Her inside me / in a green hour I cannot stop” (*Postcolonial* 13), “I’m counting the carpals, / metacarpals of her hand inside me” in “From the Desire Field”; “Some nights she rises like that in me” (*Postcolonial* 15) in “Manhattan is a Lenape Word”; and “My mouth at your inner / thigh. Here I must enter you, mi pobre / Manolete” (*Postcolonial* 39) in “Ode to the Beloved’s Hips”. The poet’s dynamic, varied metaphors for disappearing inside or being entered (being devoured or devouring) again parallel *nyen nyen* (seeking out the flower, penetrating, disappearing into the flower and a fulfillment of hunger)<sup>276</sup>. Therefore, describing physical disappearances in acts of desire, Diaz exemplifies what Miranda praises in women’s erotics; that which makes “a more ‘real,’ less stereotypical” indigenous woman “*visible*” (Miranda 145, my emphasis). And, although consumption was a major theme of “The First Water is the Body”, Diaz unsettles the word

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<sup>276</sup> I see this as almost an inverse of “privation and desire and seeking”, which is Italo Calvino’s interpretation of Kafka’s short story, “Knight of the Bucket” or “The Bucket Rider”, in which the peasant rides on his empty bucket, as if it were a flying car, to seek more coal, only to be shooed away from the contemptuous wife, and disappears again into the night sky (Calvino 28).

“consumption” here, which is typically conjoined with climate change discourse, by yoking it with desire.

Echoing Diaz’s challenge of the Western notion of “human” and “humanity”, and those who cannot fulfill it, Miranda quotes Joy Harjo: “To be ‘in the erotic’...is to be alive...the dominant culture can’t deal with a society of alive people” (qtd in “Dildos” 145). Thus Diaz’s more “real” construction of being alive “in the erotic” involves an autonomous appearing and disappearing outside of the heteronomy and heteronormativity of “the dominant culture”, allowing for the many modes, even ravenous ones, of desire, care, and visibility. Berger calls this the “exemption” promised by desire, which “is tantamount to disappearance”; desire proposes a type of vanishing or escape. Yet, the “lovers’ disappearance cannot be counted as an evasion, a flight; it is, rather, a shift elsewhere: an entrance into a plenitude” (Berger, “Another Side” 28). Indeed, Diaz writes, “Let’s say I am only a hand—when I slip beneath the shirt of my lover / I disappear completely” (18) in “American Arithmetic”, and “I’ve only ever escaped through her body” (29) in “Like Church”. In Diaz’s kinetics and “autonomy” of desire, the erotic brings on a state of fullness through penetration and devouring, and as described in the action *nyen nyen*, allows for an ecstatic disappearance.

#### The Fathoms: Hybrids, Disappearance and Visibility

In this section, I further expand on alternative notions of hybrids, disappearance and visibility in a close examination of the poem “When the Beloved Asks What Would You Do if You Woke Up and I Was a Shark?”. Firstly, I point out Diaz’s suspension of the moment of pleasure in this poem. Recalling Warrior’s phenome-defying slime molds and introducing Bruyneel’s “third space”, I discuss how Diaz interrogates established measurements and categories through both this suspension and the possibility of recurrence, noting her own notion of the body as “outside of time”.

I then compare established notions of hybridity in poetry to Diaz's autonomy of pleasure, devouring and disappearance. In Paula Gunn Allen's 1995 essay "'Border' Studies: The Intersection of Gender and Color", she warns that despite the effects of "crossing and recrossing boundaries of consciousness", biculturality should not be considered the foundation of the work's "multiplicity" or "aesthetic largeness" (Allen, "'Border'" 33). Literary fields and the academic "establishment" could be less dependent on "multiculturalism, multilinguality, and dizzying class-crossing [...]" to insist on the variety of the lives of writers, which, as Diaz has pointed out, is not "bound by ideological barriers" of gender, sexual orientation, or color. This "doctrine of exclusion" insists almost solely on hybridities of identity, rather than hybridities of poetry which create textual multiplicity, or to reflect the potentialities of our human and non-human relations off the page (Allen, "'Border'" 34). I will address the latter in Diaz's "When the Beloved Asks What Would You Do if You Woke Up and I Was a Shark?", which again couples devouring beasts with tender desire.

The poem begins by explaining that the narrator has already imagined the title's hypothetical question her lover conjures up "in the shadow-long waters of many 2 a.m.s—drunk on the brine // of shoulder blades, those pale horns of shore I am wrecked upon" (85). These first lines seem to indicate a prolongation of "Monday Aubade", which comes directly before, recalling its lines the "New World shore the gods have chained me to" (83). The shore again suggests the narrator is wrecked on the shore of a desired body, while alluding to the colonial shores of America, as both a past, a present, and potential future. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson parallels this relationship:

Our bodies are [...] the heart of our self-determination, freedom and nationhood because every single meaningful relationship [...] flows through our bodies and joins us to our homelands. It is through our bodies [...] that we amplify and celebrate indigeneity. It is through attacking our bodies and relocating our bodies that colonists get what they need to reproduce coloniality. (Simpson, "Decolonial Love")

Thus, the lover-as-shark, a chimera of desire, is what brings the reader “outside of time” by intertwining the celebration of the body while suggesting violence in the concept of the colonial “New World”; “not a divorcing of the politics and the pleasure”, as poet Roger Reeves says in conversation with Diaz, but residing in the space where “pleasure is tension”, as Diaz asserts (Diaz, “Episode 13”)<sup>277</sup>. The poet embraces and eroticises the image of being devoured by a “420-million-year-old beast”, the lover-as-shark:

[...] not like the sad-mouthed, despair-eyed albacore or blubbery pinnipeds, wouldn't rage the city's flickering streets of ampullae of Lorenzini, nor slug my ferocious, streamlined lover's titanium

white nose, that bull's eye of cartilage, no, I wouldn't prolong it. Instead, I'd place my head onto that dark altar of jaws, prostrated Pilgrim at Melville's glittering gates, climb into that mysterious

window starred with teeth—the one lit room in the charnel house. I, at once mariner, at once pirate, would navigate my want by those throbbing constellations. I'd wear those jaws like a toothy cilice,

slip into the glitzy red gown of penance, and it would be no different from what I do each day—voyaging the salt-sharp sea of your body, Sometimes mooring the ports or sighting the sextant, then mending

the purple sails and hoisting the masts before being bound to them. Be-loved, *is* loved, what you cannot know is I am overboard for this metamorphosis, ready to be raptured to that mouth, reduced to a swell of wet clothes, as you roll back your eyes and drag me into the fathoms. (86-87)

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<sup>277</sup> This tension involves philological allusions to Greek and Judeo-Christian metaphors, Western origins Diaz also critiques. In “When the Beloved”, the poet is treading the “wine-dark waves of luxuria's tempests” (85), for instance, referencing the translation of Homer's *oínops póntos* or “wine-dark sea”, an augury of the sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis which Odysseus has to contend with. Secondly, the “ocean is a large pot of Apocalypse soup soon to boil over with our sins” (85). Desire is cohabiting with tongue-in-cheek interpretations of Christian mores, in which sexuality is one of the soup's main ingredients. The lustful, beastly shark, however, is not causing the sinful apocalypse; the real monsters are humans, whose consumption has led to climate change and rising waters “soon to boil over”.

Although the poet says she wouldn't want to "prolong" the moment of being devoured, she ironically does just that, prolonging the moment for the reader with her descriptions of the shark's meals before her—"despair-eyed albacore or blubbery / pinnipeds" that drop into "Melville's glittering gates". This prolonging becomes a fantasy, the shark jaws "a toothy cilice", turning a symbol of the purification of sin into a sexual, luminescent aesthetic. Despite the narrator's ecstatic abandon, this luminosity also manifests in two kinds of calculated tools for measurements. Firstly, her line "sighting the sextant" is a pun on the hybrid act of sex itself as a blurring of boundaries, and the boundaries or distance measured between the narrator and the "throbbing constellations" of the lover's body<sup>278</sup>. Thus, the suspension of being devoured by the lover-as-shark creates an outside-of-timeness that replicates the detemporal physicality of sex or desire itself. Secondly, she writes, "reduced to a swell / of wet clothes as you roll back your eyes and drag me into the fathoms" (86). The word "fathoms" comes from the Old English "faeðm" meaning "embracing arms" or "outstretched arms", connoting the standard nautical depth of six feet, and the verb faeðmian is to embrace, surround, envelope<sup>279</sup>. Diaz uses the uncalculated fathoms to emphasise that desire, sexual or not, is immeasurable or cannot be fully grasped linguistically, while playing with its double meaning of embrace or even comprehension: can we grasp or fathom the incomputable tensions of desire, and can we embrace it as the poet does? Can we fathom what appears to be a beast as something pleasurable or tender?

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<sup>278</sup> Both the pun and the allusion to measurements in phrase "sighting the sextant" recall the conceits of the metaphysical poets, for instance, in John Donne's "The Flea", or the two lovers' souls as compasses in Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning". Mathematically, the sextant derives from the Latin for "sixth part", a tool with a 60° arc to measure angular distances between celestial objects and the earth, particularly at sea, which Diaz links to the fathom—a unit equal to six feet, as stated above.

<sup>279</sup> From *Online Etymology Dictionary* and *Britannica Online*.

Here, as previously mentioned in Chapter 1, I turn again to Alutiiq (Sugpiaq), Dena'ina Athabascan and A'aniih scholar Carol Edelman Warrior, who, in her essay “Indigenous Collectives: A Meditation on Fixity and Flexibility” used plasmodial slime molds—a slug-like organism with intelligent communication networks, morphing qualities, and groupings in their search for food—to show how it is possible to defy phenotypes and social categorisation tools. Warrior argued that an organism which transgresses a phenotype category, or doesn't fit the requirements within their structure, can “garner violent push-back” from those who feel that hierarchical order and status are being threatened. Warrior compared this phenomenon to “racialized bodies”; the federal government's jurisdiction that native nations comply with their classifications of native blood quantum which determine individual rights and status; and propaganda of daily images, media and advertising; the results of normalised capitalism and “ideological abuse” to quote Barthes (*Mythologies* 10)<sup>280</sup>, the country's mythological “goodness”. Diaz insists the latter is “impossible” in America, as “none of us will ever meet it” (Diaz, “Natalie Diaz and Nikky Finney”). On the other hand, fallibility and the capacity for both achievement and error are embedded in Mojave stories: “Pach Karawhe (the Man of War) tried to lift the mountains but dropped them, and now the peaks are crooked and Mojaves are fallible” Diaz notes, pointing out the Mojave landscape (Diaz, “Poetry as Wonder”)<sup>281</sup>. Beyond these perimeters of goodness, Warrior remarks that, “Slime molds surprise, however, since their morphology is transformational: they look and act at turns like fungi, plants,

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<sup>280</sup> Barthes's preface to *Mythologies* in French: “[...] je souffrais de voir à tout moment confondues dans le récit de notre actualité, Nature et Histoire, et je voulais ressaisir dans l'exposition décorative de ce-qui-va-de-soi, l'abus idéologique qui, à mon sens, s'y trouve caché” (Barthes 9).

<sup>281</sup> Diaz elaborates on this story in “Between the Covers”: “our mountain was crooked. It's our creation mountain, it's got these beautiful boulder granites [...] and it looks like a zigzag but as you get closer you realize there are these incredible boulder granites but the mountain looks slightly shifted. [Pach Karawhe] was our most powerful being. He tried to move it, got it almost straight, and then dropped it. For us, that means that there's no such thing as goodness” (“Between the Covers”).

and animals” (Warrior 375). Warrior quotes Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, who agrees that this “category crisis” makes monsters of the slime molds: “Refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’ is true of monsters generally; they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (376). Diaz’s prolongation of the erotic in being devoured by the shark is therefore a refusal to enact what non-native poets might be expected to conform to. The lover’s transformation and suspension of something monstrous—an exhilarating one, as Diaz writes, she is “overboard for this metamorphosis”—is not unlike the slime mold in that it returns us to the possibilities of the body, testing language’s definitions and the reader’s pre-formed compartments for desire.

Another way to approach this hybridity or suspension between forms of the lover-as-shark is Kevin Bruyneel’s mobilisation of the “third space of sovereignty”, which suggests yet another understanding of the “third space”, as discussed in Chapter 1 (Simpson, “Under the Sign” 110). Bruyneel perceives this third space as “politics on the boundaries” of reservations or confined spaces, understanding boundaries “to be generative sites of distinction that do more than divide and exclude but may offer analytical possibilities by opening up the construct of the category” (Simpson, “Under the Sign” 110). Similarly, with an erotic slant, in “The Erotic in Contemporary Native Women’s Poetry in Canada”, Andrews builds on what Rifkin calls the “erotics of sovereignty”, shifting the notion of sovereignty from “an exertion of juridical control over a dead quantum of space” to the “emotional interdependence and physical joining of lovers” (qtd in Andrews 138). Andrews addresses erotic texts that “push against the boundaries inscribed by settlement” (Andrews 182), and actions “beyond government-imposed definitions” (Andrews 153). These imposed



definitions play out in what Bruyneel calls “postcolonial time”, the period after the end of the treaty processes in 1871<sup>282</sup> (and, to recall, the same year Rimbaud wrote “Le Bateau Ivre”), because it was “predicated upon a conceptualisation of Indian nations as out of time”, Audra Simpson writes (Simpson 111). Yet, in the aubade, Diaz reconceptualises or reclaims her own “outside of time” in the prolonged allegory of hybridity and desire: her orgasmic descent into the fathoms moves within an “unpinnable” “third space” of sovereignty—combining Rifkin’s “erotics of sovereignty” and Diaz’s “autonomy of desire”—outside of colonial categories or colonial time marked by treaties and political domination, in which lovers-as-sharks and desire coexist.

Here, Leanne Simpson’s retelling of the traditional Anishinaabe story about harvesting maple sap is enlightening. Diaz’s movement of descending into the fathoms is not unlike Simpson’s explanation, in a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg context, of “the sheer joy of discovery” upon rehearing the story of gathering maple sap. The continual retelling of this story each maple season is “in the context of love” and “relation”<sup>283</sup>, and lacks “coercion and authority, values so normalised in Western mainstream pedagogy that they’re rarely even critiqued” (Simpson, “Decolonial Love”).

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<sup>282</sup> After the end of the treaty-making processes in 1871, nations “were legally protected, but harshly limited” (Carpenter and Riley 184), and subject to the “heavy-handed leadership of reservation agents” (O’Brien 119) and the political domination of the U.S. government, whose “doctrine of plenary power” held that “Congress had the ‘right’ to take whatever action it chose—regardless of tribal consent—so long as it deemed that action to be in a community’s ‘best interest’” (Cobb 447). This shift from treaties to “agreements with the federal government”, Vizenor states, marked “the end of tribal independence”. He cites the General Allotment Act of 1887, in which nations lost “a hundred million acres of communal land on reservations”, and Public Law 280 which “extended state, civil, and criminal jurisdiction on reservations” (*Shadow Distance* 237). Even more, U.S. “Indian agents” such as Edwin Eells and his brother Myron Eells, sons of Protestant missionaries appointed to the Skokomish reservation in Washington, suppressed traditional religious practices and healers (O’Brien 80, 119).

<sup>283</sup> Simpson writes that she learned this traditional Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg story from Elder Gidigaa Migizi (Doug Williams), in the context of her Mississauga Ojibwe community, on the north shore of Lake Huron. In other retellings of this story, she uses the name “Kewenz”, meaning “girl”, but in her book *Land as Pedagogy*, she uses the non-binary name “Binoojiinh” (145). Simpson’s elaboration on storytelling in the context of love rather than coercion closely relates to Hedge Coke’s poem “Summer Fruit”: “Her story, song—love / cradled in every / bit of wild planted sweet, / how she grew in you, fills you now. / I remember the taste—love” (*Streaming* 24).

Similarly, Diaz prolongs this moment of pleasure in rediscovering the body; rather than the shark being an agent of persuasion, “coercion”, and “authority” as Simpson writes above, the poet sinks into the shark’s mouth autonomously and willingly. Even more, Diaz’s kinetic gesture or “metamorphosis” as quoted in her line above, not only refers to the imagined transformation of lover as shark, but a linguistic one as well; her lines “Be-loved, *is* loved” (original emphasis, 86) transforms the lover from a prefix which sounds like an infinitive—“be”—to a verb in the present tense—“*is*”—so that the lover is an ongoing occurrence, a renewed “joy of discovery” as Simpson asserts.

It is useful at this juncture to comment on the category of hybrid poetics and its own “classificatory ‘order of things’”; the presumed divided camps of the formalist, New Criticism-inspired approach on one side and the historical, recovery-based literary criticism of the “cultural turn” on the other. I will briefly outline two major 21<sup>st</sup>-century anthologies of American poetry and their biases to explore the state of hybridity, and also highlight why Diaz’s “When the Beloved [...]” eschews these categories which Craig Santos Perez (Chamoru) believes are part of the white poetic legacy; a “simplistic binary reading of poetic history” into either “quietude” or “avant garde” (Perez, “Whitewashing”).

Thus far in my analysis, I have engaged with Diaz’s techniques that, in many ways, reflect hybridity or multiplicity: firstly, her parallel use of English, Mojave and Spanish; secondly, her use of traditional form and more experimental hybrids such as the prosimetrum discussed in Chapter 1, which exceed the boundaries of the form itself; and thirdly, the kinetic metamorphoses or reversals, for instance between beasts and desires, as I have just suggested in the plurality of Diaz’s “When the Beloved [...]”. Hybridity in poetics has been used to describe a

melding of stylistic or visual aesthetics. In Cole Swensen's introduction to *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, an anthology she edited with David St. John in 2009, she wrote that the collection of "hybrid poetry" is a "mandate" for "cutting into more of what was previously the unsayable" (Swensen, "Introduction" qtd in Ross, "A Space"). Yet, critic Stephen Ross argues that "the previously 'unsayable' quite often turns out to be the unmemorable"; because of the hybrids' "widespread commitment to malleability and indeterminacy", many of the poems in the anthology "blend into each other because they seem to be pointlessly eccentric" (Ross, "A Space"). In addition, Craig Santos Perez, in "Whitewashing American Hybrid Aesthetics", his satirical response to the anthology, points out its bias towards a 20<sup>th</sup>-century binary—Robert Lowell's "cooked and uncooked" debate—formulated by white aesthetics, and that it neglects indigenous writers and indigenous cultural theories<sup>284</sup>. The editors, Perez suggests, are either complicit in whitewashing American poetry and/or are unaware of modern non-white developments, as they surely would have cited Louis Owens's *Other Destinies* (1992), in which he outlines the concept of "mixedblood" in Native literature as involved in "a hybridized narrative within which the author is in dialogue with himself", having "two distinct linguistic consciousnesses", or Chicano poet Alfred Arteaga's "interlingual speech", a "hybrid thought" reflecting the scope of ideas "on race or the homeland" (Perez, "Whitewashing"). In other words, the editors are aching to claim a hybrid bridge between two models grounded in a white perspective, the self-contained New Criticism aesthetics or the "disorienting" experiments of poets like Kenneth Goldsmith—basically, "stuck between Southern Rock and a shard of non-place", to use Perez's rerendered idiom. Perez convincingly asserts that indigenous critical

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<sup>284</sup> Poet Chrystos (Menominee) writes: "You won't find us in anthologies of american poets [original lowercase]/ We forgot to sign that treaty / Everybody likes to read the whites writing myths of us / Us telling about us is too hard... / Hey I'm not screaming since you're not listening (*Fire Power* 69).

studies had already established notions of hybridisation from their own aesthetic and cultural perspectives, which Swensen and St. John ignore (Perez, “Whitewashing”).

Three years later, in 2012, the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, edited by Cary Nelson, attempted to incorporate a variety of theories and perspectives. However, I agree with Timothy Morris’s interpretation that the collection ruminates more “energetically (and anxiously) on the task of literary criticism than on the varied poets and poetry used for illustration”, and, in being so concerned with pinning down a “definable economic and social role for poetry”, poetic meaning, technique and complexity are lost (Morris E272). Once again, there is an insistence on an institutional defense of a hybrid newness and, as Morris notes, the essayists are hesitant about any “special difference” in American poetry, for instance, indigeneity or distinct local pertinences, as if it were barely distinguishable from “mass culture, news, prayer, or environmental protest” (Morris E273). Rachel Blau DuPlessis nevertheless searches to define a new hybrid between the formalist and cultural critiques in her term “social philology or socio-poesis” (66, qtd in Morris E273). This broad compromise arises from a predominantly global, transnational outlook that reframes “questions of U.S. national identity in a global context of imperialism, migration, and hybridization”, presenting the danger of broad-stroke generalisations within the poetics of decolonisation (Yu, *The Oxford Handbook* 624).

Given Diaz’s unsettling of even the blurred notion of hybridity, linguistic and cultural nuances, and her multitudes of desire from beasts to tenderness as I have outlined, it would be a disservice to define Diaz’s poetry in the aforementioned terms, between cooked and uncooked, a “socio-poesis” of both form and identity or experimentation, or a definable transnational

hybridisation (Morris E275). Instead, following Perez's examples of Owens and Arteaga, Diaz's own hybrid *techne* pushes against the convenient "mobilities of cross-national literary citizenship" (Ramazani, *Transnational* 24 qtd in Sole 186) as termed by Ramazani, who promotes poetry that might "give access to, and familiarize learners with, what is otherwise regarded as 'foreign'" (Sole 181). Diaz's poetry activates, however, not a user-friendly guide to multiculturalism or to her "foreignness", but something more akin to Warrior's intelligent slime mold; her suspensions of the many tensions of desire—sensual, beastly, physical—challenge us to be aware of Mojave linguistic connections, while intertwining international influences such as the pantoum form, Lorca, Rimbaud, and Greek mythology. Again, Diaz theorises that her poetry aims to be "unpinnable", and indeed, "When the Beloved [...]" is an invitation to a personal hybridity through the kinetics of desire and the unpinnable body, that is, the incoercible and unsystematised body, and its relational autonomy, which relies on touch and care, especially in response to colonial containment and industrial extractivism.

Finally, I interpret the act of disappearing in "When the Beloved [...]" via the monstrous, erotic encounter as a type of ecstatic decentring—a concept discussed in the previous chapters—similar to an "ego extinction in the sexual act", as Anishinaabe/Métis/Norwegian scholar Melissa K. Nelson writes. In her essay "Getting Dirty: The Eco-eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures" (Nelson 230)", Nelson discusses "an ecological or even a cosmological self", which allows Nelson to envision herself as "a semipermeable membrane" in a life "filled with fluid attractions": "I am no longer a solid center but part of an unending field of entwined energies" (230), she writes. Nelson also reminds us that the link between ecstasy and disappearance is clear in French, as an orgasm is known as *la petite mort* (the little death), and that the Sanskrit word

“nirvana” comes from the root of “extinction, disappearance (of the individual soul into the universal)” (230). Diaz’s allegorical rendering of corporal fluidity, being consumed by the lover who rolls back her eyes and drags the narrator “into the fathoms”, can be approached as another form of decentring, an aesthetic in which the “I” dissolves.

Simultaneously, Miranda believes that one of the “reasons for belated erotic acknowledgment” regarding indigenous poetics is that women spent generations “living on the precarious edge of disappearing” (Miranda 140). Diaz echoes, “we might say that everything in this country is complacent in the erasure of people” (Diaz, “Ways To Become Unpinnable”). This is why pleasure and “living the erotic” in poetry can “limit your ability to earn a living, or even get you killed” (Miranda 145). Certainly, this kind of disappearance, especially regarding Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) throughout the Americas, has been acknowledged by Diaz who has noted that we are “barely hearing the tip of the iceberg of what’s happened to so many of [...] our native women across North and South America, [...] the indigenous or native body, the women’s bodies, have always been objectified in a way, and they’ve been the source of others’ pleasures even when those have been through pain and suffering” (Diaz, “The Verb”)<sup>285</sup>. Indeed, Miranda predicted in 2002 that “if Native women, who bear the scars from five hundred years of

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<sup>285</sup> The “tip of the iceberg” has only been gradually exposed in recent years. According to the National Institute of Justice Report, released in 2016 on findings from 2010 surveys, based on the responses of 2,473 adult women, “More than 4 in 5 American Indian and Alaska Native women (84.3 percent) have experienced violence in their lifetime, 56.1 percent of women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. 66.5 percent of women said they feared for their safety” (Rosay 2). 54 percent of these women had lived within reservation boundaries or in an Alaska Native village in the past year. In 2018, the Urban Indian Health Center (UIHC)—a division of the Seattle Indian Health board—cited the National Crime Information Center report revealing that in 2016, of the 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, “the US Department of Justice’s federal missing persons database, NamUs, only logged 116 cases” (2). The UIHC released their own survey in urban areas, identifying “506 unique cases of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls across the 71 selected cities” (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2).

erotic murder in this country, suddenly become visible, there is hell to pay” (145), and Diaz again confirms it: “Pleasures are dangerous because they can make you whole [...] and they can exist without being surveilled. Our nations try hard to surveil pleasure, to regulate it, to castigate it, to deny it, to dole it out” (Diaz, “A Taste”). Diaz’s effect of interrogating disappearance is also in conversation with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s call for a “radical resurgent organizing” towards indigenous self-governance. In her book *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Simpson builds on Audra Simpson’s *Mohawk Interruptus*, which locates the tensions over societal belonging in the “fear of disappearance—a basic, terrifying, omnipresent reality of being Indigenous and particularly of being an Indigenous woman or queer person and occupied by Canada” (or the United States). Audra Simpson “re-embeds belonging in a productive place of refusal” and suggests mobilising around the “fear of disappearance” itself—rather than displacing fear in the sphere of policy—by productively refusing state discrimination so that communities can “organize around the root, instead of the symptom” (Simpson, *As We* 176-177).

This reality leads Diaz to interrogate and reorganise pleasure and disappearance on her own terms in her work: “am I invisible, either subversively or inevitably, or am I demanding an unexpected or disruptive visibility?” (Diaz, “A Taste”). How, then, is Diaz reorganising pleasure without being surveilled, regulated, castigated, denied? In “When the Beloved [...]”, Diaz’s disappearance or decentring into pleasure indirectly counters the “fear of disappearance” by reaching towards physicality and existence, and thus desire and pleasure facilitate a “productive place of refusal”, as Simpson writes. In her disappearance into the fathoms, a decentred “ego extinction” with the lover, Diaz claims autonomous pleasure and becomes not invisible, but visible: she suspends in the moment of pleasure, allowing us to observe a willing disappearance, grounded

in corporal and linguistic kineticism. By disappearing, she is reiterating the relationship to the body outside of the colonial watch and from within her own and somatic perspective.

### “Call it *Tension*”: Sin and Sensuality

In this section, to expand my argument that Diaz uses the “autonomy of desire” or pleasure as an innovative mode of kinetic poetics, I explore Diaz’s use of Judeo-Christian allusions alongside Mojave beliefs which reflect her approach to the Catholic presence in her upbringing. Diaz modifies chaste Christian conventions—for instance sexuality as sinful outside of wedlock—to celebrate desire through, again, devouring, but also ironically through sexualising “sin” and the supposed infallibility of origin stories. First, I discuss Diaz’s “I Watch Her Eat an Apple” from *WMBWAA*, one of her many love poems that has been overlooked, and which retells Christian original sin as a suspension of seduction. Secondly, I investigate the kinetic poetics and pantheistic listology in the poem “These Hands, If Not Gods”, as well as the poet’s inclination to “turn over everything”, inspired by Salinas and reflective of the possibilities of desire, including through Mojave creation stories. Finally, I begin to explore Diaz’s poem “Like Church”, which upturns Jesuit-based colonial naming by claiming the significance of Mojave naming, a kinetics of oral transference that allows Diaz to “relocate” herself and her relationship to the lover and the land. In what can be read as an alternative recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, Diaz outvies the ascribed confines or “temple” of love as “goodness”, or being “disallowed from entering” the “profane”, by reaching towards desire as an act beyond textual form.

In Nelson’s examination of daily “sensuous eco-erotic encounters” (Nelson 230)—such as “Walking barefoot on the earth; drinking a cold glass of water; eating a fresh summer peach; breathing in warm air” (234)—as well as her overview of traditional Anishinaabe “eco-erotic”



stories in which women make love to non-humans, she decries that “these beautiful stories of embodied connection have been demonized and silenced by patriarchal, colonial, and Judeo-Christian ideologies” (Nelson 232). Nelson proposes, along with Kim Tallbear, “greening” Indigenous queer theory by “investigating how Indigenous stories portray social relations with nonhumans” (Nelson 234), while “expressing the joy and diversity of our Native sexualities” as a “liberating act” (235). For instance, Nelson’s attention to how the Anishinaabeg trickster Nanaboozhoo was created, the story of “star husband” from the Kootenai tradition (241) or the Coast Yuki woman who marries a stick (242), shows that eco-erotics symbolises the “embodied kinship relations” with non-humans (252).<sup>286</sup>

However, while Nelson asserts that traditional “eco-erotic” stories have been “demonized” by Judeo-Christian notions of purity, Diaz doesn’t silence Judeo-Christian influences which infused her own upbringing as a result, but addresses them, suspends their tension, and even reverses them; she responds to America’s Christian-infused moral imperatives and expectations of benevolence with humour, and pits them against Mojave ontologies. The poet writes, “We do not have an idea of goodness in Mojave because we were made Mojave. We are already ‘good.’ Mistakes or errors, we are Mojave. That being said, I am also Catholic. However, it is not the Catholicism that most people would recognize. It’s rezzed out. It’s jalopy” (Diaz, “Ways to Become”) (see the previous footnote about Pach Karawhe and the creation mountain in the section “The Fathoms”). Diaz claims this “rezzed out” Catholicism as a metapoetic theme; Catholic allusions are reconfigured into an erotic, almost dithyrambic embrace that addresses and subverts, rather than denies, the poet’s syncretic and

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<sup>286</sup> Similarly, in a version of the creation myth of the Havasupai culture, which shares the Yuman language group with Mojave, Pukeheh emerges from a hollow log after a flood, and is impregnated by both the sun and a waterfall, similar to Changing Woman who, in the Diné story, makes love to the sun. The non-human sexuality encounter doesn’t follow in one Mojave version, in which “Mustamho took the people in his arms and carried them until the waters abated” (Alexander 180).

Jesuit-influenced upbringing, “a very physical and wild idea of pleasure as well as an almost grotesque and dangerous idea of pleasure” (Diaz, “A Touch”). Spokane writer Gloria Bird also experienced a “jalopy” Christian upbringing originating from her family’s Jesuit conversion, and recounts that her grandmother practiced Catholicism but “did so with tongue in cheek” (Bird 36)<sup>287</sup>. Diaz similarly probes metapoetic jalopification, if you will, in her form and also sensuality. For instance, in “Cloud Watching”, she jalopifies the postures of the “pure” body: “in the dark our hands / pretend to pray but really make love” (*WMBWAA* 21). Likewise, the previously analysed “Monday Aubade” has nine stanzas—eight unrhymed tercets plus the final quatrain—and imitates Dante’s *terza rima* in the *Inferno* which descends into nine circles (Paradise also having nine circles), suggesting an ironic reversal of the ingrained tendency to view sexual pleasure as sinful. Indeed, to recall the reference to Homer in this poem, the narrator’s mind is “treading the wine-dark waves of luxuria’s tempests” (*WMBWAA* 85), nodding again to Dante’s *Inferno*; Luxuria was inhabited by the lustfully self-indulgent in the first circle of hell, and in Romanesque art, “Luxuria” is lust personified as a woman (Jerman 35). Thus, Diaz’s ironic praise of “luxuria” and her replication of Dante’s form refashions Christian mores into sexual autonomy.

Secondly, poems such as “Monday Aubade” and “When the Beloved [...]” are essentially domestic scenes of autonomous pleasure and thus the stanzas—i.e. rooms—are liberated spaces, counteracting the expectations for girls to build a “model home” which were enforced by Carlisle

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<sup>287</sup> The idea of redemption from sin or “errors” also applies here: when Yi ya, Bird’s grandmother, went to her first confession, the priest asked her lots of questions, such as if she did “dirty nasty things with boys”. Yi ya responded “yes” to everything, even though none of it was true, simply because it was “easier this way”; “The priest would dole out some penance and go on his way” (Bird 35).

Industrial School, as exhibited in a likely ironic poem written by Maude Cooke (Mohawk) and Agnes Hatch (Chippewa) in 1917<sup>288</sup>:

This Model Home banner which teaches so true,  
The ways of plain home life and happiness, too,—  
The planning and serving of different foods,  
That would set grouchy people in pleasurable moods.

[...]

In this Model Home Cottage are furnishings plain—  
The reason for this we shall later explain.  
It is not with rich trappings we aim to thrive,  
But toward plain economy we patiently drive.

The flickering shadows that dance on our hearth,  
Delight us with joy and laughter and mirth. (Cooke and Hatch 237-238)

Diaz's poetics of the corporal experience—domesticity as the kinetics of desire—indirectly upturn the “plain home life” and quaint furnishings exemplifying the Judeo-Christian patriarchal efforts to confine women or female-identifying people, and task them with providing a puritanical “Model Home”. This ensured “happiness” is void of sensuality, multiplicity, and the Mojave ontologies which reject the ideal of “goodness”, as embraced in Diaz's domestic scenes. Diaz's probing of ecstasy—with another woman, further disrupting heteronormative roles—is free from these deeply entrenched gender roles of women as slaves to domestic perfection, utility, heterosexuality, and chastity. Pleasure in these poems interrogates the results of spiritualising missions but also the ways in which contemporary erotic poetry is often boxed as “explicit” or “profane” (Diaz, “The Letters”).

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<sup>288</sup> Jennifer Elise Foerster points out that poets of native nations (she is referring in particular to the southeastern region of the United States) have long been using irony, referencing Cherokee poet Sameul Sixkiller's 1895 address to the graduating class of Carlisle Indian Industrial School: “To help nature's children [...] to make pure Americans from ocean to bay.” (qtd in *When the Light* 357).

“I Watch Her Eat An Apple”

In Diaz’s poem “I Watch Her Eat An Apple”, the first of a series of erotic poems in part “III” of *WMBWAA*, the suspension of hungry desire occurs in conjunction with Christian allusions, as the narrator watches a woman at a conference eating an apple:

She twists the stem, pulls it  
like the pin of a grenade, and I just know  
somewhere someone is sitting alone on a porch  
bruised, opened up to their wet white ribs,  
riddled by her teeth—  
lucky. (73)

The apple becomes a grenade, a heightened potentiality, while the woman undresses it as she would clothes: she “lifts the sticker / from the skin. Now, / the apple is more naked than any apple has been / since two bodies first touched the leaves / of ache in the garden” (73). In this reference to the Garden of Eden, as well as the “wet white ribs” above, we are reminded of Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; sexual freedom and unrestricted passion is not a sin but reversed as a sacred act<sup>289</sup>. Nelson concurs that the banishment from Eden, a story which Diaz resets here, is the catalyst that dissociated “some Eurocentric cultures from the human body and nature” (234). She quotes Cree writer Tomson Highway’s essay “Why Cree is the Sexiest of All Languages” which notes, “the human body became a thing of evil, and nature became an enemy” (38, qtd in Nelson 234), and this disembodiment (the cerebral from the physical) is ongoing in anglophone Judeo-Christian thought. In Diaz’s poem, the consequences of the woman desiring the apple are not sinful but intoxicating. This reversal leads to the last line, which is a prayer for the seduction game to repeat all over again:

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<sup>289</sup> In Blake’s first section, “The Argument”, he writes: “Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys reason; Evil is the active springing from Energy” (7), and later in the “Voice of the Devil”: “Energy is Eternal Delight” (9).

“If there is a god of fruit of things devoured [...] then God, please, / let her / eat another apple / tomorrow” (74). Ironically, she prays to God to be seduced again, as in the continuous, out-of-time condition I explored in “Monday Aubade”, here the possibility of infinitely recurring tomorrows. In fact, as she describes in “The First Water is the Body”, the body is “always on the verge of praying”, not Catholic prayer, but a gesture equivalent to “entering any river of movement” (48). Diaz, then, reclaims “profane” and “explicit” from their etymological meanings: “profane” means “before” or “outside of” the temple<sup>290</sup>, and “explicit” means “unobstructed”, or literally “out” (*ex*) “fold” (*plicare*)<sup>291</sup>. Both meanings suggest a freedom from fixed design. Diaz writes that she must be worthy of “what is profane as well as what is within the temple or hopefully at a place beyond the temple, as a return to myself, because my people come from before the temple” (Diaz, “Ways to Become”). The “temple” can be understood as both the church—which as she notes is irrelevant to the Mojave creation story—but also the accepted constructs of contemporary poetics. Catholic redemption is remodeled as a “rezzed out”, “jalopy” kind of sexual desire; while desire stemming from original sin instills “profound notions of shame into one’s relationship with bodies” (Nelson 234), Diaz rewrites the origin as pleasure which one is worthy of, instead of that which is unseen behind the temple wall, or folded in on itself.

Another reframed symbolism is found in Diaz’s line “This blue world has never needed a woman / to eat an apple so badly, to destroy an apple”. The “blue world” perhaps suggests purity and clarity, which is juxtaposed by a “red” world in all its tensions: “cleaning away a red wing” of the apple which “pulses like a red bird”, and a “Red Delicious” that “I beg to wrap my red skin

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<sup>290</sup> Etymology from: [https://www.etymonline.com/word/profane#etymonline\\_v\\_2622](https://www.etymonline.com/word/profane#etymonline_v_2622).

<sup>291</sup> Etymology from: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/explicit>.

around” (74)<sup>292</sup>. Firstly, this red, which Diaz explains is “the color of something I dreamed”, reimagines the irreparable sin of Eden as a Mojave dream. In Mojave thought, stories and songs pass through one’s dreams, including one’s “gifts” (Diaz, “On a Mission”)<sup>293</sup>. Diaz suggests that dreams, poems, and desires have occurred in the past (“what I or my people have already known”), the present, (“to already be in the midst of a story”), and those “already happening in the future” (Diaz, “A Taste”), for instance when a poem or a desire reoccurs or is retold. Even more, in a recording of a Mojave creation song sung by elder Emmet Van Fleet in 1972, Van Fleet sings of Mutavilya, “He gave them a good dream. He gave them an aching heart. Don’t forget what he gives to you” (Klasky, “Song”). This illuminates Diaz’s juxtapositions and multiplicities, both good dreams and breaking hearts, or as Neruda wrote, “our shameful behavior, our wrinkles and vigils and dreams” (Neruda, “Toward an Impure Poetry”). In this sensual red imagery, given to her in a dream, Diaz transforms the linearity of original sin into the gesture or “gift” of desire, not a settled, irremediable “thing of evil” (38, qtd in Nelson 234).

How does this rethinking of desire and breakage of time affect the text itself? Diaz notes her “relationship to the body” reflects her “relationship to the page”, in that one can avoid succumbing to the latter’s fixities: “The poem can obliterate the page in that the page is an inadequate body incapable of controlling the poem’s language, because the poem’s language is not font but touch” (Diaz, “A Taste”). In the line, “this blue world has never needed a woman / to eat an apple so badly,

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<sup>292</sup> The element of being out of reach and only imaginable creates a more erotic rendition of Sappho’s fragment comparing what one assumes to be a woman to an apple (“Sappho compared the girl to an apple” writes Himerius in the 4th century AD): Like a sweet-apple / turning red / high / on the tip / of the topmost branch / Forgotten by pickers / Not forgotten—they couldn’t reach it (“Sappho 105a”).

<sup>293</sup> In this interview, Diaz continues: “[...] so they elders worry that maybe the dreams are coming to the kids but maybe they are coming in Mojave, and maybe they don’t understand that, so they’re not going to know what their gifts are, they’re not going to know what they should be doing because they don’t speak the language” (Diaz, “On a Mission”).

to destroy an apple” (74), Diaz “destroys” and “obliterates” the page, as we cannot rely on its fixity, just as we cannot rely on confining the “capaciousness” of love to language alone (Diaz, “Between the Covers”). Her exaltation of the women’s devouring of the apple, in its reversal of original sin, allows for desire’s boundaries to once again blur; the poem almost performs its own “exemption” as Berger says or disappearance from the page, worthy of its autonomy. If profanity is “outside of” the temple, her desire reaches outside of the confinements of the page as much as outside of Judeo-Christian binaries of goodness and sin.

“These Hands, If Not Gods”

Dislodging religious motifs also feature in her poem “These Hands, If Not Gods”, a type of pantheistic creation story of the lover’s body. It again rearranges biblical allusions in Genesis and integrates Mojave origins, reminding us that, as Joy Harjo declares in her introduction to the *Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* (2020), “We begin with the land” (Harjo 1). The poem contains a series of questions alluding to the book of Genesis, in reference to the narrator’s hands: “Haven’t they moved like rivers— / like glory, like light— / over the seven days of your body? // And wasn’t that good?”, as well as, “And when these hands touched your throat, / showed you how to take the apple *and* the rib” (8). However, she also references Islam and, again, Greek mythology: “didn’t you sing out their ninety-name names— // *Zahir, Aleph, hands-times-seven, / Sphinx, Leonids, locomotura, / Rubidium, August, and September— / and when you cried out, O, Prometheans, didn’t they bring fire?*” (8)<sup>294</sup>. The integration of various origin stories works on multiple levels. Firstly, the kinetic fluidity of this series of questions and their lists linguistically reflect the kinetics

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<sup>294</sup> “Ninety-nine names” references the 99 names of Allah in the Koran, and “Prometheans” allude to the Greek myth of Prometheus who deceived the gods and stole fire for humanity’s benefit, and therefore “prometheans” are willing to take risks in order to create, innovate, or change.

of the hands and their movement on the body. Questions surrounding pleasure awaken the consciousness when, as Edward Said writes, the “harsh strains of capitalism have removed thought and reflection”, especially about how we experience our bodies and origins (Said, *The Edward Said Reader* 301)<sup>295</sup>. These questions to the lover hold the reader in multiple creation stories and imaginations, making all of them possible, and therefore engaging again in Salinas’s notion of going “beyond” in the poem. The hands’ ability to forge, to “bring fire”, is a self-reflexive metaphor for writing; her hands create desire as well as the poem itself as “touch”. Even more, these questions “had you at your knees” (7), Diaz writes to the beloved, conflating prayer with sexual supplication.

Secondly, while one can speak of the *creation* of the text, Diaz notes that “creativity is a trap”: “Call it *tension*, not creativity. Tension is easy in America, and in love” (Diaz, “Natalie Diaz on the Physicality”). She suggests that poetic creation *is* a question that one might feel uncomfortable asking publicly, as in the questions she asks the lover. The colliding, infinite capabilities, forms, and names of the hands and body—“one breast a fig tree, the other a nightingale, / both morning and evening” (7), and the lover using 99 names including “*Zahir, Aleph, hands-times-seven, / Sphinx, Leonids, locomotura, / Rubidium, August, and September*”, are kinetic tensions because of their distinct linguistic departure points, as well as the sexual suspense this list carries. For instance, Diaz uses “Zahir” and “Aleph”, two of Borges’s short stories: “Zahir” in his text is a quality that causes an obsession of seeing only one thing, yet “Aleph” represents the opposite, the ability to see everything at once from every angle, a point that contains all other points. The latter perspective reflects the “Leonids” she mentions, which are meteor showers occurring every 33 years. A particularly prominent Leonid shower occurred in 1833 seen from different points

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<sup>295</sup> For instance, in her interview with Victoria Adukwei Bulley in *Poetry London*, Diaz asks, “I’m wondering what you believe you are made from, and how that affects your ways of pleasure—can you tell me about it?”, and goes on to explain it in Mojave terms (Diaz, “A Touch”).



across North America east of the Rocky Mountains, an event which signaled an unexplained omen, and which served as one of the first markers of the Lakota and Kiowa calendars<sup>296</sup>. Thus, each of these names has its own origin point or story, paralleling the infinite touches and forms of the narrator's hands, which build sexual tension in each question. By autonomously "turning over everything" and intensifying the tension of multiplicity, she embraces Neruda's "impure poetry" and breaks from a spiritual mono-narrative.

Finally, Diaz points to the Mojave belief that she was "made from clay and river", writing, "from the blue-brown clay of night / these two potters crushed and smoothed you" (7) and "I have returned you / to that from which you came—white mud, mica, mineral salt—" (8). In the Mojave origin story, Mutavilya created the Colorado River by loosening it with a stick from the mud and clay, from which all beings were created. Mutavilya's son, Mastamho, continued to teach humans how to care for themselves and the river, after Mutavilya died and was cremated, establishing Mojave cremation rights ("The People by the River"). Returning to "white mud, mica, mineral, salt" repositions the creation story as recurring in the present, and simultaneously acknowledges the restructuring of relationships with non-humans in the present as well. As Métis artist Erin Marie Konsmo asserts:

We need to think about life at all times of creation. Even under dire circumstances of climate change. How can we love and build the right relations with profoundly polluted water, water that we are entangled in harming through the infrastructures and systems we have to live through? [...] In order to love and build good relations through ongoing colonialism and

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<sup>296</sup> In N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, the event was seen by the Kiowas as a colonial turning point, "the violent disintegration of the old world order" (Momaday 85). Momaday also cites the Leonid shower in his essay "Ancient Vision": "The native inhabitants of the Great Plains believed that the world was coming to an end. And in a certain, ironic sense, it was. The world of the buffalo hunter, the dog soldier, and the Sun Dancer was indeed moving inexorably towards annihilation. Within four years of the falling stars the Kiowas signed their first treaty with the US Government [...]" (Momaday, "Ancient Vision" 370-71).

environmental destruction we need to get rid of concepts of purity [...].  
(Konsmo, qtd in Smith 3)

Settler-colonial religious notions of purity evolved into the Manifest Destiny that in turn led to the dependencies on resources—mostly from native reservations—and their dangerous side effects. Knowing that the concepts of pure, untainted landscapes are unrealistic because of colonial domination, Diaz nevertheless embraces every intimate aspect of sexual desire regardless of purity's sake. In fact, in turn everything over, each aspect of her sexual desire, each of desire's names, she reaches a type of profanity in its purest form. In this poem, which is at first glance an erotic love poem, Diaz further develops desirability not only of erotic relationships but our relationships with land and water in returning to this Mojave creation story, in which the body is synchronous with “white mud, mica, mineral salt” (8).

However, Diaz's multiplicity—digging through Borges's drawers, skimming a cosmonaut's calendar, and upturning the table of elements—distrusts the American open-armed universality often defended in the name of Whitman's romantic “I contain multitudes” (Whitman, “Leaves of Grass”). For instance, poet Rafael Campo declares that American poetry “owes as much to the incantations of Native Americans and the songs of African slaves as it does to the likes of Whitman, Dickinson, Williams”, and defines American poetry by its “inclusiveness, its rich layering of voices [...]” (Campo 292), allowing for “a multiplicity of forms, which together must be considered American” (293). I argue that relying on this romantic notion of a built-in empathy, an inclusive diversity as inherently American, and “the ideal of free speech” (290) in America is dangerous. The fetish for a seemingly harmonious acceptance of multiplicity, a congenial melting pot, does not challenge us as Diaz's desire does in the ways I have outlined. The “*Everything*” in Diaz's “These Hands, If Not Gods” is not the celebration or sculpting of Whitman's inclusive America, but the tension of a

multitudinous pleasure which superposes desire and the sacred, the pure and impure, and challenges the godlike hands of capitalism that control water, its origins, and its destination.

Furthermore, given the poet's scope of Mojave, Greek, Christian, European, Middle Eastern, scientific, and metaphysical influences in "I Watch Her Eat An Apple" and "These Hands, If Not Gods", it would be an arduous task to compartmentalise Diaz, or even the position of her critics. Thomas Hove and John M. McKinn (Maripoca Tribe, Gila River Indian Community), outline "position-taking strategies", based on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological relational approach, suggested for researchers in Native studies: "solidaristic", "nationalistic" and "cosmopolitan". These classifications can be determined "according to the amounts and proportions of either institutional, cultural, or ethnic capital they possess", and based on certain assumptions of power structures (Hove 201)<sup>297</sup>. Although Hove and McKinn signal that their relational approach does not intend to set rigid categories, and that overlaps are inevitable, the positioning of oneself in one of these parameters also plays a role in how one would read a text, which poets one would critique. Yet, in Diaz's "These Hands, If Not Gods" and other aforementioned poems, sovereignty, autonomy and "cosmopolitanism", if you will, collide so that these parameters of critique are disrupted. Because I am non-Native, I am a solidaristic critic in Hove and McKinn's terms. However, Diaz complexifies the very notions of "humanity", "cosmopolitan", "nation" and "identity", particularly in "These Hands, If not Gods", and in laying bare her own approach to unsettling linguistic paradigms, she

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<sup>297</sup> Hove and McKinn outline non-Native critics as "solidaristic" "because they participate in the Native literary field to help promote broader cultural respect and recognition" for Native writers. Nationalistic critics are those who claim that Native writers should be critiqued by other Native scholars, and they "advocate preserving Native culture from colonizing, assimilating, or corrupting external influences". "Cosmopolitan" critics can be native or non-Native scholars who advocate "a respect for cultural pluralism and diversity", "reject notions of cultural and ethnic purity", and "criticize the legacies of hostility and oppression that have historically accompanied those notions" (203).

invites a response within the diverse community of readers, with an attention to multi-cultural contextualisation, intertextuality, and distinct Mojave allusions. Therefore, Hove and Mckinn's paradigms, institutional categories, and market expectations are constraining as a result. As Lloyd L. Lee notes regarding both Diné diversity and distinctness, "a lot of native people [...] fall into thinking that [...] you have to be this or that and you can't reflect that diversity and distinctiveness about what it is to be a human being" (Lee, "A Conversation"). Because Diaz subverts framing the body's desire as ultimately a resistance to oppression in her boundless linguistic possibility and interrogation, to assume either a "solidaristic", "nationalistic" or "cosmopolitan" stance would require either ignoring the techniques of autonomy embedded in her Mojave understanding or her having "turned over everything", as in her culturally and spiritually inclusive naming of hands in "These Hands, If Not Gods".

"Like Church"

The fluidity between autonomous spirituality and sexuality is even more overt in Diaz's poem "Like Church", also published in *Postcolonial Love Poem*. The poem deconstructs how "it's hard, isn't it? Not to perform / what they say about our sadness", such as, "they think brown people fuck better when we are sad" (29). This "they" suggests white people of privilege, those who have not questioned persisting colonial stereotypes and forms of containment, and who are indifferent to, as Diaz writes, the "wound they hang on my chest" (30). The lover questions "*who is they?*" (29), and the answer comes not in naming the coloniser, but, not unlike "These Hands", renaming the self: "You want me to name names. Shoot, we are named after them. You think my Creator had heard of the word *Natalie?* Ha! / when he first made me he called me *Snake*—" (30). Just as Diaz deconstructs the colonial exonym "Mojave" in "The First Water is the Body", here the poet scoffs at

the colonial name she was given by reclaiming, to the beloved, the name *Snake*. I will explore the complexity of this line in more detail here, as it reflects the poet's understanding of her ancestry and reinforces the beliefs surrounding non-human relationships.

Firstly, this name implicitly turns again to the creator Mutavilya, who also gave Mojave family names to be passed on, based on the typologies of “above-things”, the “earth-things”, the plants, the water, and the “below-earth things” (Sherer 11)<sup>298</sup>. Diaz explains that “each particular clan had their own songs that had to do with the trees, the plants, the land, the water they were tied to”, and her uncle Ahmoch Chumee Mahakev, or Hubert McCord, one of the last fluent Mojave elders and bird singer, attests that their family comes from the diamondback snakes. They believe the snakes “lived together as people”—similar to the description in Chumash, Tohono O’odham, and Pima poet Georgiana Valoyce-Sanchez’s poem “The Dolphin Walking Stick”<sup>299</sup>—, performing at some point a metamorphosis, or “tuach” in Mojave<sup>300</sup>, the “moment when one being changes into another iteration of itself” (Diaz, “Songs”). However, the federal government established Fort Mojave, later a boarding school which, like others across the country, attempted to strike the language out of the community. Likewise, the tribal rolls overseen by agents and superintendents of the (BIA), as explained in Chapter 3, imposed another iteration of colonial measurement and containment through a series of eugenicist approaches, which lead to fragmentation and conflict within one’s own tribe; in instances of exogamy, the children of an enrolled tribal member can lose

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<sup>298</sup> This is how Frances Stillman, chairwoman of the Fort Mojave Tribal Council in the late 1950s and early 1960s, recounted the Mojave origins of naming people after animals to Lorraine Sherer.

<sup>299</sup> The poet describes her father retelling a story of the Chumash People making their way “across the ocean to / the mainland”. They walk across a rainbow as a bridge, but “some looked down / and fell / into the / deep / to become / the dolphins / they too / the People” (*When the Light* 279).

<sup>300</sup> The accuracy of this spelling in Latin script is uncertain, as the word seems to have not been documented in Mojave language resources thus far, but this is my interpretation of Diaz’s pronunciation on the recording of “Songs in the Mojave Desert” on BBC 3.

their tribal status due to their lower blood quantum (Teves et al, “Blood” 202). These controlled numbers underline another form of “American Arithmetic”, to use Diaz’s poem title, which compares the low indigenous population in the U.S. (0.8 percent) with the fact that indigenous people “make up 1.9 percent of all / police killings, higher per capita than any race—” (*Postcolonial Love Poem* 17). In this tribal census process, Mojave names directly linked to geographical kinship were changed and misdocumented. The mocking replacement names, and thus mythologising of natives, which Diaz lists below can be found in the “U.S. Indian Census Rolls” records<sup>301</sup>:

[...] They gave us absurd names, there were Mojaves who were renamed Rip van Winkle, we had an Abraham Lincoln [...] we had a Robin Hood. In some ways it seems they were anglicising us, and making us more civil, but they were actually making fun of us and treating us as always less than. (Diaz, “Songs”)

In reiterating the name her ancestors were given, she returns to a system of linguistic and ontological possibility, a kinetic poetics, that shifts the pace—“*Snake*” triggers a more pointedly assertive rhythm—and trajectory of the poem; the “church” performs a metamorphosis or “tuach”, becoming another iteration of itself, a rewriting of personhood from these non-human origins or as Diaz says, “a place beyond the temple” (Diaz, “Ways To Become”). By this, as mentioned in reference to “Like Church”, Diaz seems to suggest that the “temple” is a human-made container for ideologies and their related names, whereas Mojave naming is a “reminder that I’m a body connected to this body that is language which has come up from this land which is a body” (Diaz, “Between the Covers”). Diaz enhances this renaming, directly correlating to Mojave stories, particularly in relation to desire,

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<sup>301</sup> There are numerous listings across the country under the name of “Robin Hood” by the superintendents of the BIA, for example a male born in 1868, aged 31 at the time of the 1899 tribal census, living in Arizona of the Apache Mohave & Yuma tribes; and hundreds of listings for native tribal members across the country under the name of “Abraham Lincoln”, for example a male born in 1883, 41 years old at the time of the 1924 tribal census, a Mojave from Needles, California, where Diaz grew up (U.S., Indian Census Rolls, 1885-1940).

to emphasise that these stories are more real than the myth of America, what it purports to be, and more real than the mythologised names of indigenous people on the census rolls.

In reconstituting the Mojave naming system, her clan name, and, in her poem “Snake-Light”, her personal name, *Hikwiir* or rattlesnake, given to her by her great grandmother—a name the poet admits she does not normally speak of in person—Diaz also recalls the Mojave geoglyph of a human figure holding either a snake or a staff, possibly representing Mastamho, near the Colorado River<sup>302</sup>. The arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad in the 1880s, however, damaged this figure, as well as the Topock Maze, a network of nested furrows or windrows near Needles, California where Diaz grew up (Pesek, “Topock Maze”)<sup>303</sup>. About 90 miles south of the maze are the Blythe Intaglios, a set of giant geoglyphs representing, among other designs, what is also thought to be another figure of Mastamho, and two snake-like figures. Like Carter Revard who also reflects on the indigenous “names of birds and plants” which have been renamed in English, and the “surnames and ‘Christian names’” (*Family* 108, qtd in Muller 41) which replaced indigenous names, Diaz “realigns words” and their “possible future trajectories”, shifting the arbitration of who is allowed to feel desire and be desired, who is worthy of their given name embedded in one’s storied landscape (Muller 42). Similarly, Miranda argues that because of the lack of appreciation for erotic poetry, one might reluctantly “conclude that the erotic is a luxury, something which must be earned after, not during, a more primal struggle for physical survival”, (Miranda 141) as Diaz suggests in her line, “the wound they hang / on my chest” (30). Miranda however reminds us of Audre Lorde’s essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”, in which Lorde writes, “If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and

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<sup>302</sup> Diaz also refers to a “rock painting” in Topock of the Creator and his staff in her poem “exhibits from The American Water Museum” (64).

<sup>303</sup> As I mention in chapter three, the serpent mound at Blood Run had the same fate; it was destroyed and used as landfill for the short-lived railroad on the site.

directly toward and through promise, is discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core [...] of our power, our womanness; we give up the future of our worlds” (Lorde 39, qtd in Miranda 141). Poetry and pleasure are not “mutually exclusive”; pleasure, Diaz asserts in “Like Church”, is given as part of existence, not as an afterthought, and is as worthy as a name. Diaz’s expression of desire is not an antidote only for those who have earned the luxury, but an inherent happening, or what “might yet become”, reignited in claiming her name as “*Snake*”: “‘This is who I am,’ and it’s not about ‘I’ as an ego or ‘I’ as a flesh body but it’s I as a being”, Diaz says (Diaz, “Between the Covers”). The name affirms that the poet is not denied pleasure nor defined by her Christian name, but is ontologically grounded in Mojave naming and beliefs, in relation to the Colorado River which has for millennia sustained the community and non-human life (Diaz, “Ways to Become”).

Similarly, as Heid Erdrich points out regarding the poem “Family Tree or Comanches and Cars Don’t Mix”, Sy Hoahwah (Yapaituka Comanche and Southern Arapaho) explains that a woman called “Tsi-yee” was “named after a war deed”. Given names can carry individual “ongoing and active resistance” (Erdrich, “Placed” 100), which is itself a kind of sovereignty: Mohawk scholar Patricia Monture’s proposition for a more apt translation of sovereignty is ‘tewatatha:wi’’, which does not denote ownership but “best translates to ‘we carry ourselves,’” (*Journeying Forward* 36, qtd in Simpson, “The Place” 22), while a poem, Diaz says, is “one pathway home, either to return me to home or to carry me to a home that doesn’t exist yet” (Diaz, “Between the Covers”). Indeed, James Thomas Stevens agrees “that every person, every partner, already has a name, a history, before contact. People are individual worlds, individual planets” (Stevens 186). Echoing Revard’s statement that “names have their Creation Story packed inside them like software, shaping their meanings and functions” (Muller 41), Diaz asserts that “human language operates like humans—it is



one of our most physical and emotional *technologies*”, not unlike Roberto Harrison’s play of “tech” in his concept of Tecumseh Republic, introduced in his poem by the same name in *Yaviza*<sup>304</sup>. Her renaming in this love poem thus carries a kinetic “anti-technology” counteracting the colonial state, through language and naming as a software allowing for a “return to the body, and so also a return to the land [...]” (my emphasis, Diaz, “The Body”). In fact, the linguistic technologies in Diaz’s claiming herself as “*Snake*” again echo Warrior’s analogy of the slime mold, in which “there is [...] a vein-like structure carrying cellular material, nutrients and chemical information through the cell”, and this “continuous, synchronous oscillation” maintains its relationship “without any large-scale control center”, and is “where its intelligence lies” (qtd in Warrior 374). Diaz’s renaming allows for multiple possibilities; she engages in ongoing “emotional technologies”, directly correlating with the Mojave landscape, as well as sexual desire in relation to the lover she addresses.

Moreover, the name “*Snake*” once again reverses the symbolic “evil” of the snake in Genesis’s Eden by embracing origins and autonomous pleasure, and thus outwits the categories “[...] dark/light, fullblood/mixedblood, and urban/reservation” (Warrior 376) or even “fast” and “slow” as she writes in “Like Church”: “Remind yourself and your friends: *Sometimes I feel fast. Sometimes I feel slow*” (poet’s emphasis, 30), a line taken from the song “Sometimes I Rhyme Slow” by the 1990s hip-hop duo Nice & Smooth, which Diaz cites in the collection’s notes (98). The urge to “remind yourself and your friends”, which she repeats three lines after, underpins how “the

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<sup>304</sup> Harrison, a poet and visual artist whose parents are both from Panama, explains that his idea of the Tecumseh Republic—named after the Shawnee leader Tecumseh, who tried to form a pan-indigenous alliance against colonial encroachment before his death at the Battle of the Thames in 1813— suggests a modern version of a pan-indigenous alliance. Its citizens, or “Tecs” know Saloma, a type of throat singing, and “how it triggers our mirror neurons to create empathy in interacting with the face”, which is why “Tecs” are “interfaces”. They “belong to the earth. They arise from the earth and they return to the earth”. Harrison uses “Tecs” to create an anti-racist language, and thus technology, towards a “more all-inclusive idea of the human” (Harrison, “Two Tecs”).

individual and the collective are interrelated in Indigenous ontologies”, as Warrior writes (Warrior 388), and circumvents the “stasis, incorporation, and commodification” (388) of the colonial state. Indeed, her repeated “Remind yourself and your friends” also echoes Llewellyn Barrackman’s translation of Van Fleet’s creation song cycle: “Don’t forget what he gives to you”, and “Don’t forget, don’t forget, God is singing, I’m telling you, don’t forget” (Klasky, “Song”). “Like Church”, Diaz’s retold creation song cycle which samples hip-hop, counters the performance of America’s “fable” in the cycle of colonial othering and branding, and reinstates a celebration of life, ritual, and desire.

Finally, in “Like Church”, Diaz complexifies and eroticises the Christian “grotesque and dangerous idea of pleasure”: “Yes, our Creator says *Kingdom* and we come<sup>305</sup>. / Remind our friends. We fuck like we church—best. And full of God, and joy and sins, and / sweet upside-down cake” (31), she writes. This bold re-rendering of the Lord’s Prayer, remaking its phonics with the alliteration and half-rhyme in “Creator”, “Kingdom” and sexualised “come”, is a celebratory, monosyllabic volta (“We fuck like we church—best” is also an iamb and an anapest replacing the monosyllabic, iambic “our will be done” of the Lord’s Prayer). This line might be read as a blessing or a laudation in praise of the orgasm. “Come” expresses ecstasy in the form of the “petite mort”, not only as a projection in the afterlife but in the present; again sin and sanctity are conflated, a resounding echo of Lovelock Paiute Adrian C. Louis’s poem “Skinology”: “Bad Indians do not go to hell. / They are marched / to the molten core / of the sun & then / beamed back to / their families, / purified, whole / & Holy as hell” (*When the Light* 288). As Louis does with “hell”, Diaz grants the

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<sup>305</sup> Diaz does not shy away from using “come” to suggest a sexual climax: “...through the orchard of her thigh. // Her, come—in the green night, a lion” in “Manhattan Is a Lenape Word”, or “so to them I come” in “Ode to the Beloved’s Hips” (37) or “I put my mouth there—: come we both / to light” in “Skin-Light” (21), and “I want everything—the ebon bull and the moon. / I come and again for the honeyed horn” in “The Cure for Melancholy Is to Take the Horn” (77).

word “fuck” a revered luminosity and a sense of testimony in aligning it with the alliterative triplet “Creator”, “Kingdom” and “come”. As Miranda wrote in 2002, for an indigenous woman to “express the erotic is almost as frightening to America as if the skeletal witnesses in anthropology departments and national museums had suddenly risen from their numbered boxes and begun to testify” (146). Diaz’s simultaneous tension and tender ecstasy in these curt lines answers to the body’s multiple pleasures as well as its multiple wounds, reminding us of Gay’s application of “making space for a certain kind of desire, a certain kind of pleasure, a certain kind of being a body in the world that is not dirty or shameful, but that is [...] holy” (Gay, “The Poem” 145). The wound which Diaz wears on her chest, in the first part of “Like Church”, encompasses Miranda’s explanation of trauma—genocide in the name of supporting Catholic Spanish colonies, the continued suffering from population loss, sexual and psychological violations under mission enforcement. Yet, the poet’s declaration of desire in “we fuck like we church—best” exalts the body, rather than outlawing it<sup>306</sup>. Diaz valorises an ontology of pleasure whose own mission—touch—is out of reach of colonial codifications, yet in many ways within the intimate reach of the reader.

### Wounds: Elements of Lightness

In this section, my focus is the relationship between wounds and desires. Firstly I expand on Italo Calvino’s exploration of lightness in a continued analysis of “Like Church”, which uses

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<sup>306</sup> This line is also in conversation with Deborah Miranda’s book *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*. At the 2020 conference “Topping Mission Monuments and Mythologies”, Miranda read a section from the book called “My Very Late Fourth Grade Mission Project: Glossary Definition: Padre”, which calls attention to the Christian mission projects brought to California indigenous peoples, often credited to Junípero Serra, a Spanish Roman Catholic Priest who established widespread Franciscan missions in Mexico and California, and who is valorised by statues still erect today. These violent impositions created, Miranda writes, “poor Christians, drunken Christians [...] homeless Christians, starving Christians, diseased and landless Christians”, and ironically she concludes, “we are saved by the Padres and for that, Jesus Christ we must be thankful” (Miranda, “Toppling”).

multiple elements of lightness—luminosity, weightlessness and agility—that eclipse the conjectured sadness given to “brown people” (29) for instance, or the “wounds they hang / on my chest”, as the poet writes. I then elaborate on Diaz’s series of simultaneous juxtapositions in “Manhattan is a Lenape Word” which consider numerous allusions to wounds—the wound of Manhattan, temporally, geographically and linguistically; the wounds of those rushed in ambulances; the wound of the absences and presence of the lover; the wounds caused by drones—and their relationship to desire. Drawing on Berger’s “Another Side of Desire”, and contrasting Badiou and Rancière’s readings of the siren symbol in Mallarmé’s “Stilled beneath the oppressive cloud” with the siren in “Manhattan is a Lenape Word”, I argue that Diaz illuminates wounds to make desire visible.

In order to approach the idea of wounds and alternatively interpret the word itself, Diaz imagines the possibilities that can “bloom” from them, answering again to Lorca, in his poem “Llargas de amor”, or “Wounds of Love” (*Postcolonial* 55). For instance, retelling a dream in her poem “That Which Cannot be Stilled”, a reiteration of the significance of dreams for the Mojave, Diaz recalls “the rusting is in me, / like how a deep wound heals—glimmered, open” (*Postcolonial* 43)<sup>307</sup>. In this respect, John Berger is relevant once more. As mentioned in Chapter 1, in Berger’s 2003 essay, “Another Side of Desire”, he writes: “Desire is inconceivable without a wound. If there were any unwounded in this world, they would live without desire” (28). Miranda similarly describes grief as “a wound reopened each time we open our eyes every morning”, and yet she must do “the work left to do anyway [...] with the important ways that pain informs and creates me” (Miranda, “What’s Wrong” 348). David Stirrup reminds us that in *Glas*, Jacques Derrida writes that

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<sup>307</sup> Diaz’s poem recalls imagery from Lorca’s poem: “This light, this fire that devours. / This grey landscape that surrounds me. / This obsession that torments me. / Anguish of heaven, world and hours. / This sea which pounds me with its weight. / [...] This scorpion dwelling in my heart. // Are all love’s garland [...]” (Lorca, *The Selected Poems* 208).

the artistic signature is, “a wound, and there is no other origin for the work of art” (184, qtd in Stirrup 80). Derrida continues to quote Jean Genet: “There is no other origin for beauty than the wound—singular, different for everyone, hidden or visible—that every man keeps in himself [...] Giacometti’s art seems to me to wish to discover the secret wound of every being and even of everything, so that the wound may illuminate them”.<sup>308</sup> Berger, then, may take his perspective on desire as a result of a wound from Genet, and so does Diaz in part; Genet’s wound illuminates, Diaz’s wound is “glimmered, open” (43). Do Giacometti’s charcoal-dark sculptures not reflect a gloss of light on the bodies, and do Diaz’s wounds not glimmer with “joy and sins / and sweet upside-down cake”?

Indeed, in “Like Church”, Diaz turns the wound, or the wound appointed to native women from the outside<sup>309</sup>, into luminosity and sensuality, as if treating the wound as a beloved. She does this by speaking directly to the non-white reader: “they are only light because we are dark. / If we didn’t exist, it wouldn’t be long before they had to invent us. Like the light switch.” (30). Playing with Voltaire’s rationale for the human need to invent God<sup>310</sup>, Diaz counters the colonial invention or the perpetual wound of an “other”—who is “dark” or “always so sad”—with a radiant phonic aperture at the poem’s opening. She uses words such as “mullion”, “transom”, “hematite clocks”,

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<sup>308</sup> The original French is: “Il n’est pas à la beauté d’autre origine que la blessure, singulière, différente pour chacun, cachée ou visible, que tout homme garde en soi, qu’il préserve et où il se retire quand il veut quitter le monde pour une solitude temporaire mais profonde. Il y a donc loin de cet art à ce qu’on nomme le misérabilisme. L’art de Giacometti me semble vouloir découvrir cette blessure secrète de tout être et même de toute chose, afin qu’elle les illumine” (Genet 2).

<sup>309</sup> One telling example in pop culture comes from Neil Young’s song “Pocahontas”: “They killed us in our tepees / And they cut our women down / They might have left some babies / Cryin’ on the ground”. While Young might have raised awareness of the impact of tar sands and oil pipelines on indigenous territories (Eagle, “Native Sun News”), his lyrics appoint a perpetuated wound which the listener might expect an indigenous person to perform.

<sup>310</sup> Voltaire wrote, in a verse epistle from 1768, “If the heavens, despoiled of his august stamp could ever cease to manifest him, if God didn’t exist, it would be necessary to invent him” (Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics* 265). The phrase in the original French is, “Si Dieu n’existait pas, il faudrait l’inventer”, from *L’Épître à l’auteur du livre des Trois imposteurs* (1769).

“her right hip / bone is a searchlight, sweeping, finding me”, and “*Mi caracol*”, which means snail in Spanish, to describe “the pearline damp she laces up my throat, my face”, an erotic luminescence of saliva or genital fluid. This series of images illuminate the narrator and the lover, reversing the “sadness” (30) affixed to the dark other. Indeed, Diaz asserts: “I am done asking this country to recognize me and my wounds. When I tell about them, it is first and foremost to remind me [that] I have a body, a strong body. Not an uninjured body or a body incapable of error, but I have a body that is still and always capable of love” (Diaz, “Energy”). Her succession of luminous happenings at the beginning of the poem accentuates this capable body from all of its incandescent departure points, and seems to be emitting from the wound itself, inseparable from desire: “I’ve only ever escaped through her body”, Diaz writes (29).

Regarding the line “I keep time on the hematite clocks of her shoulders”, hematite deposits are found in the Mojave Desert along the Colorado River, and according to Paul Campbell, nations in western Arizona and eastern California would follow a trade route to bring hematite to the coastal tribes such as the Chumash. It was used as face paint for social and ceremonial purposes, as well as for pictographs, as seen in the Chumash Painted Cave State Historic Park, northwest of Santa Barbara. Diaz notes: “All of the natives who moved back and forth across this desert, they would scrape the desert varnish to reveal the pink underneath and that’s how they made some of the petroglyphs” (Diaz, “Songs”). The shimmering quality of “hematite” and its palimpsest-like presence serves as a mode of telling time using the light on the body itself, as if a clock of ochre rock, which contributes to the poem’s quality of being “outside of time”. Diaz has also said in numerous interviews that the desert is a place you can’t hide; its sprawling, blinding expanse is revealing. She uses the phrase “your time”, for instance, as it is told by one’s own shadow, which is

“tethered to your ankles, you can’t escape that shadow part of you”, Diaz says (Diaz, “Chat With Natalie”).

In addition, the words “light switch” quoted above are also not chosen lightly; as discussed in Chapter 1, not only is electricity not available to many households on reservations while the energy to power major urban populations is extracted from reservation resources, but more figuratively, to turn on a light switch is to be able to see—to see whoever has been othered, to see the wound that has been created for them (or the new ones that have been invented, as Diaz suggests above). These visions are perpetuated in that subaltern light, for instance through sexualisation: “They think brown people fuck better when we are sad. / Like horses. Or coyotes. All hoof or howl” (29). The creation of an inferior “dark”, however, is blinded by Diaz’s successive luminous imagery and thus the body’s visibility.

Thirdly, the line “the pearline damp she laces up my throat, my face” as quoted above strongly recalls Eugenio Montale’s 1953 poem “Little Testament”, which Calvino elicited to defend his framework for “lightness”, laid out in the first of a series of published lectures, *Six Memos for the New Millennium*<sup>311</sup>. Calvino uses Montale’s poem to explain how the “the subtlest of elements”, such as Montale’s description “mother-of-pearl trace of a snail / or mica of crushed glass”, cohabit with Montale’s “fearful, hellish monster, a Lucifer with pitch-black wings who descends upon the cities of the West”: “the wild sardana turns hellish, / and a dark Lucifer swoops down on the shore /

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<sup>311</sup> Because of Diaz’s consistent allusions to Greek mythology and metamorphosing personas throughout *WMBWAA* and *Postcolonial Love Poem*, which darken her domestic scenes in order to approach the reality of her brother’s drug abuse, Calvino’s interpretation of the burying of Medusa’s head is interesting to note. As Calvino explains, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Perseus kills the terrifying Medusa, and to bury her head, he performs a delicate, ceremonial act; he “makes a ground soft with a bed of leaves and on top of that he strews little branches of plants born under water, and on this he places Medusa’s head, face down” (Calvino 6). This striking gesture precedes the apotheosis of lightness, according to Calvino: “when they touch Medusa, the little marine plants turn into coral and the nymphs, in order to have coral for adornments, rush to bring sprigs and seaweeds to the terrible head” (6).

of Thames, Hudson, or Seine / flapping pitchy wings half / shorn away from his hard toil to tell you this: It's time" (Calvino 6)<sup>312</sup>. Calvino notes that in this "testament", paralleling Diaz's playful title "Like Church", the delicate, glowing traces of the snail are foregrounded against the apocalyptic Lucifer, a "contrast to dark catastrophe" (Calvino 6). So too does the luminous "pearline damp" of Diaz's delicate "*caracol*", the lover's erotic snail-like trace, foreground and outshine the dark animals, the "hoof or howl", used to postulate non-white desire.

In a similar "contrast to dark catastrophe" (Calvino 6), Diaz notes that the Mojave language "carries in it the ways we love and touch each other"; as mentioned in Chapter 1, in Mojave, "to say, kiss me, is to say fall into my mouth" (Diaz, "If What I"). This kinetic, verb-based motion mirrors the poem's buoyant, kinetic "leap" at the end of "Like Church": the narrator and her lover hold melon seeds in their mouths "like new eyes" and "wait for them to leap open / and see us first" (31). Firstly, as Diaz explains earlier in the poem, melons feature in the Mojave afterlife: "Pluck one melon and another melon grows / in its place" (30). This perpetual, weightless reemergence of melons parallels the poem's "thick-syruped" plenitude, the coupling of delicate luminosity with infinite desire, like Montale's "mother-of-pearl trace of a snail". The "leap open" of the melon seeds in their mouths suggests a space outside of the reader's vision and knowledge, a place of perceiving which is independent from the conjectured "sadness" and "the wound they hang" on their chests; the melon seeds can see what we cannot, their gaze is beyond ours, and thus what do they see? They see, perhaps, desire as an action, as a "fall into my mouth", as a hunger, as something willing and deserving. Although desire's shifting chiaroscuro, its "fast" and "slow" (30) drives the poem and its

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<sup>312</sup> Montale's original Italian is: "traccia madreperlacea di lumaca / o smeriglio di vetro calpestato" and "Conservane la cipria nello specchietto / quando spenta ogni lampada / la sardana si farà infernale / e un ombroso Lucifero scenderà su una prora / del Tamigi, dell'Hudson, della Senna / scuotendo l'ali di bitume semi-/ mozze dalla fatica, a dirti: è l'ora" (qtd Calvino 6).



many illuminations, in these final lines of kinetic metamorphosis, one cannot fully access the narrator's desire which is out of reach, agile, and "unpinnable" in the lovers' mouths.

Even the delicacy of the word "pluck" in the line "Pluck one melon and another melon grows / in its place" (30) implies a smaller, lighter object than a melon, exaggerating the facility, pleasure and even brightness of the action, the "green-on-green, on green" of the melon in one's hand and its self-rejuvenating quality. The line exemplifies Joy Harjo's phrase which I mention in Chapter 1 in relation to Bitsui's work: "if this world dissolves, because it is dissolving and always has been, another will emerge" (Harjo, "Sherwin Bitsui by Joy Harjo"), suggesting that even in an *emergency*, or after a wound, there is a renewed kinetics of *emergence*—another melon grows. Diaz's melons also mirror Diné activist Kim Smith's comments on the "decolonial process" of promoting traditional relationships with harvesting practices as opposed to the dependency on unhealthy FDA foods on the reservation, which contribute to chronic health issues: "food is a big part of our ceremony, [...] foraging with the things that are in our backyard; how do you pray to them, how do you make offerings to them so that you can harvest, [...] what do you need to do so that when you take from it, it will replenish itself for others and for the next season?" She adds, "those foods are medicine" (Smith, "Healing"). Diaz's joy over sharing replenished melons with a lover embraces not only luminosity and desire in spite of or because of the wound, but an ongoing ritualistic and traditional care, "like church", for the food and resources we use.

Another poem that carries the complexities of wounds and desires in *Postcolonial Love Poem* is "Manhattan is a Lenape Word", a piece that Diaz wrote during a residency in Manhattan's Ace Hotel, produced in the solitude of the question, "What has happened to this place, to this people?" (Diaz, "The Body"), which echoes the broader question posed by Mishuana Goeman,

“how do we begin to [...] recognize people whose land we’re on at every stage of our lives?”

(Goeman “Mapping Indigenous”). Diaz writes in the poem:

I’m the only Native American  
on the 8th floor of this hotel or any,  
looking out any window  
of a turn-of-the-century building  
in Manhattan.  
Manhattan is a Lenape word.  
Even a watch must be wound.  
How can a century or a heart turn  
if nobody asks, *Where have all  
the natives gone?* (14)

Firstly, Diaz’s juxtaposition of the city hotel with the Lenape origins of Manhattan correlates with Goeman’s project to remap indigenous Los Angeles, originally the territory of the Tongva people. Goeman asserts that forgetting the native histories and contemporary presence in and around cities “comes from colonial geographies where the only authenticity is the reservation, which is in itself a colonial construction, yet places people have made home” (Goeman, “Mapping Indigenous”). Diaz begins to dismantle this colonial construction by presenting the hotel, and all of Manhattan, as built on Lenape land. Moreover, Diaz’s solitude in the hotel, shared with the lonely coyote she imagines “wandering West 29th Street”, is in line with a statement by Shawnee, Sac and Fox, Muscogee Creek and Seminole writer Donald L. Fixico: “Being Indian is always finding oneself outnumbered by the majority of society and frequently feeling lonely and surrounded [...] the only Native person in a meeting, the only one on a team, the only one on an elevator surrounded by non-Indians” (Fixico 473-4). Moreover, as is shown above, the poet, “the only Native American on the 8th floor of this hotel or any”, aligns the forgotten Lenape “word” with “wound” in the next line, the latter signifying both time—“wound” as the past tense of the verb “to wind”, as in a clock—and an open injury or lacuna, an untended linguistic wound in which the Lenape word has been replaced. Thus,

in just two lines, Diaz winds forward the clock of the colonial processes that have transformed the Lenape word “Manhattan” into the mecca it is now. Diaz does not expound on the Lenape origins of the “Manhattan”; the poem’s aim is not to be didactic or pedagogic<sup>313</sup>. Yet, Diaz refuses the colonial timeline and suggests that the reader discover the indigenous origins of Manhattan and its settler-colonial history for themselves, indicating that settler colonialism and its modern, normalised megastructures are still “perceived in a single event as if it is finished”, as Audra Simpson writes, a presumably quondam occurrence (Simpson, “Indigenous Women”). Diaz’s refusal on a textual level could encourage more active refusals of cultural erasure, for instance, instances similar to when Columbia University students petitioned for a plaque to “commemorate Lenape stewardship in Manhattan, a site of massive capitalism, so residents don’t forget. The debate went on for 4 years to make it happen” (Simpson “Indigenous Women”). In addition, Diaz homes in on—quite literally, in her evocation of the “American drone”—desire. Rather than acquiescing fully to centuries of colonial amnesia, she tells time with the turning of “a heart”, similar to the hematite clocks as discussed in “Like Church”. Likewise, in its positioning just underneath “wound”, the word “heart” also resonates almost as a homophone of “hurt”. This conducts the entrance of the poem’s drone

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<sup>313</sup> Linguist Ives Goddard, in his essay “The Origin and meaning of the Name ‘Manhattan’”, analyses proposed theories of the origins of “Manhattan”, beginning with a map from 1610 known as the Velasco map (Goddard 280). He debunks several of the origins as folklore, such as the claim that “Manhattan is simply a Delaware word for island”, or the Mannahatta Project’s claim that the local Lenape Indians used the term Mannahatta to mean “island of many hills”. In fact, the spelling “Mannahatta” was Walt Whitman’s, and apparently does not mean ‘island of hills’ let alone ‘island of many hills’ in the Algonquin dialects (287). According to Goddard, the native communities which came to be known as the Delaware, spoke two dialects of Eastern Algonquin, one of them now known as Munsee, the original language of Manhattan (277). Unami was the other dialect, spoken down the Delaware River in the rest of New Jersey, eastern PA and Delaware, which came to be known as Lenape (/lěnáapeew/), the Munsee word for “human being” (287). After debunking what Goddard believes to be the specious grounding for the word’s origin, he settles on the testimony of Munsee speaker Albert Anthony (b. 1839), who noted that “We call that island Man-ă-hă-tonh, the place where timber is procured for bows and arrows”. (Goddard 298)

image, disguised as a bee or hummingbird—“Somewhere far from New York City, / an American drone finds then loves / a body—the radiant nectar it seeks / through great darkness” (15).

Firstly, the “American drone” evokes the country’s increased budget allocated to defense spending and use of armed drone strikes from 2016 to 2019, grounded in, as Sabeen Ahmed asserts, a fear-induced logic of risk management, “*preventative measure against future threats*” and the “War on Terror” (author’s emphasis, Ahmed 382) recalling Walter Benjamin’s recognition of the “state of emergency” not as an exception but a “rule” (Benjamin, “Theses” 256). Secondly, it pertains to the airborne surveillance used by law enforcement at Standing Rock during the 2016-2017 protests, in contrast to the drones that were used by the indigenous “Drone Warriors” as a tactical reclamation of presence, what Lisa Parks calls “vertical mediations” and “audiovisual discourses” (Parks, “Tactical”)<sup>314</sup>. Thus, the “American drone” in Diaz’s poem coalesces both wound and desire: the drone’s sound is like a haunting bee or hummingbird—images the poet has used to evoke nectar and the entering/exiting movement of the Mojave word for sex, *nyen nyen*—and the drone is also an invasive, fatal weapon, an “American touch” Diaz writes (15), that enforces America’s imperial hegemony and “war on terror”, which includes the peaceful Standing Rock water protectors. The drone’s multiplicities and the expanded lexical space of “Manhattan” as a backdrop, disallow the reader from interpreting the wound as a singular entity that occurs within, or is fixed to, the past or

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<sup>314</sup> As Parks notes, Dean Dedman (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe) and Myron Dewey (Newe-Numah/Paiute-Shoshone) used drones during the DAPL protests to practice sovereignty against the highly militarised armed forces at Standing Rock, before the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) enforced a “no-fly zone” on October 25, 2016, which banned all aircraft in the area apart from that of U.S. law enforcement. The latter formulated legal documents with weaponising rhetoric to criminalise indigenous drone users, whereas TigerSwan, a private security firm which typically employ military-like counter-terrorist strategies, were hired to survey the site and permitted to use their own drones to monitor the camps while the “no fly zone” was enforced (Parks, “Tactical”).

future preventatory acts, and instils the question of complicity—who is benefitting from Manhattan, who is benefitting from safeguarding this linguistic and cultural lacuna?

Diaz again makes a connection to the erotic disappearing act in this poem, as a lover disappears inside the narrator<sup>315</sup>: “I’m counting the carpals, / metacarpals of her hand inside me. / One bone, / the lunate bone, is named / for its crescent outline. Lunatus. Luna. / Some nights she rises like that in me, / like trouble—a slow luminous flux” (15). Diaz merges disparate, luminous forms of desire: her personal desire for the lover measured by the body, in lunate bones, with the wound of lit-up Manhattan, which is “measured in lumens”, “an electric bill which must be paid, / a taxi cab floating across three lanes / with its lamp lit, gold in wanting” (15). These simultaneous illuminations are met with another Greek reference, the recurring siren’s song, which manifests as the ambulance siren—“single siren-cry: *Help me*. Meaning I have a gift / and it is my body” (14)—and later as the poet’s own song, evoking more directly the siren as the seductive sea creature—“The siren song returns in me, / I sing it across her throat” (16). Diaz sets two parallel metaphors in motion; firstly the ambulance siren, which speaks for one body among the mass of urban bodies and which broadcasts the body’s wound and desire to be saved, and secondly the erotic desire that seeks the lover, which parallels the ecstatic, hungry drone of the lines “her bees with my mouth of smoke [...] my hands stung sweet / on the darksome hive. / Out of the eater I eat” (14). These parallel metaphors recall Berger’s proposition of erotic desire as a shield or exception from the wound, albeit temporary, which, “once shared and experienced [...] no longer exempts” and “remains unforgettable”; “the disappearances still seem more true, more precise than what is apparent and legible” (Berger, “Another Side” 28). The temporal nature of these exemptions or

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<sup>315</sup> One cannot ignore Diaz’s play here with race, imitating E. E. Cummings’s “May I Feel Said He” as a she said/I said lesbian foreplay dialogue, rather than a heterosexual “he said / she said”: “She says, You make me feel / like lightning. I say, I don’t ever / want to make you feel that white”.

disappearances coupled with the long-term nature of a body's wounds means that desire is constantly renewed. Transcendent exemptions from loneliness through desire recur in our daily lives, in a city for instance, where "everyone [...] is empty and asking for someone" (15). Berger ends his short essay with the siren, as Diaz does her poem: "The sirens wail down the street. As long as you are in my arms, no harm will come to you" (Berger, "Another Side" 28). Both Berger and Diaz converge the wound and desire using the siren as a warning cry. This convergence brings forth the erotic vanishing of the lover—"I'm counting the carpals, / metacarpals of her hand inside me"—a temporary exception from the body's wounds and Manhattan's many wounds. Desire's exception and proposal to vanish into safety is not an evasion, however, as previously mentioned; it is, as Berger notes, "a shift elsewhere: an entrance into a plenitude. Plenitude is usually thought of as an amassing. Desire insists that it is a giving" (Berger, "Another Side" 28). That is, unlike the plenitude of emptiness in Manhattan's mendicating lumens, erotic desire gives the gift of "a body", as Diaz writes. It is a present possibility, a shift away from linguistic and cultural displacements of colonial urbanity measured in its illuminated "wanting" and wound up time that erases indigenous presence. Desire manifests in both the ambulance siren's call "Help me", and the lover-as-siren's call, "*Am I what I love?*" (16). Diaz illuminates the wound, the antecedent of desire, reshaping the contrasting measurements of urban lumens into the many lights of the lover, and through this metaphor reaches again back to the body and the land.

In relation to this siren metaphor, the body of work critiquing Mallarmé comes to mind, in particular the contrasting readings of his sonnet 'Stilled beneath the oppressive cloud' in Bruno Bosteels's translation or 'Hushed to the crushing cloud' in Steven Corcoran's version. In Mallarmé's poem, a trace of bubbling foam on the sea's surface is all that remains of what Badiou reads as the

“absent cause”, quoting Mallarmé—either a sinking ship or a siren who has drowned or slipped back into the water’s abyss—and each element of the poem is parcelled to evoke what has vanished, or what Mallarmé calls the “mute object” (qtd in Boncardo 131). For Badiou, the siren is the nihilistic absence representing the “structural dialectic”<sup>316</sup>, and this absence is doubled by Mallarmé’s act of anonymity and “annulment” as poet; both are modes of destroying that which formerly existed in order to forge novelty, though perhaps a hermetic novelty understood only by few (131). Rancière’s understanding of the siren’s disappearance is that the masses—the hungry crowds willing to consume—are not ready to receive the work which, as Rancière has it, is made for democratically egalitarian readers of the future. Thus, calling to an ideal beyond the present, the siren must disappear into the sea. For Rancière, Mallarmé’s absent siren describes a new language which—in replacing religion—aims to get closer to a communal vision (Boncardo 217).

However, Diaz’s siren is not the “absent cause” or a mute object, which dives into obscurity so that the reader, as Badiou and Rancière suggest, struggles to recuperate it. The siren here is rather desire *revealing* itself as a wound, as in Giacommetti’s aim according to Genet, or as inseparable from the wound, so that the disappearances—that of the lovers or that of the ambulance among the desperate, uncountable lights of Manhattan—revert back to the body’s existence, its gift of love, and desire to exist. Despite the colonised space of Manhattan, in which indigenous traces are overlooked or have seemingly disappeared—“*Where have all the natives gone?*” (14)—the siren as the ambulance and the siren as the lover make both wound and desire visible. The two manifestations of the siren, then, do not end in a disappearance, only to represent an aesthetic thought experiment in anonymity, or something so novel that it calls only to a future society, as Rancière reads Mallarmé’s

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<sup>316</sup> The structural dialectic is that which “locates the symptomatic where society in its apparent plenitude is undone, but which cannot progress beyond this recognition of an affirmative praxis of creative change” (Boncardo 130).

“aesthetic regime of art” (Boncardo 191). Diaz’s sirens present rather a kinetic chiasmus: desire is made visible in its appearance as a wound or as inseparable from a wound, for instance the colonial attempts at abolishing the indigeneity of Manhattan, and secondly, desire offers a *disappearance* into the ecstatic, which is a way of existing or appearing outside of Manhattan’s *telos* of disappearance. Both siren songs moving through this vast urban loneliness are the kinetics of desire, sounding a warning call to remind the narrator not to succumb to evasion but to “shift elsewhere” as Berger writes or that “we must be brave” as Diaz opens this poem, in response to Anne Sexton’s first line in “The Truth the Dead Know” (“I am tired of being brave”). Diaz’s sirens thus reach *towards* the lover, the reader, and essentially the body in the present, rather than vanishing into a textual abyss.

The poem’s themes surrounding visibility also bring us to the crossroads of the body’s memory and value. Barthes reflects that “‘to read’ a country is first of all to perceive it in terms of the body and of memory, in terms of the body’s memory” (Barthes, “The Light” 7-9)<sup>317</sup>, to which the writer is assigned to be “conscious of the very interstices of competence”. This suggests, in Martin Jay’s interpretation, that the “undigested residues of the past [...] are felt in the body”, and that it is through writing “the body’s memory as well as its desire that experience makes its halting *appearance*” (my emphasis, Jay 473). Likewise, Heath Justice calls our attention to a “fierce love” which, in works by indigenous women such as Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Gwen Benaway, and Darcie Little Bear, is dedicated to “possibilities beyond the impoverished imaginations of those who would long ago have seen indigenous peoples disappear” and which insists that “we love:

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<sup>317</sup> Original French from “La Lumière du Sud-Ouest”: “Car ‘lire’ un pays, c’est d’abord le percevoir selon le corps et la mémoire, selon la mémoire du corps. Je crois que c’est à ce vestibule du savoir et de l’analyse qu’est assigné l’écrivain : plus conscient que compétent, conscient des interstices même de la compétence” (Barthes, “La lumière du Sud-Ouest”, 129).



courageously, insistently, defiantly” (180). The bodies in this poem are not embodiments of desperate Manhattan, the body is not all wound, nor wound, as in the verb, by colonial time which, despite the city’s technology and luminescence, has invisibilised and relegated bodies to wounds of the past. Diaz imaginatively illuminates, or makes reappear, both “reading the country [...] in terms of the body”, as Barthes writes, through the “lunate bones” of the lover, against the “lumens” of Manhattan and its colonial “impoverished imaginations” (Heath Justice 180).

Finally, this dual luminescence—the “lumens” of electric, colonial Manhattan, and the luminosity of the lover—complicates the “glittering world” in the last question of the poem: “*Is this the glittering world / I’ve been begging for?*” (16). In the Mojave creation story, the glittering world refers to the earth which gleamed, when the ground was “still wet” as Diaz explains it (Diaz, “Songs”), a phrase also used in some translations of the Diné creation story. Again the “glittering world” questions what Diaz calls “American goodness”, the glittering world of success and yet utter loneliness embodied by the city she observes from the hotel window. For instance, Diaz explains that she played basketball because it was one way she could be “good” in America. She “was determined to be the best at it”, and therefore determined to leave her community: “the country I live in had convinced me to leave my reservation. In order for us sometimes to do the things we need to do, so that we are successful or so that we belong in this country, we need to leave the community and the family that are closest to us” (Diaz, “Vocarium”). Indeed, as Huggan and Tiffin observe in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, colonial “developmentalism”, as defined by Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar, concerns an insertion of the “Third World” “into a regime of thought and practice in which certain interventions for the eradication of poverty” became fundamental to the capitalist regimes (Huggan and Tiffin 30). Diaz underscores the migration of disappearance into American

“goodness” from within America’s own demands of progress and capital: the “glittering world” of urban success. This is, in a way, a more sinister paradigm than “developmentalism”; while economists like Amartya Sen praise economic development in poverty-stricken countries abroad as “human development”, human “expansion” and “freedom” (Huggan and Tiffin 31) despite ecological and colonial interference, the detrimental impacts of “goodness” come from within America’s own colonial borders they carved out, which native communities still grapple with. Thus, the normalised disappearance into the bright colossus of Manhattan in order to fulfill the definition of “goodness” is juxtaposed with an autonomous, kinetic disappearance into another glittering world: the luminescence of the lover disappearing inside the poet. The poet welcomes erotic disappearance, which, in my reading of the poem, is in fact a presence, “more precise than what is apparent and legible” as Berger writes. In the textual migrations through erotic lightness and luminosity, the notion of a wound is another manifestation of kinetics; it is brought out of the fixed past, out of a stagnant permanence, and into a kinetic, ongoing desire which sutures.

*“Exhibits”*: Displays of Water, Desire, and Autonomy

As I have already explored in “The First Water is the Body”, *Postcolonial Love Poem* addresses ecological responsibilities grounded in Mojave practices more directly than Diaz’s first collection. I will analyse two more poems from this second collection—“*exhibits from The American Water Museum*” and “How the Milky Way Was Made”—which foreground Diaz’s Mojave perspective of ecological relationality in the context of pleasure, the body, and possibility, beginning in this section with “*exhibits from The American Water Museum*”. Firstly, in refusing to be complicit in museum investments in private prisons and harmful migration policies, whose inhumane doctrine of dislocation further separates family members, Diaz creates her own textual

museum in “*exhibits from The American Water Museum*”. Firstly, I discuss how she unhinges the normalisation of water mongering at the expense of others, often indigenous communities. Secondly, I discuss Diaz’s implication of the reader not as an onlooker but as a participant and even a complicit curator in this textual museum. I consider how these kinetic exhibits, revealing both natural and unnatural water migrations, reconfigure Western notions of autonomy and the poem-as-artifact, while challenging the reader’s “ocularcentrism” in Diaz’s terms (Diaz, “A Celebration”) in their sensual, visual, auditory and performative displays. Finally, I examine the different ways Diaz claims an expanded spatial territory in these exhibits, including sensual, alternative approaches to translating the kinetics of the water and body.

To contextualise her creation of a poem as an exhibition, Diaz refused to be part of an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2019, citing the museum’s “support of mass incarceration & detention centers”, institutions her family members had to cope with: “Most places”, she wrote in the tweet, “even our own institutions, are entangled. My sister was just released. My brother spent a large part of his life there. We have choices in art” (Diaz, @NatalieGDiaz). Diaz’s “productive refusal” (Simpson, *As We* 176) to reiterate Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s term, was in response to Larry Fink, a board member of the museum, who is also the CEO of Blackrock, a major shareholder in private prison companies with billions of dollars in profit. They are “responsible for over 70 per cent of all immigration detention, including families separated at the border”, and MoMA’s pension fund, Fidelity, “is also one of the largest owners of private prison stocks” (Cafolla, “Art activists”). Diaz’s poem “Under Correction” recounts going to a correctional facility to visit her sister, though unable to see her in person, she only appeared as an “unbody” through a TV screen, which is owned by these private companies who profit from this enforced

distance (Diaz, “Natalie Diaz and Nikky Finney”). However, while she refused to be part of MoMA’s project, an extract from “The First Water is the Body” was featured, alongside quotes from Virginia Woolf and Octavio Paz, in the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago’s exhibition called “Water After All”, on display from December 14th, 2019 to March 13th, 2020. It centred on Ghana-born British filmmaker John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea*, which engaged in the “poetic awe and horror of humanity’s relationship with water” (“Water After All”, MCA).

After this refusal to be complicit, Diaz created her own poem-exhibition published in *Postcolonial Love Poem: “exhibits from The American Water Museum”*. The poem, which is structured to replicate an experience in a gallery space, contains twenty-seven “exhibits” or vignettes, which number from zero to 2345 yet appear out of order, indicating that these imagined displays are only a drop in the sea of possible encounters with water, or only a “small part of how the American Water Museum of my mind exists” (*Postcolonial* 99), as she says in the collection’s notes. The endeavour, in its suggestion of the infinite, makes a nod to Borges again, particularly his “Library of Babel” in which the world is a library of rooms housing every possible combination of 25 characters, leading to insanity and despair because of the futility of these books. In Diaz’s poem, the possibilities in the exhibits are limitless. *Aha Makav* gestures towards a “third place” in “The First Body is the Water”, and in “*exhibits from The American Water Museum*”<sup>318</sup>, Diaz textually takes us there. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson says that, in Anishinaabe culture, storytellers have the responsibility “to make sure that stories are relevant to the people, that people can see themselves in the story [...] and this means telling our stories from all different angles and from all different perspectives” (Simpson, “Decolonial”). Thus, the poem “*exhibits*” tells the story from

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<sup>318</sup> I will refer to this poem as “*exhibits*” henceforth.

many perspectives, but can also be seen as a reiteration of “The First Water is the Body”. Diaz notes that “repetition has a lot to do with how Mojave songs work, the way my mother’s stories work. Even if the word might seem the same, it’s being uttered new, it’s a new iteration of itself (Diaz, “The Verb”). Thus, this repeated theme is a way to “disrupt that knowing” that the reader assumes they have achieved from “The First Body is the Water” (Diaz, “The Verb”). For instance, exhibit Number 78 in “*exhibits*” resumes the interrogation where “The First Water is the Body” left off: “Who will call us back // to the water, wash the dirt from our eyes and hair? / Can anybody uncrush our hands, reshape them / from clay, let us touch one another’s faces again?” (65). Diaz reinstates the importance of clay and the relationship with the body’s creation in practice; Diaz’s aforementioned uncle, Hubert McCord, notes that “The elders loved the clay, I’ve seen it, the elders would go up in the hills and eat clay” (Diaz, “Songs”)<sup>319</sup>. This ingestion of minerals corresponds with Diaz’s reference again to the Mojave creation story here, in which the creator made the Mojave out of clay and mineral deposits from the river.

What is most striking about this piece is the simultaneous manifestations of body-as-museum, body-in-museum, and museum-as-body of water, which engage in various enactments of thirst, and the struggle once again to translate these physical relationships. The textual exhibits house translations of sounds, photographs, love letters, definitions, and performance pieces representing the body as water and vice versa, presenting both those who suffer from thirst and those who benefit. The metamorphosis of a poem into a museum experience displays Diaz’s capacity to imagine “new sounds, new rhythms, new choreographies, and new songs and verses about how wonderful and terrible the sea is, and how we cannot live without it”, recalling Tongan writer Epeli

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<sup>319</sup> Poet Margo Tamez (Lipan Apache) recounts a correlating experience in her poem “My Mother Returns to Calaboz”: “When I was a girl, my grandfather taught me / to put a small clump of soil in my mouth, / and to swallow it” (*When the Light* 322).

Hau’ofa’s words. “The sea”, he continues, “is our pathway to each other [...] the ocean is in us” (408–9). In order to illuminate what we still have not seen, Diaz brings us into a textual museum as a pathway to our own bodies as much as our bodies of water, filled with rooms to walk through, literalising the etymology of *stanza*. She sets the reader in motion, walking us through multiple “sounds” and “choreographies”, of destructive choices and lifestyles stemming from America’s colonialism.

Firstly, Diaz achieves this kinetic choreography by laying bare the normalisation of the mistreatment of water, and thus the mistreatment of ourselves and non-humans, as well as our complicities in this behaviour. In other words, the separation between the body and water has been normalised to such an extent that the credo of corporations becomes exhibit “123. Marginalia from the BIA Watermongers Congressional Records, redacted”:

To kill █████ take their water  
 To kill █████ steal their water  
    then tell them how much they owe  
 To kill █████ bleed them of what is wet in them  
 To kill █████ find their river and slit its throat  
 To kill █████ pollute their water with their daughters’  
    busted drawn bodies washed up  
    on the shores, piece by piece (66)

The reader is denied access to what they might choose to ignore: the names of the cultures and communities, from which water is taken for the greater capitalist benefit, are barred. Diaz’s description of the federal watermongers’ violent archeology is especially visceral in her lines “pollute their water with their daughters’ / busted drawn bodies washed up / on the shores, piece by piece”, a haunting chiasmus of the body polluted by the industrialised river and the river polluted with colonised body. The body and water are presented as living and dying archives, rather than reports of economic circulation in “the closed-door domesticity of empire” (Russo et al. 21). This

section recalls Yurok and Karuk writer Shaunna Oteka McCovey’s polyphonic poem, “I Still Eat All of My Meals with a Mussel Shell”:

**Because our rivers**  
*halfbreedshave*  
**were once filled**  
*agodthat is*  
**with gold**  
*neither Indian*  
**our women were violated**  
*or white*  
**in the worst imaginable way.** (McCovey 330)

In McCovey’s polyphony, the words between the lines, which seem to create a palimpsest, are made visible. In Diaz’s redacted “BIA Watermongers Congressional Records”, what we should see is blacked out, the voices still inaudible. McCovey’s statement that “halfbreeds” have “halfbreed” gods reinstates, in synchronicity with the main thread in bold, the fact that non-Christian beliefs gave colonists a pretext for violence and control over gilded rivers. In fact, artist Carolina Caycedo, in a conversation with Diaz, which I mentioned in Chapter 2, explains that the Cauca River in Colombia, which receives hundreds of tons of residual waste daily from gold mines, has been nicknamed “blond boss” by miners; “it’s the best boss they’ve ever had, it never gives a schedule, you can go to work to the river at any time, and it always pays back in fish and gold” (Diaz and Caycedo, “Borderlands”). While Caycedo’s textile river portrait imports “the golden heart of the river” into the exhibition, as opposed to the infrastructures that pipe the rivers into our homes, Diaz’s exhibit “123” imports the despotic violence imposed on kinetic betweenness: where does materiality in and outside our bodies begin or end? Which body is being violated? Similarly, Diaz’s barred names make us work harder “to decipher the layered meanings” of this story, reiterated here as an exhibition; the museum is framed as a place of knowing, but Diaz “disrupts that knowing”,

reminding us of a refusal, even the normalised blindness to what happens before our tap water arrives. The hidden or encoded polyphony in this section—the silence of the barred names—comes back to desire; as Audra Simpson writes, the “desires of states” are encoded in “dispossession, protection, alienation, incorporation, exclusion, assimilation, containment” (Simpson, “Under the Sign” 108). Because indigenous peoples’ initiatives to protect land and water challenge the “settler state security and the economic, political, and moral right to govern” these spaces, the greatest threat to the state’s desires are the desires of Indigenous peoples, “their governmental and philosophical systems, and most significantly, their lands” (108). Indigenous theorising suggests semantic ways of knowing that do not transfer into federal methods and records which one can “redact” at will as Diaz shows in exhibit “123”.

The violence enacted in order to safeguard the normalisation of the state’s control over water is also underlined in one of Diaz’s footnotes, which, given the text as an exhibition, mirrors a painting’s plaque. The footnote clarifies that exhibit Number “2345” is a “prayer of an Elder Mojave woman shot in the head and throat by two rubber bullets as she sat in prayer before a tractor and a row of German shepherds barking against their leashes at the site of yet another pipeline” (68). The prayer itself reads “I am both—the river and its vessel. [...] I am it and its mud. / I am the body kneeling at the river’s edge / letting it drink from me” (68). This unusual reversal—the river drinking from the body—insists again on kinetic reciprocal relationships and suggests that even the river has a desire; it benefits from maintaining mutual exchanges. The poet exemplifies other kinetic relationships in the same “exhibit”, such as “The river is my sister, I am its daughter” (68), to subvert colonial separations which, because they are upheld as commonplace, make these fluid relationships seem impossible or unsettling. “Number 2345” also allows the reader to participate in



unlearning the gazes of the “Western patriarchal academy”, as Caycedo discusses. Even formats for filming bodies of water, Caycedo asserts, are prescribed; “the river should flow from left to right, or if you’re filming a cascade, it should flow from the top of the screen to the lower part of the frame”, so that the human is a “mere observer from the outside” (Diaz and Caycedo, “Borderlands”)<sup>320</sup>. Diaz disrupts the outsider gaze by embedding the reader in the bio-relationality of these water-body declarations. The prayer—“I am the body kneeling at the river’s edge / letting it drink from me”—of a Mojave elder violently hurt at a pipeline protest shifts the outsider’s gaze narratively but also kinetically, in that we imagine the possibility of an act deemed otherwise impossible.

Secondly, along with revealing normalised colonial relationships, the museum-like exposure of “*exhibits from The American Water Museum*” positions the readers as observers of these relationships, and thus observers of themselves as paintings or artifacts from a distanced vantage point in the exhibit. Just as we have fixed our gaze on water as onlookers, we are the voyeurs of our own dying bodies and rivers, perusing the artifacts or performance pieces of our own harmful relationships and potential demise. Yet, we soon come to realise in exhibit “67”, that we are in this textual space “not as / patrons but rather as parts of the new exhibit” (67); that in fact, as Diaz writes in the “guidebook” entry, we “built this museum” as its “Muse and Master” (63), and therefore we experience these exhibited encounters as textually removed from the river and our own bodies, as the poet suggests we are in reality. The readers are, however, part of the exhibit. Diaz involves the reader in the exhibit’s performances so that the presence of water and thirst are ubiquitous; as

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<sup>320</sup> See Ho-Chunk filmmaker Sky Hopinka’s nine-minute film, “Kunjkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunjkaga Remembers the Welcoming Song”, featuring shots of Red Banks, “a pre-contact Ho-Chunk village site near present day Green Bay, WI” where Jean Nicolet, the first European to explore the area, landed in 1634. The water is filmed from many different angles, but more memorably, there is a fixed shot hovering closely above a river flowing downstream, in the direction of the top of the frame, so that the viewer feels pulled by its force, almost taken along (Hopinka, “Kunjkaga”).

curators, we are complicit in the techniques Diaz imposes. The black strips cited above in exhibit “123”, for instance, barring the names of those killed under the guise of consumer contentment, were made by us, the creators and visitors of the museum, who may benefit from the consequences of the names being invisibilised.

Another illustration in “*exhibits*” of the reader’s involvement is in “10. Metonymic Experience”. Diaz writes:

[...] The curators ask us to collapse  
as naturally as possible, in a heap—so those who come  
behind us might be immersed in this exhibit of thirst,  
as if it was their own.

Soon. (67)

Diaz’s “metonymic experience” is a reenactment of reality; we observe the performance in the museum and yet we *are* the performance; the waters we ruin are equivalent to the “60,000 miles of waterways” of our own bodies (66). In the extractivist reality we have built, we are performing the “masterpiece of thirst” (67), a fatal cartographic choreography set in motion by the first settler colonists, who as Hedge Coke writes, “sent all bailiwick on cursed course” (*Streaming*, “We Were in a World” 56). The museum does not hold artifacts from antediluvian pasts, however. It projects our precarious migrations through the present, in which the readers perform modern reenactments of colonial intrusion; we are “pilgrims of scarcity”, “our thirst” is our present-day “caravan”, paralleling Bitsui’s “Caravan” pub, an allusion to border town settlers (66). The ominous “Soon” at the end of this “exhibit” set apart from the rest of the text, reminiscent of Martin Hägglund’s haunting “not yet” discussed in Chapter 1, and again suggests a plaque which might feature the artist of the work; we are the imminent authors of this real-life performance piece, moving into another future room in which we die of thirst.

## Alternative Autonomies

In understanding Diaz's "*exhibits*" as movements in their capacity to gesture outwards, projecting the reticent biotariat present<sup>321</sup> alongside the kinetics of Mojave water relations, the poem counters the central concept of autonomy as laid out in modern philosophical paradigms repeatedly built on Aristotle and Kant. For instance, Aristotle's refutation of Plato's argument on banishing poets from the state serves the autonomy of a poem; poets don't imitate reality, Aristotle suggests, but organise reality's messiness into another "nature"—what Sidney calls the golden world over nature's brazen one (Sidney, "The Defence"). Mimesis is however still a central lens of contemporary poetry: in their introduction to the 2017 publication *Literature and sustainability: Concept, Text and Culture*, Johns-Putra et al. write that "Literary fictions, poems or prose, mimic the contingency and chaos of the bio-physical world, like Keats's 'salt sand wave' crashing, one time only, on the beach" (Johns-Putra xii). This approach continues to follow Kant's notion that because aesthetic beauty is "disinterested", that is, not grounded in our desire but simply our ambiguous pleasure or displeasure, it is sufficient or autonomous unto itself, with its own internal coherence (Zangwill, "Aesthetic"). Kant's "aesthetic judgment" is a precursor to New Criticism, for instance, which at least in Empson's case, attempts to scientifically account for ambiguity and the poem's autonomous functions (*Seven Types* 16-19), and Beardsley and Wimsatt's argument that for an artwork to be autonomous, its meaning must be evident to the reader, not dependent on biographics or sociological context (Richards and Beardsley, "Principles" 764-73).

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<sup>321</sup> A class which depends on resource extraction "to the point at which the entire biosphere faces exhaustion and collapse", and only at this brink does it begin to "develop a new political consciousness and new revolutionary subjectivity" based on life as "intersystemic and interspecies responses and responsibilities" (Russo et al. 24).

These ideas of autonomy are upturned by Diaz. Autonomy means dependency on community and those around her, as previously mentioned: “I can only be myself in relation to my family and my community” (Diaz, “The Verb”). Meaning thus relies on relationships outside of the text; the page is just the field where it begins. In “*exhibits*”, the reader is not presented with autonomy as a Kantian conception of beauty, a coherent form unto itself, nor is its autonomy the opposite, solely “an act of resistance” (Deleuze, “Qu’est-ce que l’acte de création?”) against external forces in control societies such as “disciplinary” institutions (Foucault 140). Instead of being passive interpreters of the poem’s autonomy, we *are* the exhibit, as Diaz proposes in exhibit “673; we have created it and thus it surpasses its textual form. The poem has become us, the poem has been made by us, it is our actual world. In this way, Diaz avoids presenting “a petrified facade of opinion and society” (Adorno 6) by didactically preaching anti-capitalist struggles to the converted with “political slogans”, yet she doesn’t imply a decolonial protest through obscure “guise” and “form” alone (6). The poem retains its own autonomy because it exceeds the poet as the author, in that we have become the authors. At the same time, the poet herself retains her own autonomy as well, because she has led us to this American water museum, its non-chronological, fragmented sequences, which, while denouncing the colonial “essence of capitalism” (Adorno 9) in destructive relationships with water, constructs a poetic form that is unusual enough to unsettle us, but does not terminate the “social contract with reality”, as Adorno contends (6). What is more of a concern in “*exhibits*” is that if autonomy depends on communal relations, then autonomy also depends on exercising the desire to live, which is presented as an immersive construction; the museum goes, ourselves and the author, “collapse as naturally as possible, in a heap—so those who come behind us”, who are also some form of ourselves, “might be immersed in this exhibit of thirst, as if it was

their own” (67). The shock is not in the work’s unintelligibility, as Adorno argues, but in the direct implication of the reader and reiteration of autonomy as relationality: outside of this textual performance, we share the reality of thirst (Adorno 6).

Thus, the poem is not autonomous in these Western modes and likewise, the poem is not an artifact. Rather than object-oriented critiques claiming art occurs as a “thing” in a liminal space of active “nothingness” (Morton, “The Liminal” 279)—which Morton relates to the vast, liminal spaces of global warming (279)—Diaz’s “*exhibits*” contain not artifacts or “things” but actions, performances, and movements “between self and other” (Diaz, “A Taste”). Diaz’s “choreographies” similarly oppose the humanist tradition that sees preservation of a time period as the artifact or art’s main function, or the Modernist faith in “things” and referentiality to the page as object itself (Morton, “The Liminal” 273). Each of Diaz’s “exhibits” is not a display unchanged in time, as is often seen in museums of stolen or looted indigenous artifacts, which many indigenous nations believe to be alive and have agency. In contrast, Diaz’s textual displays make our bodies and actions part of the museum of extraction itself, and thus we are facilitators of our own harm *off* the page. As Karrmen Crey of the Cheam nation says: “We are embodied, and these histories are embodied in us. That’s a really important framework to understand why we don’t just get over [this history]. We don’t get past it. We’re in it, we’re living bodies that inherited from it” (Chariandy 77). Both our creation of and movement within the museum depend on Diaz’s line in “exhibit 200” which reads, “You cannot drink poetry” (69): noticing that “poem is printed on paper” will do nothing to stop our body’s thirst and desire. Thus, “*exhibits*” is only the beginning of what the poem achieves textually as the “practice field” for reality (Diaz, “The Pen Ten”). Whereas Morton, following a faith in “things”, insists on the relationship “between the poem and its physical medium” (Morton 274), an

object and a linear concept of time, Diaz’s out of order “*exhibits*” insist on the poem as “outside of time” as we move through the textual rooms, observing our own destructive relationships and admitting our compliance as “artful voyeurs”<sup>322</sup>.

### Occupying Textual Territory

“*Exhibits* from The American Water Museum” is a ten-page opus; it is, at least, the longest poem in *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Diaz’s choice to take up space in a variety of ways is partly in response to being denied the ability to occupy space; textual space as well as geographical space. Indeed, Lakota scholar Nick Estes—who has written extensively on the aggressive tactics of private security contractors at Standing Rock and their drone footage resembling the U.S. “war on terror”—notes that “Indigenous caretakers” of “the land, water, air, and nonhuman world” (Estes, “Indigenous”) are repressed from as Smith writes, “taking up as much space as possible”, both physically and vocally, in asking legislation to include indigenous communities in decision processes (Smith, “Healing”)<sup>323</sup>. Their voluntary acts are highly undervalued, while projects such as the Green New Deal are more visible and deemed more legitimate, productive, and worthy of financial support<sup>324</sup> (Estes, “Indigenous”). Diaz uses “*exhibits*” to assert her own space of

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<sup>322</sup> Poet Roger Reeves elaborated on his analysis of the “artful voyeur”, a line from Seamus Heaney’s “Punishment”, in a lecture Reeves gave for Poets & Writers in 2015. Reeves contemplates the “traffic in the spectacle” of sharing video footage of violence on social media in solidarity with someone who was killed, an act which often obscures “the individual suffering of those that actually experienced” the violence. In Heaney’s poem, the narrator admits he is not directly complicit in the spectacle, but also critiques his position and questions this detachment from complicity (Reeves, “The Work of Art”). Diaz’s conception of a museum space unsettles the readers’ position as safe, detached witnesses.

<sup>323</sup> Kim Smith uses the phrase “taking up as much space as possible” to talk about insisting on Diné presence during the legislation process, not only when cleaning up mines but also informing and consulting communities in their own languages about fair transitions into clean energy after mines are closed, so native workers don’t suffer economically (Smith, “Healing”).

<sup>324</sup> Estes writes this in the context of the Coastal Gas Link pipeline (CGL) which the Unist’ot’en Camp, about 750 miles north of Vancouver, Canada, aimed to block in 2019. The controversial pipeline was another hurdle to battle after the community tried to heal from a “period of intense logging that threatened moose hunts and salmon runs” (Estes, “Indigenous”).

interrogation and critique. To put on display is also to be exposed, and thus the readers in the museum space, in a sense, are exposed, as Diaz describes the exposure of the Mojave desert: “I have learned love is a shifting type of luck and abundance, a thing my people, my family, my mother, cultivated in the desert. The desert is a place where you cannot hide from yourself. All of you is there, to be seen, to see”. Diaz writes (Diaz, “Chat with Natalie”). One cannot hide in a museum either, and in Diaz’s text, the reader is exposed just as much as the text is exposed to the reader, therefore creating a space where language can be both returned to and cultivated. In the desert of the text, we cannot hide but we can also be reached, if we accept Diaz’s notion of poetic touch.

The poem also exceeds its own textual territory by pointing to innumerable material spaces, represented in the innumerable exhibits, another iteration of the infinite, as discussed in “These Hands, If not Gods”. For instance, it charts the space of our bodies and the waters within them (“there are 60,000 miles of waterways in our bodies—veins, arteries—the red lines of our own lives”, 66) and it derides the excess extraction and domination of land on which America prides itself. Diaz writes in “exhibit 78”:

An American way of forgetting Natives:  
Discover them with City. Crumble them by City.  
Erase them into Cities named for their bones, until

You are the new Natives of your new Cities.  
Let the new faucets run in celebration, in excess.  
Who lies beneath streets, universities, art museums?

My people!

Excessive urbanisation is encouraged, ironically, to be celebrated as if a Dionysian feast; Diaz’s line “let the new faucets run in celebration” reminds us that the dammed Colorado River feeds the metropolises of the southwest, while in some indigenous communities, the river is sucked dry. In

this exhibition space in which we are surrounded by water—whereas in reality we are most often, as consumers, detached from it—we are also shown, whether or not we are prepared to accept it, the origins of cities, and the water extracted to sustain them<sup>325</sup>. As Diaz writes, colonial and intellectual structures—including in universities and museums—have shrouded the history of the country’s indigenous populations<sup>326</sup>. Again, McCovey’s polyphonic poem, “I Still Eat All of My Meals with a Mussel Shell” is a useful comparison:

**If you cannot see**  
*Istilleat*  
**between the lines**  
*allofmy meals*  
**Then your collected facts**  
*witha*  
**will never constitute**  
*musselshell*  
**knowledge.** (McCovey 331)

McCovey’s less apparent and legible text between the bold lines indicate that her traditions are not accessible in a closed past, but are personal, ongoing practices. Diaz similarly signals this intention by underlining what’s underneath our feet; her line “My people!”, cited above, is indented, suggesting a voice buried and unheard in underneath the dominance of institutions, while her “people” on the contrary participate in ongoing intentional practices. The separate voice of this line also suggests, as McCovey does, a polyphonic subversion of what constitutes knowledge, such as artifacts in a museum and the development and civilisation of a city, which involved colonial

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<sup>325</sup> This feeling of unpreparedness recalls Ofelia Zepeda’s (Tohono O’odham) poem “Ocean Power”, about facing the ocean for the first time: “We are not ready to be here. / We are not prepared in the old way. / We have no medicine. We have not sat and had our minds walk through the image / of coming to this ocean / [...] We have not put our minds to what it is we want to give to the ocean” (Zepeda 84). In walking us through the images, Diaz shows how unprepared many of us are to contemplate our relationships with water, let alone to think “what gift we will ask” from it, as Zepeda writes (84).

<sup>326</sup> Similarly, as Mukavetz recalls, Janice Gould’s essay “The Problem of Being ‘Indian’: One Mixed-Blood’s Dilemma”, argues that “there is not a university in ‘America’ built on what was not once Native land” (qtd in Mukavetz 14-15).



“civilising” missions, rather than the knowledge of a culture, as in Long Soldier’s use of “blužo” in her twelfth “Whereas” poem. McCovey counters conjectured facts with her italicised line, recalling, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Cheam’s idea of history as a palimpsest “that the colonial state continues to try to erase” and which writers can “re-illuminate” (Chariandy 77). Similarly, Diaz layers her exhibit with “My People!” against forgetting “the bodies who spoke” the original names of rivers, given by indigenous creation stories (64). While actual museums may distract us from the reality of colonial histories, only to keep us superficially entertained until we leave its space and disappear into our cities, Diaz’s “*exhibits*” represent a space that dissolves these boundaries because it suggests the exhibits are endless and everywhere, so that we are forced to recognise actual fragmented relationships with water and ourselves. As Leanne Simpson says, “Stories [...] are really spirits that shift in order to illuminate what we don’t know or what we can’t see [...] And our responsibility both individually and collectively is [...] to work hard to decipher the layered meanings of story as we move through our own lives” (Simpson, “Decolonial”). Diaz re-engages and illuminates the “layered meanings” in what is often obscured, and how this shift in perspective can activate our ecological responsibilities in practice.

Diaz also takes up this museum space through the suggestion of other mediums beyond text, challenging one’s “ocularcentrism” (Diaz, “A Celebration”). For instance, the second vignette is number “17”, in which we are told what to imagine:

A recording plays from somewhere high,  
or low, floating up or down through the falling  
dust light.

It is a voice out of time, voice of quickness,  
voice of glass—or wind. A melody, almost—of mud.  
How it takes a deep blue to tumble across wet stones  
Into a songline. The music any earth makes

When touched and shaped by the original green energy/  
The song, if translated, might feel like this:

You have been made in my likeness.

I am inside you—I am you / or you are me.

Let us say to one another: *I am yours*—

and know finally that we will only ever be

as much as we are willing to save of one another. (Original spacing, 63)

This sound recording again expresses, as in “The First Water is the Body”, the concept of the pre-verbal, a feeling that cannot be textually translated but rather is experienced physically: “A melody, almost—of mud” (63). The only way to experience a “melody” of mud is to imagine its substance and its possible noises, not voice or language, but the sounds that language can only reach towards. The “pathway”, to use Hau’ofa’s word, here is the translation of the imagined recording in the poem, so that the reader becomes the listener but also the feeler, suggesting a synesthetic, existential encounter within the text<sup>327</sup>. In this translation, the voice of water, or the unnamed earthly entity, is “a voice of quickness, / a voice of glass—or wind”, in a double-spaced section to emphasise the sound’s clarity and physicality, its divergence from language and its divergence from the violent rhetoric of water extraction in “exhibit 123”. Diaz’s translation of the “pre-verbal” also renders Hau’ofa’s call to encompass sensual desire, an alternative experience of the non-human “ecstatic”, as she explained, “from cosmos to dirt to mountain” (Diaz, “Between the Covers”): “I am

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<sup>327</sup> Diaz’s translation of this non-human sound recalls Valéry’s question of the seashell: “Who made me?” Living things surround us, yet the “signatures” of certain non-man-made objects are illegible, indecipherable because they have become naturalised, and they come into existence without our intervention. For Valéry, these creations make one question the tension of their perceived form (Valéry, “Man” 126). Diaz’s translation reaches towards explaining this mystery through the Mojave ideology and cosmology that our bodies are in fact made from the river, that we are the same, and asks what the results would be if we experienced these biological desires as daily realities.

inside you—I am you / or you are me. / Let us say to one another: *I am yours*—”. This voice echoes the narrator as lover in Diaz’s poems, suggesting that our relationship with water can be just as sacred, unifying and necessary as our relationships with each other. It shouldn’t be too difficult to imagine, as she writes in “The First Water is the Body”, that the river is “as sacred as a breath or a star or a sidewinder or your own mother or our beloveds” (51). And yet it is indeed that difficult, which is why Diaz attempts to approach the idea not as coherent speech but as sound and movement. Again, as I have outlined in Chapter 1, an “attentiveness” to the river results in a response—which is the poem itself—to the river’s own modes of expression, its texture, sound, its movement and migration, its relief from thirst, and as Diaz says, “in whatever small ways I can, I try to speak it back out” (“Natalie Diaz Live Reading”). Switching from one language to another, however, we can sense the misunderstandings and potential flaws of language, especially one which lacks a verbal and intrinsic connection to the body’s ontology: “There is often trouble choosing which language for the headset: // Makav: ‘Aha Haviily inyep nyuwiiich. / Espanol: A beber y a tragar, que el mundo se va a acabar” (69). The literal translation of the cited Spanish proverb is “Drink and swallow, for the world is going to end”, equivalent to the English proverb “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die”, in other words, consume oneself to death. Another way the poem uses space, then, is to enlist some of the many manifestations of language, and then, as they fail, extract us from them, extract us even from the imagined recordings in the imagined museum, and point us towards the sensuality of the body and water: “I am fluent in water. Water is fluent in my body” (69). Would we ignore the voice of a beloved who has expressed themselves as this non-human song has? Do we pursue destructive, life-threatening relationships with our life partners, as we do with the river? While Adorno argues that the obstacles towards progress are social and

psychological, Diaz would argue that they are also linguistic<sup>328</sup>. In these “*exhibits*”, Diaz exhausts every possible mode of expression—textual, visual, aural, olfactory, tactile—not unlike translator Erin Moure’s metaphor of the “ex(h)orbitant body”. Moure writes that translating poetry:

is a set of performative gestures, a performance, because it involves the body of the translator. Each of us translates differently because we have different bodies, with different cultures and histories, different pains and capacities. The act of translation is thus exorbitant always, because out of the translator’s mouth, the voice of another emerges. [...] Our bodies, our translators’ bodies, exist between the text and its reader in the new language, and although we pretend to be invisible, oh we are there. (Moure, “The Translator Relay”)

Diaz’s attention to how her own body and language have been informed by Mojave expression—the creation story which ontologically grounds her desire for the Colorado River’s survival—is embedded in her proposed translation of water, a form of betweenness, as Moure suggests. Her final exhibit called “*Art of Fact*” states, “America’s thirst tried to drink us away. / And here we still are” (72), the verbal hyperbaton at the end emphasising presence and possibility, not unlike Hedge Coke’s “Snake Mound”. Thus, her translations in all the senses reflect desire, sensuality, and the body beyond speech, which is also the river, and puts on display the violent distances we have maintained.

Diaz’s assertion of autonomy, simultaneous and multitudinous spatial expressions, and experiences beyond the capacities of speech in these “*exhibits*” present modes of receiving; are we guests or hosts in this museum? Are we onlookers or complicit? How do desires manifest, and whose desires are seen and heard? Diaz herself asks, “How do we receive one another better?” (Diaz, “Borderlands”). Her “*exhibits*” enact, rather than dictate, her own relationship with water so that the reader can “arrive in a way that connects you to that place, and allows you to have a

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<sup>328</sup> Adorno’s “social-psychological” diagnosis of “exchange societies”, those organised around producing exchange values for the sake of it.

memory of where you've been as well as an imagining of where you are arriving" (Diaz, "Borderlands"). In "*exhibits*", simultaneous manifestations of body-as-museum, body-in-museum, and body-as-water expand our reception of the poem as only text, or a vacuum unto itself, in its infinite renderings of kinetic translations for both water interrelationality and water as extracted profit.

"The Night Becomes the Song": Linguistic Parallels in "How the Milky Way Was Made"

Both desire and the Colorado River are again central to Diaz's poem "How the Milky Way Was Made", in which the river is recreated as both the lover's body, and the celestial body of the Milky Way. To achieve this, Diaz again empties herself—as in Salinas's "beyond"—in form and sound symbolism so the reader can "imagine new landscapes and relationships to them", as Erdrich describes (2018). Diaz writes:

My river was once unseparated. Was Colorado. Red-  
fast flood. Able to take  
  
  anything it could wet—in a wild rush—  
  
  all the way to Mexico.  
  
Now it is shattered by fifteen dams  
over one thousand four hundred and fifty miles,  
  
pipes and pumps filling  
swimming pools and sprinklers  
  
  in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. (61)

The poem pivots, as a river or as a human gesture, which Diaz endows with a certain sensuality: "able to take anything it could wet—in a wild rush—" (61). Then, overshadowing the American myths described in the "The First Water is the Body", she tells her own myth: "To save our fish,

we lifted them from our skeleton river beds, / loosed them in our heavens and set them aster— // ‘Achii ‘ahan, Mojave salmon” (61). These “‘Achii ‘ahan” become “‘Achii ‘ahan nyuunye— / our words for *Milky Way*”, which “glide gilled with stars [...] god-large, gold-green sides, / lunar-white belly to breast” (61). Firstly, Diaz enables this shifting process by reversing which language is portrayed as an alterity, with the English “*Milky Way*” in italics. Then, her alliteration of “‘Achii ‘ahan” and “aster” above phonically give significance to the Mojave linguistic parallel and relationality between these bodies, and lends itself to the possibility of its metamorphosis in English. English lacks the semantic connection between these earthly and cosmic bodies—a discrepancy which, Diaz suggests, facilitates the use of destructive “pipes and pumps” to serve Las Vegas. Diaz’s story of transmigrating the fish to the cosmos enhances a kinetic gesticulation towards, as Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong writes, the “ongoing reality” that the Mojave language carries; the river, its ecosystems and our interconnected bodies (Armstrong 178). This suggests an alternative vision of translingual engagement; because English cannot “carry” “‘Achii ‘ahan nyuunye and ‘Achii ‘ahan”, the phrase exists not *because* of the English poem, that is, because it is wrapped around English words, or that the English language delivers it, but rather it is situated so that it can be shared but not completely mined, at a distance “where it can’t be touched” (Diaz, “Between the Covers”). This linguistic autonomy is also a physical one, it is for Diaz a mode of bridging what was “once unseparated” (61)—“I am a body which is connected to language which has come up from this land, which is a body” (Diaz, “Between the Covers”)—while providing an adjacency of Mojave and English, and simultaneously guarding what we were not meant to fully discern, given the poet’s stance on the colonial history of

linguistic erasure, knowledge extraction, and the unknowability of individual experiences, as previously mentioned.

Interestingly, Paul Valéry, in the 1958 publication *The Art of Poetry*, proclaimed that 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry was becoming increasingly “fixed”, because the more the “poetic value of legends disappear”, the more they belong “to the domain of studies at the Sorbonne and pass from the vigor of Life to the inert condition of a document” (225). Diaz, and each of the poets discussed in this study, reverse this; her linguistic tethering of Mojave relationality in the present context of “pipes and pumps filling swimming pools and sprinklers in Los Angeles and Las Vegas” avoids “the assumption that this story takes place in precolonial times”, and insists of course that it doesn’t, as Valéry decries, belong to the academy (Simpson, “Decolonial Love”). Diaz’s understanding of being “outside of time” in this poem is “an ongoing intervention to linear thinking”, that land, as Simpson writes, “is both context and process” (“Decolonial Love”), which her translation upholds, despite the river being once “unseparated”, now “shattered”.

The reader is then carried further beyond material boundaries—the possible connections from salmon to Milky Way—towards the desire or “thirst” for the lover:

O, the weakness of any mouth

as it gives itself away to the universe

of a sweet-milk body.

As my own mouth is dreamed to thirst  
the long desire-ways, the hundred thousand light-year roads

of your wrists and thighs. (62)

Her figurative representation of the Colorado, the Milky Way, and the lover's body mirrors and refers to all three of these bodies, exemplifying what I have called an *embodied poem* in Chapter 2. Moreover, her vocative "O"—in response to the "ah" sounds above—evokes the mouth in orgasm, marking a traditional prayer-like turn from the "sapphired" path of the Milky Way to the "light-year roads" of the lover's body. In line with Diaz's form, which now has at least three of the dimensions mentioned, are Diaz's comments on the configuration of white space:

When I read a poem, I can see the lines, of course, but I can also see these constellations of words and images that zigzag and leap all over the page, like traces of connectivity. The white space is as present and active as the text. So the poem and its language happen all over, all at once [...]. (Diaz, "A Touch")

The kinetic zig-zag form Diaz imagines actualises itself here, and thus the poem can be approached not only linearly but as a constellational "all over", further establishing the connectivity of the river, body, and Milky Way, a form that echoes what Nelson calls "an ecological or even a cosmological self", not "a solid center" but "a semipermeable membrane" in a world of "fluid attractions" (230).

The poem is also in conversation with Carter Revard's poem "People from the Stars", which similarly pivots like Diaz's lineation choice, and in which he writes, "Wazhazhe [the Osage] come from the stars, / by their choice, not by falling / or being thrown out / of the heavenly bars like Satan / into Europe / and we are invited back / whenever we choose to go" (Revard 5). Revard, like Diaz, compares the luminous stars, and therefore the body—as the Osage worldview is that they descend from the stars—with the counterpoints of the "oil that lights their [Europe's] midnight highways / dangling across the land", the "creation of Las Vegas" and the "Stardust Inn" (6). Revard's poem illuminates a complexity also present in Diaz's poem; that colonial extraction and excess coexist with, and are eventually usurped by, the



luminosity of the body and desire. Both poems cohere ontological descentance, the direction of language towards the body, the body itself as an ongoing continuum, and their autonomous desires and migrations based on traditional stories. Diaz's migration from the river, to the celestial, to the body, is similar to Revard's migration from the stars, to the "Stardust Inn", to the body's movement towards the cosmos, "whenever we choose to go" (5): each echo Ortiz's assertion that "existence has been determined by the language of speech and the language of motion" (Ortiz, "The Language" 187). Therefore, Diaz's "desire-ways" perform a poetics of futurity, reaching with a "language of motion" beyond the text, towards a renewed, continual migration. As she describes, "I'm now, of course, and also part of a future that is made of the past, or a past that demands the future" (Diaz, "A Touch"), or as Lloyd L. Lee explains, narratives are as indicative of "where we've come from" and the present, as they are of "where we're going" (Lee, "A Conversation").

Diaz translates the moving landscape of what is spoken, seen and heard—the Mojave words for salmon, the desire for the lover—and what is unspoken: is the desire that the river and its ecosystem thrive so different from the desire for the body to thrive? Is this desire so different from both platonic and erotic desire? Diaz further theorises these simultaneities by addressing Mojave song cycles:

Mojaves have song cycles, some of which can last four nights long. In these songs, the words are not the song, but rather the night becomes the song, the relationship between the gourd as an instrument being thrown to make music and the ground it grew from, the river that fed that ground, the space between the stars and the cinders from the fire, the beginning where those songs came from and the future those songs move us toward. That's how I've been shaped when it comes to language – the words themselves are not the body, but the body's technology, the body's desire to be carried to another body.

Firstly, her statement probes, what does it mean for the night to become the song? Diaz seems to be reiterating that the night, and therefore the song, is kind of third place; a place of potential movement or communal presence which brings together these forces—the gourd, for instance, which was nourished by the river, the river which nourishes the people, and the people who were asked by their creator to protect the river. Likewise, as Philip Klasky notes from his research with Llewellyn and Betty Barrackman, the Mojave songs are “cultural maps with spatial and temporal dimensions”, correlating with Diaz’s assertion noted in Chapter 1 that in “Mojave culture, many of our songs are maps” (Diaz, “New Poetry”). Hubert McCord confirms that “All the stories are going down river” (Diaz, “Songs”), suggesting that songs describe and map the journeys Mojaves took in relation to the Colorado, as Diaz’s poem describes and maps the inter-relational journeys of the river, the celestial sphere, and the body. Klasky notes that “The songs are part of a 525-song cycle sung from sundown to sunrise at the wake and cremation ritual”, and chronicle the journeys “along the Colorado River from Avi Kwa Me or Spirit Mountain (Mt. Newberry, Nevada) to Avi Kwahath or Greasy Mountain (South Mountain, Arizona) [...]” from “the profound and the mundane” such as “hunting, fishing, and farming techniques” to “the discovery of fire” (Klasky, “Song”). Diaz’s poem similarly maps “the long desire-ways, the hundred thousand light-year roads” from the profound to the quotidian; how to cope with thirst, the shattering of the Colorado River with dams, pollution, pipelines, how to return to the journeys of the salmon, the streak of Milky Way, the lover’s “wrists and thighs”. Through this cartographic attention to material relationships, Diaz implies that the words she has created are not the poem, but rather the water, the Milky Way and the body become the poem.

The poet also confirms that rather than personifying non-humans, as one might misconstrue of “How the Milky Way Was Made”, the congruence between elements reflects the metamorphosing life cycles in Mojave belief: “the same energy is rushing through the stone, who’s rushing through the tree, who’s rushing through the human body, which is why we have a tree that cries, which is the cottonwood. Our birds, for example, cry because they were once human”, Diaz asserts (Diaz, “Songs”). This description aligns with the end of Louise Erdrich’s short story, “The Stone”:

As the blood seeped into her brain, she dreamed that she had entered a new episode of time, in which she and the stone would become the same through the endless repetition and decay of all things in the universe. Molecules that had existed in her body would be joined with the stone’s molecules, over and over in age after age. Flesh would become stone and stone become flesh, and someday they would meet in the mouth of a bird. (Erdrich, “The Stone”)

Rather than a linear, conveyor-belt progression, elements of bodies are on a metamorphosing ontological journey, as seen in Diaz’s meeting of linguistic and formalistic shifts. The use of Mojave in this poem exceeds a standard mode of translanguaging, in that it provides, in its constellational expansion, a narrative map to direct us out of language itself, and towards the kinetic states of becoming.

While scholars have highlighted “writing to survive” against colonial legacies (Archuleta 89), or poets as writing “the erotic *to* erode dominant stereotypes about Indigenous peoples” (my emphasis, Andrews 152), I argue, following Diaz’s assertion that “the least of poetry is what I wrote on the page” (Diaz, “A Celebration”), that Diaz’s poetry foregrounds a more semantic scope: her poem’s are textual indications towards the body’s physical union with the land, with community, and with language, and its articulations of pleasure and desire. Critiques often bypass or avoid probing language “that brings joy, and not just pain” (Diaz, “A Celebration”); poet Rishi Dastidar, for instance, recommends *Postcolonial Love Poem* for its “meditations on stolen land, stolen water and

erased bodies”, but does not mention the evident perceptibility of desire (Dastidar, “Best Poetry”). Consequently, a shift is needed towards developing “the language we need to live in America right now” as Diaz says, “not to survive, not to scrape by, but to live, to live fully, in all our complexities without this measurement or value of what is good or bad” (Diaz, “Natalie Diaz and Nikky Finney”), echoing Anishinaabe poet and scholar Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy’s call for writers to explore and question “our sexuality and sensuality, our way of writing our life force” (*Indigenous Poetics in Canada*, 189 qtd in Andrew 134).

In a podcast interview with poet Ian Macmillan, Diaz explains: “pleasure, the autonomy of pleasure, desire for example, have been denied to natives in certain narratives within the country. Not within our own communities of course, we find many ways of acknowledging that. But maybe outside of our individual communities” (Diaz, “The Verb”). This is largely due (along with the violence of forced linguistic, religious, and cultural assimilation, the stereotypes, and a “wound” imposed by a white-dominated culture, as Diaz writes in “Like Church”) to essentialising “Native Americans” as one culture; indeed, Macmillan’s episode was called “Native American Writing”. In Janel Cabbage’s terms, there is a distinction between being minorities and being minoritised, being underrepresented versus having been historically excluded (@JanelCabbage, “We are not”). I have argued that Diaz’s kinetic aesthetics subverts the reader’s desire to extract and mine her understanding of human and non-human relationality, and her own “autonomy of desire” and pleasure. To claim this autonomy, Diaz explores desire in all of its forms, not solely in resistance to exclusion or colonial repression or in resistance to narrow visions of poetry taboos, but beyond this, to textually gesticulate the possibilities of pleasure, even when entangled with ruin. Modes of desire are paradoxically but inevitably

intertwined—colonial greed, the lover’s desire to possess or devour, desire as a wound, ecstatic desire which begins with the body regionalism of non-human relationality—Diaz asks “is the ecstatic outside the body or inside the body?” (Diaz, “Between the Covers), and her poetry suggests its beginnings and endings are unquantifiable. Diaz’s ruminations around desire and the body are singularly brought to the forefront of aesthetics, not in negation of wounds but as inextricable to them, a shift from the long-standing traditions envisioning the poem as a self-contained artifact sufficient unto itself, “a pure poetry of *logos*, the only object of which is the contemplation of ideas, the production of truths” (Lecerle 105). Instead, expanding on her own Mojave understanding of “truth”, “human” and “body”, Diaz proposes that poetry is a question, “When and where does truth begin, and whose truth is it? What truths do Americans know about Natives or Indigenous peoples?” (Diaz, “Energy”), and in turn, where does the body end and begin? Indeed, where does the poem begin? Extremities, brinks, and peripheries are reached between land, water, cosmos and lover, and even between lover and reader. If truth’s self-satisfaction can be “lazy”, as Diaz writes, and its fixed linear dimensions eclipse other possible truths (Diaz, “Energy”), Diaz’s desire and rebodilying of poetry through personal mythologies, creatures, beasts and lovers is not just an affective *pathos*, but reaches towards her material existence through Mojave ontologies. Poetry diverges from, as Mallarmé defines, “the expression of human language restored to its essential rhythm of the mysterious meaning of the aspects of existence” which “confers authenticity and constitutes the only spiritual task there is” (Mallarmé, *Selected Letters* 138). Rather, it turns over the possibilities of language restored to its form of touch. Whether Diaz exceeds her own typographical structures in suggesting infinite, polychronological desires as in “Monday Aubade”, or if her form represents a metonymic

sensory inventory of her relationship with water, against the inventory of watermongers, as in “*exhibits from The American Water Museum*”, her kinetic aesthetics found in the poems outlined here—unpinnability or unknowability, a “rezzed out” jalopification of Christianity, disappearances and visibility, lightness, textual territory and Mojave linguistic parallels—lead us beyond the text and towards the body’s “autonomy of desire”.



## Conclusion

My research had no intention of answering the question, “What is Native poetry?”. As Diaz writes, the question should never be answered: “asking the question [...] means there can be infinite possibilities, infinite poets and their infinite poems who might be an answer. It is only when we answer this question, when we try to define what a native poet should be writing, what a native poet shouldn’t be writing, [...] that we begin to get smaller, that we silence the voices of our own possibility” (Diaz, “Natalie Diaz: Poetry”). I have, instead, examined a few of these “infinite possibilities” in my close readings surrounding what I have called kinetic poetics, in response to the following questions: what nuances of textual movement do Bitsui, Diaz, Hedge Coke and Long Soldier make intentionally or unintentionally explicit? How do these kinetics effects—translingualism, spatial iconicity, sound symbolism, lineation, punctuation, shape, prosopopoeia, appearances and disappearances—achieve alternative modes of approaching and receiving poetry today? How do these textual kinetics suggest extra-textual physicalities—the somatic relationships between both humans and non-humans off the page? How do the poets’ notion of time contribute to their kinetic representations of a linguistic and/or somatic continuum? More specifically, how do these kinetic nuances ask us to reconsider our perception of colonial extractivism and ecological disruption affecting indigenous communities in particular, in which we may be complicit? My examination of the technical forms of linguistic and typographical kinetics in Bitsui, Diaz, Hedge Coke and Long Soldier’s work has ultimately led to my assertion that the linguistic questions these poets propose and textually represent are inevitably questions about our bodies, our physical interactions with one another, and with our



lands and waters. Language provides a “place of exiting”, or “a place of moving out” (Bitsui, “The Song Within”), to recall Bitsui’s expressions, towards somatic realities decentred from the self, and in relation to a polychronographic present. The kinetic poetics in Bitsui, Diaz, Hedge Coke and Long Soldier’s work involve many nuances which I have detailed, but overall achieve two main elements: firstly, a sense of movement on the page through visual representation, spatial iconicity, sound symbolism, punctuation, simultaneity, and non-linear chronology; and secondly, a movement beyond text or speech and towards the body. These two modes of kinetics, I’ve argued, mark a distinct space within common trends in contemporary poetry and in research, setting this somatic, translingual focus apart from common contemporary prose forms, narrative linearity, hyper-conceptuality, or monovocal, first-person perspectives.

### Summary and Reflection

In Chapter 1, I considered Diaz’s poems “The First Water is the Body” and “The Red Blues” and Bitsui’s work across his three poetry collections, with the aim of highlighting their verb use and translingual movements, in particular their verb-centred syntax, form, and contemporary renderings of traditional perspectives in Mojave and Diné respectively which map intricate connections between human and non-humans. Firstly, I argue that the main modes of kinetic poetics at work in “The First Water is the Body” are the poet’s verb-based translation of her own endonym and her interrogative prosimetrum, and in the “The Red Blues”, her “out of time” cycles of past and present womanhood. Diaz’s translingual integration in “The First Water is the Body” is unusual in that the foundation of the poem is her own translation of the Mojave endonym, ‘Aha Makav “the river runs through the middle of our body, the same way it runs through the middle of our land” (46). Diaz’s translation, suggesting an unlearning of the Mojave

exonym and the colonial containment it embodies, provides the catalyst for the poem's contextualisation that follows, unravelling the effects of the colonial bifurcation of bodies in English. Examining the translation as a sense of coenesthesia, indigenous names as a kinetic "technology" in Diaz's terms, and carriers of ubiety—Carter Revard's insight is that "names have their Creation Story packed inside them like software" (Muller 41)—while building on Driskill's "decolonial skillshares", I argue that Diaz's own translation of the endonym suggests that the poem itself is not an *ab ovo* enunciation, but rather an answer to the river's own technology, capacity, materiality, and relationship to the body. In addition, I discuss Diaz's demetaphorisation of her translation (that she literally, not figuratively, carries a river in the body) as a kinetic gesture, because it enacts Yazzie and Baldy's emphasis on the "practices around water", following Tuck and Yang's insistence that "decolonization is not a metaphor", but a "material struggle" (Curley 58). The poet's series of questions—one of which is a response to Derrida's assertion that "every text remains in mourning until it is translated", which Diaz challenges, as I have discussed—contribute to her prosimetric form. As Carol Edelman Warrior convincingly argues regarding the slime mold form, this question-based prosimetricum creates a textual permeability that echoes the poet's own translation of the verb-based, kinetic endonym. At the same time, I examined how her questions approach a hauntological possibility: "If the river is a ghost, am I?" (50). Diaz's series of interrogations nevertheless seem to be guided by, as Whyte expresses, "relational responsibilities" (not just rights) across species and their vast ecosystems (qtd in Hoover 12). Differing from Timothy Clark's scalar effects, in which the "ecological signposts" are not "illegible", Diaz clearly spells out colonisation and normalised privilege, especially regarding the endangered, dammed, pumped and rerouted Colorado River. Whereas,

as Clark proposes, many have the daily worry of “leaving a light on or buying a steak” yet feel crushed under the “terrifying” but abstract “collective weight”, many indigenous nations have experienced visceral, colonial effects firsthand, and as Diaz expresses, their questions may drastically differ from Clark’s collision of disparate scalar poles (Gerrard 64)<sup>329</sup>. This leads to my final point, that Diaz’s porous, kinetic form, her demetaphorisation, and elucidation on the Mojave endonym, reach towards a “third place” or the “pre-verbal”, using John Berger’s term, which is exterior to a negotiation of linguistic translation and points towards the body/river synchronicity. In this way, the piece contrasts eco-apocalyptic narratives or anticipatory catastrophe, as in Lyn Keller’s reading of Jorie Graham and Evelyn Reilly, and aligns more closely with Leanne Betsamosake Simpson’s notion that “land must once again become the pedagogy” (*As We Have* 160). I finally argue that Diaz’s widely overlooked poem “The Red Blues” uses the menstrual cycle to superimpose and embody a number of pains born by women, but also a number of strengths and possibilities; colonial trauma, extraction, linguistic assimilation, forced sterility and toxic infertility, a dammed, polluted river, but also continuance and ancestral traditions. I draw on Baldy’s writing on the preparation and care of *’ahway nyaway*, a traditional bark skirt, to show Diaz’s synchronicity of care towards this process and the river—whose ribbon-like movements are echoed—made possible through her use of Mojave.

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<sup>329</sup> One of the ecocritical trends I have mentioned in my research is “eco-deconstruction” or the “deconstructive turn”, rethinking ecology primarily through Derrida, his predecessors and successors. Using terms such as the “an innate sense of affinity with other living things”, or Derrida’s term “bonds” which rethinks “the limits between the human and the animal, the human and the natural [...] (Derrida, 241 qtd. in Clark, “Ecocriticism and the Post-Literary”), “eco-deconstruction” searches for a “new environmental ethic” (Clark, “Scale as Force” 82) through the Western canon, while rarely taking into consideration the inseparability indigenous writers highlight between colonialism, extraction, and assimilation. Even more, in these deconstructive strains, current indigenous practices and activism which call for “systemic change” (Simpson, “Dancing”), are often neglected. The same is often the case in other strands of ecocriticism, though this is starting to evolve.

Alongside Diaz's connectivity, Bitsui agrees that "everything is intertwined", as he asserted in a personal interview (Bitsui, PI). The two main correlations I've highlighted between Bitsui and Diaz, which informed my decision to discuss their work in the same chapter, is firstly their integration of verb-centred conceptions of language to kineticise English—in Bitsui's words, "pulling the colonizer's language into our ways of knowing" (Bitsui, "A Conversation")—in order to illuminate simultaneities and superimpositions of the body's materiality and that of non-humans and homelands, and secondly their use of the term "third place". Grounded in Bitsui's own description of the Diné language being "always about going and moving through life and through time", I've argued that Bitsui's phonic, spatial and verbal representations—images that are dissolving, superimposing one other, being "etched", or metamorphosing—drive the sense of a phonic and visual "continuum" (Bitsui, PI) and a place-based topophilia, especially his italicised, verbal anthimeria as discussed in "*mountaining*", "*sunflowers*", "*abalones*" and "*sistering*". His one-word poem "Tó", meaning water, provides a foundation to my discussion on sound symbolism and spatial iconicity, and also marks a transition into Bitsui's descriptions of CO<sub>2</sub>-induced drought, toxic waste, the "extractive legacies" (Powell 29) of uranium mining, the extraction of Diné aquifers to power coal mines, and how this disrupts and rearranges the kinetics of place. His verbal anthimeria is therefore superimposed with rerendered Diné narratives in the colonial containment and contamination of the present, as well as a disturbing chiasmus of consumption and extraction; birds ingesting and coughing up diesel, ladders following bodies from mines, and, as in Diaz's haunting questions of disappearance, Bitsui's places become dislocated phantoms, inhabited by muddled punctuations

and fragments of life: “What crows above a city’s em-dash / doused in whale oil, / hangs here—named: *nameless*” (12).

Nevertheless, I’ve asserted that Bitsui similarly enlists a “third place”, which is at least three-fold: it involves the idea that work written “bilingually or in indigenous tongues [...] bring forth a third place, where the edges of difference are folded back and new ways of seeing emerge [...]” (Bitsui, “Converging” 35); it involves a kind of somatic gateway outwards or “a place of exiting” (Bitsui, “The Song Within”) beyond the text, because “the English language fails to describe work that is doing something in between” (Bitsui PI); and it is a phonic “resonance”, in particular regarding *Flood Song*: “How do I just create tone? How do I just create feeling in the space, so that people feel the deepness and heaviness of the moment?”, the poet asks (Bitsui, PI). The first element, the “third place” as a throughway towards “reimagining and re-practicing” human and land-based relations (Simpson, “The Sovereignty of Critique”)—represented, as I’ve argued, in the poem “Caravan” through the rescuing of a drunk relative on the street—is a gesture of autonomy and relational communication. I distinguish this from Matt Hooley’s focus on Bitsui’s work as an example of an ecocritical agenda, how “contemporary ecopoetics” can “challenge the politics of recognition as it inflects the methods and goals of ecocriticism” (147). While I agree that “settler colonialism has been and continues to be the greatest cause of environmental violence in (and as) U.S. history” and that it maintains that it is “innocent of responsibility” and yet is one of “the primary agents of reform” (Hooley 147), I’ve argued that Hooley misses the nuances behind Bitsui’s kinetic dissolving and “etching”, his visual and verbal symbolism, and the instrumentality of his “third place”. The poet asks, “how do I share, but also maintain some kind of control, or some kind of agency? How do I offer this but not fall into

these trappings where I'm dehumanised, objectified?" (Bitsui, PI). The multiple facets of the "third place" convene in his final sequence in *Flood Song*; the poet's final song provides this agency, and a way to "present" or translate the porosity of the effects of extraction and colonial containment throughout the Diné nation, as well as a "quest" for "beautifying things, "not in a defeatist way, but in a human way. Just to make people feel again" (Bitsui, PI). My analysis aligns with Blaeser's assertion regarding Vizenor, that "when we think about language itself as a border and examine the ways in which Vizenor attempts to transcend these borders, the use of the mythic and the use of Native language become important elements in this quest for liberation from the page" (Blaeser, "The Language" 13). Bitsui's work therefore can be read beyond the "politics of enclosure" (Hooley 147), with an attention to, following Ortiz's notion of the poem as perception, the way language extends beyond itself.

While much attention has been given to Long Soldier's responses to the federal apology in the second section of her collection *WHEREAS*, I explored, in Chapter 2, the typographical representations in her poems which probe the somatic transference of motherhood, the inheritance of daughterhood, and the communal practices, as she describes, embodied in the Lakota language and relations—particularly in the poet's own rumination about the search within language itself—through what I have called her thought-music, a translation of her internal dialogue on the kinetics of communication. I first discussed her poems which more directly navigate the somatic experiences of motherhood, arguing that Long Soldier reinvents lineation and punctuation to translate her thought process on reciprocal mother-daughter learning, as well as language loss and colonial trauma that she unwillingly transmits to her daughter—as in her poem *Wahpánica* and the sixth "Whereas" poem. At the same time, the poet employs calligraphic

typography, which I have called embodied poems—building on Mishuana Goeman, Heid Erdrich, and Ross Gay’s use of “embodied”—to suggest that the first and most effective communication—from mother to child—is physical and exposed, contrary to elusive rhetoric in the federal government’s non-apology. To demonstrate, I discuss the form, spacing and punctuation in her poems “Dilate” and her series “Obligations”, part of a larger visual project exhibited at The Racing Magpie in Rapid City, SD (2017-2018) entitled “Responsibilities and Obligations: Understanding Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ”. Using Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s “positive mirroring”, Arthur Sze’s negation of linguistic hierarchies and Orlando White’s notion of charged white space, I then addressed Long Soldier’s shape poems which are more directly responses to the physical manifestation the federal apology had on the poet. Long Soldier restructures a phrase from the apology in the deliberately quasi-illegible shape of a hammer, and employs complex symbolism and forms of Warren Cariou’s “edging” and Simpson’s “positive mirroring” in her five-part poem “Ĥe Sápa”, which includes the shape of an eagle as well as, among the other possibilities I’ve suggested, a mirror. I also explore how Long Soldier disclaims the tautological infallibility of the apology’s “Disclaimer” by writing her own. In her final triplet “grassesgrassesgrasses”, she responds to the Dakota reaction—which she calls a poem in itself—of killing Andrew Myrrick and stuffing his mouth with grass, after his dehumanising phrase “Let them eat grass”, while the Dakota were starving due to the effacement of their territory and elimination of their food sources. I argue that this final phrase is a way of “having the past and the future collapsing on each other”, as Leanne Simpson describes her own novel, *Noopiming* (Simpson, “Leanne Simpson [...]”); it is a response to the “poem” during the Dakota uprising and a response to the 2009 federal apology, which, along with questions of linguistic

transference as a mother, serve as “poetic occasions”, using James Wright’s term, for her collection.

In the third chapter, I discussed Hedge Coke’s verse play *Blood Run*—excerpts of which Hedge Coke read to South Dakota’s Game, Fish & Parks Department, whose board members consequently voted to protect the site—in particular the effects of her prosopopeia, which I compare with traditional occasions, heteroglossic qualities and modern poetry which non-human voices speak; her visual representations and spatial iconicity; and her stylistic singularity of storytelling and embedded conceits. As mentioned, although there have been only a few critical readings of *Blood Run*—namely Chadwick Allen’s articles “Serpentine Figures, Sinuous Relations: Thematic Geometry in Allison Hedge Coke’s *Blood Run*” (2010), and “Performing Serpent Mound: A Trans-Indigenous Meditation” (2015) which reiterates some themes in the former article, and “‘In the End, Our Message Weighs’: Blood Run, NAGPRA, and American Indian Identity”, by Penelope Kelsey and Cari M. Carpenter—further analysis was needed of Hedge Coke’s techniques listed above. Her personas speak to their own kinetic interdependencies; I argued that their embedded intertextuality as well as referencing unrepresented characters, suggesting their interrelationality is much larger than the text can contain, freed them from being conceived as static entities. Her listology of site-specific flora and fauna counter the lists of the “Squatters”, whose aim is to profit from destroying the mounds and the site’s species, and her decentring, a type of funneling outwards, as Hedge Coke describes, illuminates small-scale to cosmic-scale relationships, including what Bouttier calls “perceptual” and “linguistic constraints” (158).



Finally, I returned to Diaz's poetry to discuss her work through the lens of desire; the "autonomy of desire" (Diaz, "A Lexicon") or the "autonomy of pleasure" (Diaz, "The Verb"), as she calls it—corresponding with her definition of autonomy as relationality—is a major yet often under-examined element of her work. After an overview of her use of form—the pantoum, the abecedarian, triolets—I examined her suspension of sexual tension in "Monday Aubade", building on the poet's notion that poetry is one of the ways "language touches". I also addressed the kinetics of the infinite, which is a way Diaz exceeds the thematic constraints of the aubade: partly due to the laws of physics, as the poet elaborates, we do not really touch one another but experience a "repulsion of electromagnetic fields" (Diaz, "A Touch"). Desire, then, makes the chronological constraint of the aubade endless. I then observed her marriage of desire to monsters or beastly creatures, devouring, and disappearances, which in fact evoke a type of visibility. Expanding on her autonomy of pleasure, I argued that her *jelopification* or sexualisation of Christian themes renames and reverses positions of sin and reshapes lovers' bodies into movements of sensuality ("we fuck like we church—best", to recall "Like Church"). This points to a series of other renamings, for instance forced colonial names on federal census records, as opposed to the significance of Mojave names recounted by her uncle Ahmoch Chumee Mahakev, or Hubert McCord. Monsters become lovers, anxiety becomes a desire, a prayer becomes sex, and a pair of hands are renamed in a suggestively infinite list of gods. Building on Italo Calvino's theories of lightness, Pedro Salinas's "beyond", Leanne Simpson's "productive refusal", Heath Justice's "fierce love", and again on Revard and Warrior, I argue that the desiring and desired bodies in Diaz's poems are not embodiments of wounds, they aren't wound (as in the past tense of the verb "to wind") by colonial chronology, nor are they acting

solely in resistance to coloniality. Rather, desire is the way “a poem moves”; its kinetic ecstasy and moments of suspension illuminate Mojave-based synchronicities between the lover, the river, and the cosmos. In having “turned over everything” (“Episode 13”), the “autonomy of pleasure” evades the reader’s own desire to have full access, to extract, and to claim knowledge.

### Contributions and Intentions

My aim in these close readings was to prioritise the linguistic, syntactic, typographic, and somatic conversations that these four poets stimulate in their differing aesthetics, and in correspondence with their distinct indigenous traditions and linguistic perspectives, to highlight their poetic contributions to alternative ways of seeing language. Their poetry provides a kinetic channel towards our physical transferences, inheritances, receptions and responses, in relation to our own bodies and the lands we interact with—or indeed, neglect and destroy. As I have outlined, these kinetic effects denounce the toxic, convoluted entanglement of patriarchal colonisation, the harmful modes of extraction—intellectual, environmental, and cultural—and the ecological injustices most viscerally affecting these poets’ indigenous lands. However, what often gets ignored in poetic critique—in favour of sociological, anthropological, or identity and cultural themes as the main focus while poetic nuances are more of a footnote—is the ways in which poets, these four poetics in particular, extend language—because language itself, and certainly the English language, “fails” as Bitsui notes (Bitsui, PI)—towards a “third place”, where somatic relationships become more visible as interconnected happenings. Indeed, all of these poets actively denounce and invalidate colonial violence and ecological devastation off the page, and reiterate positive, reciprocal ways of receiving and giving, while pursuing ontological interrogations, language revival projects, protesting extractivist projects, and maintaining and

reconsidering traditional practices. As I've elaborated on in Chapter 4, Diaz insists that the poem is "the least" of who she is and what she's written; it is only a fraction of what is physically possible (Diaz, "A Celebration"). And yet, these poets write. Why? An attention to their kinetic forms, lineation, punctuation, iconicity, non-linearity and modes of simultaneity reveals that while language fails, it can also attempt to reach outside of itself, to point more directly towards a gesture, a "belief" ("how can I translate—not in words but in belief—that a river is a body [...]") as Diaz writes (48) to express not what we are *not* but to reconsider the ways in which we are "all of it                    the pieces", as Long Soldier writes (76).

My focus on these close readings also correlates with the poets' own opinions about identity politics which tend to neglect their contributions as poets, and their disapproval of being dumped into a broad stroke, separate literary category of "Native poetry": apart from Diaz's quote above that the question "what is native poetry?" cannot be answered, Erdrich proclaims "There is no such thing as Native American poetry" (Erdrich, "Introduction"), Nick Martin writes "Native Lit is dead" (Martin, "Native"), and fiction writer Brandon Hobson, member of the Cherokee nation, has said in an interview with *Tin House*: "I don't consider myself any more of a Native American writer than I do just a fiction writer. I consider myself a fiction writer. I think for people to say, "Here's American literature", then "Here's Native American literature", can draw an issue, as if we're put into another category" (Hobson, "Between the Covers"). Bitsui, noting that "everything is projected onto Native people, from the outside" creates a language that moves in a space outside of "these trappings" where he's "dehumanized, objectified", and Long Soldier's typographical thought-music doesn't "teach in statistics" (75), but questions how one tries to affix "the space in which to place" her (8). Instead, she

foregrounds her physical and mental sensibilities as a writer and mother: “I am a poet, so I think. I’m a mother, so I think and think” (Long Soldier, “Profiles in Poetics”). Diaz uses desire and poetry as “touch” to be “unpinnable”, slipping away from these categories which represent “the least part of who we are”. Upholding the body and its relationships and the body of language, as quoted in Chapter 4, Diaz asserts: “It’s striking that many of us do not use these markers (PoC, WoC) in our communities or families. I use them most with people outside of my intimate world. [...] I think we can do a lot better at touching one another in language than these terms” (Diaz, “Ways To Become Unpinnable”).

I have also considered that a significant aspect of this linguistic reaching is driven by an attention to the multiple modes of translingualism in the work of these four poets, including the verb-centred qualities of Diné, Mojave, Lakota, and Wyandotte, though Hedge Coke uses it sparingly in *Streaming*, to address the body’s gestures, desires, bodies of land and water, natural migrations and the collisions with types of colonial extraction. Translingualism does not affix the poem as an encapsulated vacuum but pushes, aches, slips, and opens towards our materiality and that of others, suggesting a self-reflection on our shared biological needs. Indeed, as Margaret Noodin notes, “translation should be a conversation, not an act of assimilation” (Noodin, “Miidash”). As Diaz says, “I do have these connections [...], sometimes they’re very painful to have, to watch your land be diminished or extracted from, or to watch our river, Ahavil, it is the most endangered river in the United States. So sometimes those relationships are painful and heavy, and at the same time those are the relationships I can turn to right now [...] not to be *not* difficult but to let it be small enough that I can recognize something larger” (my emphasis, Diaz,

“Natalie Diaz Live Reading”). Although, and because, these poets don’t always translate their translingual phrases in English, each one provides a wider aperture.

In framing adaptation—the ability for plants, animals, and humans, to adjust to a changing environment—Eppelsheimer et al. refer to Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf’s concept of linguistic relativity: that language actively contributes in the construction of one’s environment. In turn, they agree with linguist Michael A. K. Halliday who asserts that: “Language is not a superstructure on a base; it is a product of the conscious and the material impacting each on the other—the contradiction between our material being and our conscious being as antithetic realms of experience. Hence language has the power to shape our consciousness [...]” (179– 80). Although Halliday’s perception that language molds our consciousness provides a valid standpoint, in the case of Bitsui, Diaz and Long Soldier, the “material being” and the “conscious being” are not “antithetic” poles mediated by language, but rather, as Diaz suggests, language can be equivalent to our concept of the self and even a carrier of that self, and, as it has a direct correlation with ontology (the Mojave endonym, the Mojave creator providing the clan names), language not only shapes the consciousness but shapes the perceptivity of the body and one’s actions. For instance, I’ve also discussed how language and song have in fact made land features and living things come into being in Diné oral tradition, which shapes Bitsui’s verb-centred, kinetic command of English. Long Soldier’s internal ruminations of Lakota meanings are filtered through her physical experience—not in response to a contradictory body and consciousness colliding with each other—as a mother and community member. This transfers into her poetry: “sometimes form comes first. Sometimes a shape comes first. There is no content; the content is yet to come. I’ll wake up and I’ll see a shape or I’ll feel a

shape. [...] I'll sit and work on it, and there's no language yet [...] Then I have to sit, be patient, and allow the language to reveal itself" (Interviewed by Akbar, Divedapper), Long Soldier writes. Thus, sometimes language is firstly physical, which is why, particularly in reference to Long Soldier, I've adopted the word "embodied".

Finally, Wittgenstein believed that philosophy "doesn't really progress" as we're "still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks", because language itself keeps asking us the same questions: "As long as there continues to be a verb "to be" [sein] that looks as if it functions in the same way as "to eat" [essen] and "to drink [trinken], as long as we still have the adjectives "identical" [identisch], "true" [wahr], "false" [falsch], "possible" [möglich], as long as we continue to talk of a river of time [einem Fluß der Zeit], [...] people will keep stumbling over the same puzzling difficulties and find themselves staring at something which no explanation seems capable of clearing up (*Culture and Value* 15)". This way of seeing linguistic structures is Westernised. As I have outlined, the verb "to be" does not function as "to eat" or "to drink" in Diaz's translation of 'Aha Makav, because the endonym unfixes the conjugation of "be": her translation isn't "I am like a river", it is "A river runs through the middle of my body". Likewise, as I reference in Chapter 1, in response to a Mojave language learner's frustration in there being no literal translation for "I love you", the elders provided verb-centred, gesture-based expressions to offer in Mojave as close glosses; "I would die for you", "you are my eye", and "I'm going to be stingy with you" (Diaz, "Between"). Diaz similarly asserts that the Mojave language "carries in it the ways we love and touch each other": "to say, kiss me, is to say "fall into my mouth" (Diaz, "If What"). Of course, Diaz's subsequent elucidation in "The First Water is the Body" proves that this is no "clearing up", as Wittgenstein

writes, but certainly does open up new forms of “stumbling”. Long Soldier likewise unsettles the function of the adjective “identical”, which Wittgenstein provides as an example above, in her rumination on identity and its etymology “idem”—“as if any of us can be identical ever. To whom, to what?” (75)—and reconfigures its notion using the Lakota word “haŋké”: “This relationship to the other. Some but not all, still our piece to everything” (64). Finally, Bitsui’s verbal anthimeria certainly approaches alternative linguistic questions; “*mountaining*”, a night that “*abalones*” (a reference to Doko’oosliid or the San Francisco Peaks), a song that “*sunflowers*”, “When we river” among others foreground “going and [...] moving through life and through time”, a perceptivity central to Diné expression, which reshapes itself into Bitsui’s poetic diction (Bitsui, PI).

#### An Indigenous Focus and Recommendations for Further Research

Throughout my analysis, while I have engaged in the work of non-indigenous writers (Salinas, Lorca, Sze, Calvino, Barthes, among others) who have influenced or who correspond with these four poets, I have prioritised indigenous scholars, poets, and activists in my readings of Bitsui, Diaz, Hedge Coke, and Long Soldier’s work, as they are often intellectually and conceptually in closer dialogue with these poets. They theorise indigenous praxis in their own terms, through their own languages, and through first-hand experience. Simon Ortiz’s notion that a song or poem is both expression and perception has been a keystone throughout my research, as well as Leanne Betasamosake’s scholarship on the reiteration of story and human and non-human relationality. I follow Simpson’s assertion that “if we are not, as peoples of the earth, willing to counter colonialism, we have no hope of surviving climate change”, and with countering colonialism comes countering “extracting and assimilating”, both of which effect

more drastically the indigenous nations in North America (Simpson, “Dancing”). My readings have, I hope, contributed to the attention towards poets of indigenous nations in their own terms, and as much more than poets, but also contributed to the study of what I call kinetic poetics, particularly in postcolonial and ecocritical scholarship. I have built on these four poets’ own theories on language, kinship, non-human relations, and modes of movement in the hopes that my contribution provides more accessible bridges in approaching the poetic thought process embodied on the page, which again extends beyond itself. Further studies could address these implications, as well as a continued attention to close readings of contemporary poets, particularly poets of native nations, such as Kimberely Blaeser’s reading of Gerald Vizenor, Craig Santos Perez’s reading of Lehua Taitano, and non-native critics Sarah Dowling, Robert Dale Parker, Antonio Fernandez and Bénédicte Meillon. I encourage further research on kinetic poetics and the connections between its possible embodiments, and the many facets of desire as beyond forms of resistance first and foremost. As I have outlined, many indigenous scholars, in particular Deborah Miranda, Melissa K. Nelson, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, James Thomas Stevens, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Daniel Heath Justice, as well as Bitsui, Diaz, Long Soldier and Hedge Coke, are expanding the angles from which desire can be approached.

### Navigating a “Not Knowing”

At the Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA) conference which I attended in March 2020, there was a session called “Trauma Theory in Indigenous Literature”. One of the panelists briefly mentioned her indigenous background in her introduction, and her presentation also made a reference to her heritage. Another non-native panelist, who hadn’t heard this, intervened towards the end of the session, asserting her anger at the lack of indigenous scholars



on the panel, asking “how many indigenous people do we see on this panel? None!”, while the other panelist politely raised her hand. At a very moving event organised by the Paris-based association Comité de solidarité avec les Indiens des Amériques (CSIA-Nitassinan) in October 2019, “Femmes Autochtones des Amériques”, with presentations by Diné activist Michelle Cook, Casey Camp-Horinek (Ponca), rapper Q-052 (Mi’kmaq) and filmmaker Kim O’Bomsawin (Abenaki), among others, there was a roundtable featuring Tukano activist and artist Daiara Tukano. The event was mediated by a well-known French journalist, known for her support of indigenous women’s voices. Although the journalist clearly had kind intentions, her dictation of how the introduction, questions, and topics were framed, according to the typical conventions of round tables in France, made Tukano uncomfortable; Tukano had other approaches, other issues she wanted to focus on, and an alternative introduction of herself on her own terms. Eventually, in her frustration, Tukano ended up from scratch: having come all the way from Brazil, she introduced herself using the conventions of her own language, and asserted what she thought was the most important message to convey in the short time she had. The journalist, uncomfortable and visibly vexed, hurried off stage. The result, however, was direct and memorable: Tukano encouraged us to stop investments (sugar cane, mining, soy) which are detrimental to the environment; to plant as many trees as possible; that activism on the streets is fruitful, but planting trees is more urgent; and that it’s cynical to rely on indigenous people to tell us how to save the planet. We can, however, make their message more visible, question our own actions and, by “planting, sowing, and harvesting the future”<sup>330</sup>, combat this violence—words that have continued to resonate in me.

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<sup>330</sup> Daiara spoke in French to the French audience, and her original phrase was: “Planter, semer, récolter l’avenir”.

In January, 2020 at Librairie Millepages in Vincennes, Joy Harjo gave a reading which I attended; it was, as for anyone who has had the luck of hearing Joy Harjo speak, a great honour and privilege. I briefly had the chance to exchange with her afterwards; she asked me what I did in Paris and I told her I was reading indigenous poetics in a doctoral program, to which she responded, with a warm, well-meaning smile, “well, what are you doing here then?” As in Simpson’s model of “positive mirroring”, these incidents during my doctoral research made me question: what was I contributing? Where am I from? Am I listening? Have I unintentionally projected my own assumptions and fixed views? What do I know, and what am I trying to grasp, without really knowing? Long Soldier questions, as I examined in Chapter Two, “What did I know about being Lakota?”, which certainly makes me revisit my own self-reflections. Similarly, Diaz suspends the question of not knowing, acknowledging that her partner, for instance, has experiences that she will never understand. One of the things that will “save us”, she says, along with returning to indigenous knowledges, languages and non-human relationships, will be this “not knowing”:

It will be the fact that I do not know what it’s like to be a black queer woman which is a knowing my partner has, she does not know what it’s like to be a native a Mojave, Akimel O’odham, Mexican queer woman and that doesn’t mean we won’t build our own knowledges together, but it’s important that we might not understand each other. I really believe in misunderstanding or not understanding. [...] but it also feels important to me in terms of the ideas of love and ecstasy. I do think love is a-not knowing. I think that it is the willingness, the ability or the luck of being in the space between what we know of one another and again very valuably what we don’t know about one another, and yet can still be alongside. (Diaz, “Between the Covers”)

As much of my analysis has involved linguistic and typographical surprises, simultaneities, multiplicities, and juxtapositions, I am encouraged by Diaz’s suspense of “not understanding”

and yet being “alongside”. This is perhaps one of the arteries of the poetic experience, and has, I hope, come across in my readings; my aim was not to relate the poets’ language as if fully knowing their experience, but rather to relate a deep willingness to approach and receive poetry, and to “be alongside”. I am again reminded of what Allison Hedge Coke told me in conversation in Lisbon at the 2019 MLA Symposium, in the context of scholarly framings of identity and knowledge, a neglect of linguistic intricacies, and writing poetry: “When you’re in your poet head, you lose all of that. What I tell people is to just imagine that there are roots going through your feet down below where we’re standing, so deep that there is water and you can draw it up into yourself when you need it, you close your eyes and let the water come up. [...] Use the body as a tool, rather than machine technology, the body is the tool” (Hedge Coke, PI).

## Annex 1: A Personal Interview with Sherwin Bitsui

Date of interview: December 8, 2020

Place of Interview: Online

**Stephanie Papa:** Sherwin, thank you so much for your time. First of all, how are you?

**Sherwin Bitsui:** I don't know if we can really articulate how we are right at the moment. It's been so crazy; politically, the isolation, with the pandemic.

**SP:** I heard that you lost one of your grandmothers. I was very sorry to hear that.

**SB:** Yes, probably in the Western view it's my great aunt, but in Navajo culture, they're all our grandmothers, they're all our mothers, there's no distinction. She was the last of her generation, and she was the clan matriarch too. Once she left, it just made me remember being there and growing up in that world, and just noticing it sort of trickle away slowly, slowly.

**SP:** I'm sorry, I know that it's been a really difficult time in general for the Navajo Nation in terms of the pandemic.

**SB:** Yeah. I lost 2 relatives, and several of my family members got it but luckily they survived. So every day is overwhelming. It's spiking again now, which is scary. People live in these multi-generation homes, it's just a way of survival, so if one person brings it into the home, it's going to infect everybody. And there's nowhere to go, that's the situation. It's intensified because of poverty, and survival...it's a real challenge.

**SP:** Yes, I can't even imagine. It seems, though, that there has been a fantastic community effort with relief funds and opportunities to donate. You participated in a wonderful reading for the Saad éí Na'iilná Diné Writers' collective, with Jake Skeets and many other poets, to raise money for Covid-19 relief. It seems like so many people have joined an effort to help.

**SB:** Yeah, that's been one of the positive things throughout this experience, the community.

**SP:** I wanted to start with movement in your poetry, and the ways language can move. You've mentioned in a few of your interviews that the Diné language in particular has this effect, and how Diné is very verb-based. Can you speak about how this informs your thoughts as a poet?

**SB:** It's not necessarily intentional. It's not necessarily something I go into a poem thinking. It's just something that seems to shadow the work, it was never really thought out. I never thought, OK, I'm going to bring one idea from this language into this, it just happened organically. It was only until recently that I started having a conversation with my language, or just beginning to study the Navajo language and just really listening to the words, and then realizing that so much of how we converse in Navajo is always about going and moving through life and through time. So, I definitely sense that somehow it's just a way that we operate, and these things happen in conversation, casual conversation.

I just remember always calling my grandmother or even my parents and always asking, what are you doing, where are you going? The “ing” is really important in the Navajo language. So, “Ha’íish-baa naniná?”, “what are you doing?”. I usually ask that to my mom, which translates to “what’s the gossip out there”.

**SP:** That’s a little different from “what are you doing”!

**SB:** [Laughs] And then she’ll start talking about stuff. She’ll say “I didn’t tell you this but…”

**SP:** That’s brilliant. This continuous “ing” is especially prevalent in your latest work, *Dissolve*. You use “mountaining” and “sistering” as verbs.

**SB:** Yeah, I mean the notion of “*mountaining*”, “this mountain stands before us *mountaining*”, it’s even standing. Again, it just happens. But I guess, today's news was about the Himalayas and they grew two feet over this past year or something like that. So the mountains are mountaining, they are moving, they are growing.

**SP:** Do you think that’s related to growing up in Dinétah and having the landscape all around you? It’s interesting to me that so much of your work is full of movement, densely colliding images and sounds which merge in and out of each other, while the southwestern desert landscape is so vast and splayed out.

**SB:** I think just being on the land, all of my youth I spent outdoors, and where I grew up it’s a very rocky volcanic kind of place. We have a butte next to my grandmother’s house and there’s another huge mesa behind it, and as a shepherd I would have to hike this mountain—we call it a mountain but it’s actually a butte—climb up there in the morning and then be up on this sort of sky island with the sheep, then coming back for lunch and going up again. It’s just right outside the door literally, I don’t know how many hundred feet it is, but it’s up there. You can get a beautiful bird’s eye view. And I think the world was always alive at that particular moment, and even though it seems quiet, it would always be full of birds and insects and the sheep, the collar

bell, and dogs yipping, it just was always full of music. Then the planes would scratch across the sky also, that was a constant thing, because the air was so clear and so dry that when the planes would go overhead, they're really loud, although they're so far up in the sky. So all of the colors and all of the sounds. Also just the compression, I think. With *Dissolve*, I thought it was going to be...in the midst of writing *Dissolve*, it was a kind of stalling of this movement. I thought *Flood Song* was sort of flowing or floating so heavily, and I felt like *Dissolve* was the stopping of that, or the halting of that movement. Because I think the images themselves are stopping in mid-movement. And I felt like there were all sorts of photographs within the book, things are being painted or they're being etched into form throughout parts of the work. One of my favorite lines, I think, or images is "Penciled in with burnt ivory smell" (*Dissolve* 19).

**SP:** That nothing of etching also makes me think about your line, in *Shapeshift*, "and owls, [...] / carrying the night between them: a wet blanket designed by a woman who dreams of / lightning, / saying that we have finally become mountains" (64). An image seems to have a symbolic pull, and then continuously merges into other images.

**SB:** I think with *Dissolve* I was referencing a lot back to *Shapeshift*, and intentionally trying to build a bridge with *Shapeshift*. I'm definitely interested in this sort of deep symbolism within the work. It's not necessarily something that I intended, but I do realize that there is meaning. There's something else going on in the work and often I don't even know what's happening, I write out of another kind of space.

Mainly with *Dissolve*, I was interested in diffusing, and in the energy of the poems. I think what was really fun to do was to create a line that was going in one direction and then would suddenly veer back to the right, and then be pulled to that direction and then veer again. It was erasing itself as it was also moving forward. There's that kind of action within it. I never wanted to go directly into something. I think my work early on wasn't really included in a lot of papers about Native poetry, it wasn't necessarily read, because I think the language around poetry or Native poetry was that socio-political or environmental lens they were reading everything through. That was the language about Native poetry at the time. So I think my resistance in a way was also the fact that I was privileged to resist; I come from that world already, I speak the language, I grew up in a traditional family. My resistance was also like an opening door into something new, some other way of writing, that I think if I were just doing the identity work, or writing about pop Indian tropes, I don't know where I would be now. There's definitely a sort of tether and tightness in the work.

At the time when I was writing *Dissolve*, there was a moment that I was really going to just focus on the hovering—"the hovering bird twice and through the cage we swell new teeth throbbing in our lungs" (25)—because there was a sort of hanging quality. Things were somewhat hovering

above the land or above something concrete. And I was also thinking about being home and being on the reservation, and having this ancestral home, having this deep connection to home. It's home in the deepest sense, and in the most sacred sense it's also home, but it's also political and it's also a reservation, and we also don't own anything really, we're still landless, because we can't do anything. It's federal property essentially, and we're federal property. But I was interested in that idea too. Maybe it's the reality of all peoples in a sense, that we don't really *ever* own the land. We're just hovering above it. And I was interested in the Navajo context because so much of our culture and language exists there, in this particular corner of the world. So that was one of the early directions *Dissolve* wanted to take me in, but it veered off this way again. It's always about dissolution, ideas are dissolving as they're uttered into form.

**SP:** Absolutely, this reminds me of your poem "Caravan", which positions itself as an overture for the rest of *Dissolve*. The car shifts gears to drive away from the Caravan bar, and it seems that in this act, the driver and the character he rescues are almost dissolving into another world, a place of safety. You wrote in your essay "Converging Worlds" about a "third place", in which a new way of seeing emerges by being bilingual in Diné and English, in reference to encouraging Diné students. This notion of dissolving and emergence reminds of how you describe this third place.

**SB:** Yeah. I realize how there are a lot of cars in my work.

**SP:** Yes, and headlights.

**SB:** Yeah, traveling. "Coyote scattering headlights instead of cars" (*Shapeshift* 6).

**SP:** That's one of my favorite lines. Do you think those images come from having to use a car a lot to get around on the reservation?

**SB:** You're in a car a lot with your family. The nearest town is 40 miles off the reservation. So we would travel there to do laundry on the weekends or get groceries. So a lot of time is spent in a car. And what do you do in a car? You tell stories. Some of the best stories I remember were told in cars, and my dad was always amazing at it. He would turn down the radio and he would start telling stories while we were driving.

**SP:** And then again, cars and oil are inextricably linked to colonial control, and fossil fuel extraction. Your work really reveals the extent to which the Diné nation has been extracted by American colonization, and the constellation of effects that has—images of animals and landscapes are coalescing with oil and mining, for instance. One of the lines that brings that home for me is, "Two birds spitting oil: sunbeam, soot, sunbeam". There's a rainbow effect on

the oil that the birds spit, but rainbows themselves are also significant in Diné narratives. Everything is intertwined in one complex image.

**SB:** Everything is intertwined. Also linguistically. When someone in my family would get a new car, they would say “né lin nash ǰǰ”, ǰǰ is horse, but “lin” is like the plural of a horse<sup>331</sup>. So there’s that shift; in Navajo thought the horse and the car are very similar. The car would also be personified as an animal, but again it’s just within the turn of the language. All of those dualities are constant. Even the memory of calling my grandmother when I was up in South Dakota. I was driving, my grandmother was in the hospital at the time, and my aunts gave the phone to her. In order for me to tell her where I was, because she never spoke English, I was trying to tell her where I was from her perspective. And I was thinking, I don’t know how to say the Dakotas in Navajo, and I asked my aunt to tell her where I was. In her language, in her point of view, we consider the plains as Nashoné Bikeyah<sup>332</sup>, which is the home or land of the Plains people. So it’s instilled inside the language. The language is trying to adjust to these places, but there is still this notion of a peopled land in the Navajo language and how to describe places. Even in Albuquerque, you just refer to the land by who lives on top of it.

**SP:** It reminds me of what Lloyd L. Lee writes about Diné values. Being compassionate towards your people, having love for your people.

**SB:** Yeah, I think that’s always there. It’s also the family system. K’é. K’é is the web<sup>333</sup>. Everything follows that kind of symmetry or that structure. When we talk about my lines as being sort of dense or having so much in the line, it’s similar because Navajo is also phrasal, so you’ll have a whole sentence or a phrase that has several different words but they’re not words, you can’t isolate them. I think Navajo culture, Navajo language, it just does that somehow. Even rugs, if you look at the intricacy of the rugs, the tapestries, there’s such a focus on the compression, and making them so much more dynamic in terms of their geometries.

**SP:** Did you experience those traditions, like tapestry making, when you were growing up? You’ve also mentioned elsewhere that your grandfather was a sand painter.

**SB:** It just was so ubiquitous, it was just life. My grandfather was a medicine man and some of

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<sup>331</sup> This is my own interpretation of the spelling of this in Latin script.

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<sup>333</sup> Larry Emerson defines K’é as “compassionate interdependent kinship relations”. (Emerson, “Diné Culture” 56). Vincent Werito, like Emerson, relates K’é to the principles of hózhó, a Diné philosophy—“the lifelong journey of striving to live a long and harmonious life”—which orients and guides “how an individual lives and develops respect and/or reverence for self, his or her relatives, and the natural world” (Werito 26-27).



his rituals would involve sand painting. Those are so complex as well, you're literally pinching colored sand over the earth, they're also very temporal, they're quickly erased after the ceremony. Sometimes during some of the ceremonies, you might have a sand painting the size of a hogan, and it's just this piece of art. It's so beautiful, but as soon as it's over it's just swept away.

**SP:** Do you feel it may have influenced your work? On one hand, it's a form of "dissolve", to use your word.

**SB:** Yeah, we're a people that get healed by art in a way. Art heals; songs, poetry, and sand paintings. There's a kind of notion that it has a healing quality. I like this notion of impermanence. In that vein also, the books are so strange, I feel like the poem is more alive as I'm reading it. That's when it exists. You can put it on the page and it moves around the world, but for me there was always this idea that when I give a reading, the poem then is alive and the poem then is a space that we share. And it's always been really strange giving readings, in places I've never imagined giving readings, and to see people in the poem with me, they're imagining and processing these images in real time. And I thought, that's really interesting, I guess all poets do that. But I'd never thought of it. I always thought of it as an oral, spoken thing.

**SP:** I'm thinking of your reading with Joan Kane at the Lannan event in 2014. When you're reading *Flood Song*, it's spoken as a composition that has been taken into a complex orchestration. The cadence came alive when you read it; sometimes the intensity lulls, sometimes it quickens. Is this something that happens naturally when reading, or did you compose it with these distinct sections?

**SB:** I've learned to slow down a little bit. I remember when I first read *Flood Song* it was so powerful to me, I had to keep up with it. And I remember, even sometimes I would go inside a kind of trance when I was reading it, because I'm inside the poem too. That was a big part of the experience; trying to go back into the poem or have the poem give me this sort of metric, the rhythm, and then try to replicate that. But at the same time, I would read it really fast, and people would get bombarded with images.

**SP:** You do stay on a similar pitch it seems; your pacing and rhythm shifts as if there are distinct movements, but your pitch stays on a similar register.

**SB:** That was something that again came through the work, it was never something I set out to do. But once another Navajo poet came to one of my readings, it was early on when I was giving readings for *Shapeshift*, and she heard me read "Northern Sun", and that was the beginning of me going into that space. She came up to me after and said the way I was reading these poems

reminded her of how she used to hear the elders speak, when she was a child. Her elders were speaking and making language like this.

**SP:** You grew up speaking Diné, is there maybe a connection with that tonality you use?

**SB:** Yeah, we used to have that kind of tradition in the family of speaking. And strong leaders usually are good speakers. So if you have the ability to speak well, if you're articulate, then you're seen as a leader. And my aunt was a counsel woman and her speeches are beautiful. It's so poetic, the language, the humanness of that language. There's something there that seems to allow those things to be created. And, it just *was*. Sometimes I hear a concept, somebody will say something in Navajo and the concept tries to find its way into my poem. Several times that kind of thought was brought into the work. How can I say this in a poem? How can this happen in a poem?

**SP:** Do you think it has to do with sound? We've talked about your work being visual, but it's also very sound-based to me. Some of your sounds are celebratory; "the song spilling seeds", for instance, is sensual and bursting. Other times they're really representative of the extractive legacies, the sound of uranium, the sound of oil, the "rain drops" on HUD houses instead of "raindrops".

**SB:** When I was composing *Flood Song*, I would give my manuscript of a poem to somebody and they would read the poem back to me. So, I think with *Flood Song*, hearing it was how it was composed. The manuscript would have to have a kind of sound or cadence, and I remember when it was alive in my mind, when it was projected into my mind with a kind of ease—even though the images are so crazy—if it could easily live inside my mind, projected back at me, then I felt, OK that's sound at this point. That was the sort of "third space" in a sense. That resonance.

**SP:** I feel that many people, when they address your work, highlight the disquiet, or the troubling flux of complex associations. Your images are challenging; you're depicting the present reality of uncleaned uranium mines, rerouting and damming of rivers, pollution, and the many connections to colonial violence, particularly in the southwest region. But there's also joy and respectful relationality alongside these troubling issues.

**SB:** When I come to an image—when I discover, when I come into or when I come up to an image—that is particularly intense or beautiful, that's kind of a search. It's always a search. So I do take great joy when I come to a line that just rattles. When I came into "Tó", the piece in *Flood Song*, that is a celebration. You have to go through all of these things to get to that moment, that glimmer. The dark is beautiful. So when I get to those moments, there's complete

joy. Also with *Dissolve*, it was a book, the poem itself, that was playing the trickster in a lot of ways, it would show up and then it would disappear again. It was constantly playing with the reader and I think that was intentional. There was a sense that there's something here. Every line takes that kind of work, but it's also the poems themselves which don't reveal everything, but they'll reveal something beautiful or something dark. That's what the whole thing is about. When I came up to that line in *Dissolve*, "mother threw a platter / of blind spots on her son" (*Dissolve* 44), it's about the imagination, the freedom to imagine, the absolute freedom more than anything. That's the medicine, that's what you want to bring into the world, this imagining to see, and those things can be imagined and therefore they also offer something in return.

**SP:** Yes absolutely, you step to the edge of the language, a place that's unsettling, imaginative and surprising at once.

**SB:** Yeah, get to the edge, and push it a little further. You can tell when you go a little too far. A poem can be utterly beautiful and utterly bad. They ride a line, and it's so easy to fall over. I'm always riding that line, how far can I push this, and how can I find a counterweight to pull it back? How am I going to find the momentum? These books were hard to write but also hard to piece together. I think, *Dissolve*, is one of those books; how do you enter it, how do people come to it?

**SP:** Another image that seems to add a moment of beauty and lightness are the birth images. Do you find this birth image was an intentional motif?

**SB:** No [laughs].

**SP:** [Laughs] Because it comes up quite a bit.

**SB:** Yeah, "the new birth song". Maybe there's some intention with it, maybe it's about poetics, I think there's a conversation about poetry, a kind of intentional desire for something new, some new way of poems poeming into the world. Also, a lot of what predicated *Flood Song* was just the fact of not having access to the songs in the same way that I did when I was growing up. In our home, those songs were sung all the time next to my grandmother's house. Just having that sort of portal. So *Flood Song* was really also about wanting to make my own song, because the song wasn't given to me in the same way. But also when I would hear those songs sung, there's this other thing happening: those songs are very imagistic also, the Navajo songs, they have a lot of images. But when I tried to see the images and hear the song at the same time, it always just failed, when I would solely focus on the images. That was one of the inspirations. How do I have it make sense on all these levels, how can they also work sonically, how can they also be driven, how can they also drive the imagination, how can they also be an engine in a sense, how can they

be kinetic, how can they move things, how can they just exist? That was one of the reasons why, when I started reading the work, I would read really fast because I thought, well, it can exist on all these levels and I can just give you the song. And if you hear the song from beginning to end, eventually the words don't matter anymore and you're just left with the song. Because so much of it was about recreating that rhythm through language. I think *Dissolve* was a little different; I wanted people to focus on the images. It's still musical, there is still a lot of rhythm in it, and I can read it much slower. I can get people to the places they need to get to. "How self indulgent that moon, always looking down" (*Dissolve* 26)—there are these particular moments where I just want people to have an illumination. "For a second the flattened field...chandeliered constellations...the slashed wrists of the Colorado...how self-indulgent". [Laughs]. There's also humor.

**SP:** [Laughs] Yes, that subtle humor is all the more illuminating as a break from the compression you mentioned. We feel we're almost inside these images, as if they are happening to us or we are happening in them. They have a fearless effect, stripping away what we want to see, or what we expect to see, into the unknown or indescribable.

**SB:** Language fails in a sense. How do we describe this experience, how do we describe a reading? In the Western context, you're coming into an institution, an academic institution and you're expecting literature, poetry. But the English language fails to describe work that is doing something in between. It's not ceremony. I wouldn't call my work ceremonial, I wouldn't call my poems ritual, because there's already a lineage, and there's already a dimension for that. And I can't call it spiritual because I already have that here, or it's all around us. Or sometimes I try to say to my audience, we're going to be in a kind of dream together and this is the script in a way. But that's kind of cheesy too right? I always regret saying it as soon as I say it, I'm like oh god...so bad. [Laughs] It's just working in another way. I guess there's that resistance in *Dissolve*, because everything is projected onto Native people, from the outside. Everything has to be spiritual or all of these other tropes, so how do I share, but also maintain some kind of control, or some kind of agency? How do I offer this but not fall into these trappings where I'm dehumanized, objectified? But at this point, it's just been a lot of that lately. People not wanting to really sit with the work, just seeing everything else around it.

How can you dissolve one's language, or the gravity of one's language? How can you do that in English? I don't know. Navajo is this continuum, and it's constantly adding new words, and then it chooses what to keep in. I guess every language does that. How do you describe it with the tools you have? How do you really come to it? There's also philosophy, there's also taxonomy. It also reveals what's not there, that's the other thing it does.

**SP:** Diné or English?

**SB:** Even in both spaces, for me. I'm able to see what's not there in either space, sometimes. Which can be very existential, and isolating sometimes.

It's very mysterious, creating that mystery in poetry. I think *Dissolve* is also about tone. How do I just create tone? How do I just create feeling in the space, so that people feel the deepness and heaviness of the moment? That was kind of intentional because...being native we always have to constantly act like...we can't be vulnerable in a sense. The history is so heavy and everything that's happened is so dark, but we also have this energy and quest for beauty, beautifying things all the time. But how do we just own that? I think I wanted to just own that in a way, I don't know if "own" is the right word but, I wanted to present it, not in a defeatist way, but in a human way. Just to make people feel again. To make them feel it. And some people would cry when I read. But yes, just that weight of using language to create something in the room.

**SP:** Do you feel that your work is aimed towards your community, for Diné people in particular? Perhaps there's too much that non-native people will misunderstand, misinterpret. Or perhaps there's a frustration that, outside of the community, there is a failure to effectively address the gravity of the issues you evoke.

**SB:** I think my community extends to many places. But at the same time it wasn't just for my community. With "Caravan", it's a narrative poem that came out of nowhere. It's about rescuing somebody and these two people going into the city and finding their brother, and that's what I wanted to show too, I wanted to show that deep love. This is what we do. We sacrifice for other people, and we pray that things will be OK again, and they eventually turn out OK. That was the one poem that, every time I read it and there was a native person in the audience, they would come up to me afterwards, sometimes emotional, and they would say, that's my uncle, that's my brother, that's my father. That was when I realized I have something here, I have a responsibility that I didn't feel like I had before. Once that happened, I started realizing, this is my world, this is my shared world, this is my shared experience, and it's important in a way that I hadn't really thought of before. Early on, "Northern Sun" did that too because there's this grandfather image. So there are these moments when I think my poems speak directly to native people. I hope all of it does, I think "Tó" was an insider one too.

**SP:** I can understand why Diné people would be more affected by some of these images.

**SB:** Also, probably not very cool with some of the images. I'm riding the line in between. I had a big old almost-breakdown over the fact that I was going to title my first book *Shapeshift*. When it was getting published I remember wanting to call the press and say, stop the presses, I'm going to change the title. Because why would a Navajo person call their book *Shapeshift* or have any

kind of relationship with this shapeshifter? But it's *shapeshift*, not shapeshifter, there's a difference [laughs]. So again, always riding this line with taboo, what we're not supposed to speak about. At the same time, it is what it is.

**SP:** Thank you Sherwin. It's been an absolute pleasure to speak with you and thank you for sharing your thoughts. I can't wait to read more of your writing, whenever it comes into the world.

**SB:** It's still forming. There is one that was published in *Ploughshares*. My cousin was killed in Flagstaff. I was really interested in police brutality and there is this image of choke holds walking them to sleep, a very violent kind of image, also a very gentle image in a way. And there's an image of the speaker looking at their shadows, but their shadows have their hands raised up, and the speakers are asking the shadows why their hands are raised high.

**SP:** That's terrible, I'm so sorry to hear that. Was he killed by a policeman?

**SB:** He was beaten. Actually he died in town. But a week before he died, he called his mom and said he was attacked by a group of white kids, and he was in the hospital when he called her. Also, just my relationship with cops.

**SP:** I know this issue is particularly distressing for native communities. I'm only beginning to learn about the complexity surrounding this type of violence, particularly in border towns, the cases of missing and murdered indigenous women, and the unrelenting efforts of native communities who are continuously bringing it to public attention. Your work is also really essential in that. Thank you again, Sherwin. Good luck and all the best to you.

**SB:** Thank you, be well.



## Annex 2: A Personal Interview with Abigail Chabitnoy

As published in *Michigan Quarterly Review Online*, August 10, 2020.

<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2020/08/the-rupture-point-conversation-with-abigail-chabitnoy/>

Date of interview: July 12, 2019

Place of Interview: Poets House, 10 River Terrace (at Murray Street), New York, NY 10282

Abigail Chabitnoy very kindly sat down with me at the Poets House in Tribeca on a clear July morning to talk about her work. She had read from her debut collection *How To Dress A Fish* (Wesleyan University Press, 2018) the previous evening as part of Poets House's Showcase Reading Series. The collection, which was shortlisted for the 2020 Griffin Poetry Prize, is a reflection on her native Alutiiq heritage; her great-grandfather, Michael, was sent from Kodiak Island, Alaska, to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, where founder Richard Pratt's motto was "Kill the Indian in him, save the man". The layers of America's genocide and forced assimilation, including the Carlisle School, where modernist poet Marianne Moore taught for three years, are still widely unacknowledged. Abigail approaches these layers from within her own family history. Her collection is polyphonic; family voices, reflective voices, and mythological voices move her poems towards continuous questions. Poet Sherwin Bitsui has called the collection "essential and captivating", and Joan Naviyuk Kane writes, "poems like these change the world".<sup>334</sup>

**Stephanie Papa (SP):** Your great-grandfather, an Alutiiq native, was sent from Kodiak Island, Alaska, to Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, an experience central to your collection *How To Dress A Fish*. However, the landscape and/or mindscape of the Aleutian Islands, your family's ancestral homeland, figures more prominently than Pennsylvania, where you grew up.

**Abigail Chabitnoy (AC):** Yes, a lot of this was imagining work, and a lot of it was from research. I had done some archival work in Anchorage in college, so some of it came from even the first time I set foot in Alaska. It was so far from Kodiak but still closer than I had ever been before, so that place had a physical impression on me. Other images came from ethnographic narrative accounts of how water plays a role in place and history. It wasn't until I got to Woody Island, though, that I felt the visceral connection I was expecting. Although Kodiak was on my great-grandfather's records, most of the documents just have recordings of births, baptisms, and

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<sup>334</sup> Back cover blurbs for *How to Dress a Fish*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2019.



marriages, not necessarily where people lived or died. We don't know where his siblings were buried or anything. But we do know he was on Woody Island.

**SP:** So, your great-grandfather may have been exposed to these assimilation strategies, Christianity and the English language, before he was taken to Carlisle?

**AC:** Yes. That was one of the hardest parts of the research, trying to come to terms with the reality of his personal experience and how little evidence there was in the archival data. On the one hand, there are true horror stories of Carlisle—it was not a pleasant experience, to put it mildly—but then you have these pockets of students who did alright by certain Western criteria, who went off to college, even if their college experience wasn't great because of the expectations placed on them. Or you have a figure like Jim Thorpe, who was this great American athlete on the one hand, but was stripped of all his medals as a result of these internal politics, which were nothing he was prepared to navigate while at Carlisle.

**SP:** Right, he even had one of his shoes stolen right before the Olympic event.

**AC:** Yes, so you had this figure that was tragic in many ways, but one who also, while at the school, was held up as a great athlete and shining example. We only have a few records and letters of my great-grandfather, but we know he was a baseball player, and that he was coming from a place that was already colonized by the Russians. Even in the town of Kodiak, there was a lot of anti-Native sentiment for a long time. When the Americans took over, anyone who could claim Russian ancestry did, because it was perceived as better than identifying as Native in terms of how the government treated them. Michael already had Western clothes, and he came to Carlisle with a Western family name. He was probably speaking English already and most likely Russian at the time. And he had only recently already lost his parents and siblings. So many of these experiences that were so traumatic for many students had basically already made their way through Kodiak. Carlisle might not have been as jarring of a scenario for him. So, on the one hand, there is outrage, because Carlisle was truly terrible in its ambitions, but for my great-grandfather, an orphan who played baseball, maybe it wasn't as bad. Maybe it was. We simply don't know. His voice wasn't preserved in the archives. The athletes had different quarters, different diets—they were treated better because they were the face of the school. So, it's difficult to try and reconcile that possibility.

**SP:** What I feel is the most engaging aspect of your poetry is the complex architecture of it: your play with sound, homonyms, aposiopesis—unfinished phrases—and the intricacy that forms this map.

**AC:** At the end of the day, that's what I want the most out of this book. I don't want this to be a cultural critique, or to garner attention as a poet only because the background seems exotic. I want the work to stand for the work. I do believe that it's important to have an understanding of the context, but returning to the poetry is more important, to approach it like other poetry texts. It's a matter of being willing to listen too, to other interpretations. One of the larger problems in academia and how voices and narratives are given authority is a tradition of not acknowledging cultural knowledge that doesn't fall neatly and clearly under the umbrella of a Western framework. Western academics will announce, "Hey, we proved your theory", and marginalized people are like, "We didn't need you to prove anything, it didn't change our knowledge of the world just because you didn't believe us". It's a very Western thing to try and pinpoint things into neat boxes and not to accept that it's messier than that, and I think one of poetry's greatest strengths as a form is how it can draw attention to that messiness.

**SP:** Absolutely, your poetry seems to give us access to different rooms. All the doors are kept open, where we hear simultaneous narratives—Michael, Carlisle records, the shark, the sea. One of these streams in your collection is the mythical, lyrical narrative; Pyrrha on Mount Parnassus or a fox shapeshifting into a woman.

**AC:** The fox poem is actually an erasure of a traditional Alutiiq folk tale. It took me two years to find this book, a collection of Alutiiq folktales. You can, for the most part, easily find collections of other Native American folktales, and there are lots of crossovers, but most are very different from Alaska Native stories. The worldview is different, the cosmology, the landscape. I wanted to find a way to integrate these stories. This whole project largely started because I wanted to engage with myth, with surreal approaches, different ways of imagining reality. I loved folktales, which is what drew me to study anthropology in undergrad. Then in grad school, I was reading about Navajo stories and motifs, and I found them so interesting from an aesthetic standpoint. Still, it didn't feel right to put them in a poem, as I'm not Navajo, and don't—can't—fully understand the ramifications of some of these figures to those people living today. These stories are taken very seriously, and there is a lot of guarded knowledge still within cultures. At that moment, I knew I had to go back to my own culture and find our stories. The fox story was one of the first ones I had read, and it brought me back to the incomplete narrative, or the way these stories get bastardized from their original telling and watered down for a broader audience, a common scholarly approach. It can be useful, but you have to ask how much is lost in doing that. I was interested in mimicking this erasure, but also in turning it on its head. The erased story took on more meaning for me. It became a story I could fit myself into.

**SP:** Is this where the "I" comes into your poems?

**AC:** Yes, hollowing out a place for myself in the story. It's similar, in a way, to writing about Carlisle; I had to ignore certain things to be able to continue the story. I couldn't dwell so long on the fact that maybe my great-grandfather liked Carlisle. We don't have evidence to support that either.

All I know is that Carlisle was the rupture point for learning about our culture, because that's what brought him to Pennsylvania, it's what separated us from our tribal community. Who knows what kind of relationships we would have had if he didn't stay in PA. I can't quantify all the things I've lost, or deny the privileges I've been born into, but I have to ask, what if he had gone back?

**SP:** Your collection is charged with those questions—who gets to keep records, and what is left out in our family histories, oral or written? The answer is often a colonial interference; those who were entitled to keep the records were white people, often assimilating or essentializing native histories.

**AC:** My great-grandfather died right before my grandfather was born, and no one talked about Michael for a while. No stories were passed down. As one cousin said, “no one talked about the Indian anymore”. Traditional Native families can often have this beautiful extension of familial relations across generations, but I didn't grow up having my grandparents telling me stories. I know that my grandfather's brother looked more Native, and growing up in Hershey, PA, he bore more of the brunt of being Native, whereas my grandfather had curly red hair, taking more after his mom. But they were both called “half-breeds”. They both suffered from being cut off from their paternal heritage. So there were no stories about Michael. Maybe he didn't want to go back to Alaska because there was trauma in losing his family there. Another problem with going back might have been that everything these students had learned in school wasn't accessible or didn't reflect the reality in their communities back home. These stories weren't captured in the archives. They didn't serve the mission of Carlisle.

**SP:** The speaker also questions the lack of a female voice in the family story. Throughout the collection, women come in and out of stories and dreams, but in your poem “As Far As Records Go”, you write, “The women in this story never had a chance, did they, Michael?”<sup>335</sup>

**AC:** The men organize the genealogical records, and who they married, what their occupations were. A woman in a workshop once said to me, you're talking about these men, but where are the women in the story? And I just don't have access to them, but they have to be there. I feel they're there, but I don't have a direct way to tell their story. Sometimes the absence of recorded

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<sup>335</sup> Chabitnoy, Abigail. *How to Dress a Fish*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2019, p. 106.

female stories is a cultural one; anthropologists and photographers recorded stories from the men because culturally, the men weren't going to let the women be secluded with these strangers they didn't know. And not in a controlling way, but simply thinking about the time period, if you have a foreign guy coming into the community, the more vocal man might be the first person to talk to, in terms of the rationality of the time. It's not that they weren't telling stories, or that women weren't also storykeepers. But again, their voices didn't make it into the officially preserved records.

**SP:** I can feel that absence in your fragmented architecture: there are gaps in the bricklaying, crossed out words, “a moth-eaten hole” in memory. Words also seem mobile. In your poem “Family History”, letters gradually disappear. How did you decide to flesh this out on the page?

**AC:** I didn't have a strict process. I was interested in different approaches to documents in poems and historical processes, overlapping narratives, and how erasure is represented. The smaller-font lines especially do feel very much like a different voice coming in, almost as an echo. They are lines that aren't done with me yet; they're still in this narrative, and I felt them expanding beyond the scope of the poem and conversing across.

**SP:** Yes, it seems that the “I” in your poems is not necessarily a singular speaker, but a polyphonic echo.

**AC:** I can't speak for any of the people in the book, even for some of them who we do have records of. But these line breaks helped to find ways of making my own voice multiple, trying to figure out how to bring in other perspectives and possible narratives, not my singular mouthpiece, but a sense of community and build that community in my poetry. I want to leave it open; that's what I love about poetry, that language can open up the possibility for more, and not reduce meaning to less.

**SP:** You also infuse English with Alutiiq words and phrases. How does this switch come about for you?

**AC:** I've taken one semester of Alutiiq, but I was often limited to the sentences that already exist on online resources. The Alutiiq Museum has a great “Word of the Week” series<sup>336</sup>. An elder uses the featured word in a sentence, and there is a paragraph or two about the word. So, when I wanted to use the language, I'd look at these micro-essays. For example, I might feel that the

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<sup>336</sup> The series is hosted by Dehrich Chya, Nick Alokli, Florence Pestrikoff, and Sophie Katelnikoff Shepherd with support from the Kodiak Island Borough School District READ. The lessons appear on the museum's website (<https://alutiiqmuseum.org/learn/alutiiq-word-of-the-week>), in the *Kodiak Daily Mirror* on Fridays or on KMXT Public Radio, Tuesdays at 9:00 am, Saturdays at 5:00 pm, or Sundays at noon.

poem needs some further richness, and I'll think about the images already there—let's say wind is a predominant image already. So, I'd look up the word for wind, and sometimes in the essay, other images or stories would arise that seem unrelated on the surface. It could be talking about hunting, how hunters use the wind to dry out skins, for example. If I hadn't gone to that specific entry, I wouldn't have made a connection. But in this way, I did start to see the poems and the language as bridges between experiences.

Alutiiq has the same setbacks that other indigenous languages have. Historically, the Russians certainly committed atrocities against the Alutiiq people, but their approach to conquering was less driven by a "we have to make you look and sound like us" mindset. They completely disrupted subsistence lifestyle by forcing the Alutiiq to hunt for otter furs, a commodity that Russia profited from, but they didn't care so much about what language people were speaking in the home. In fact, Russian Orthodox priests actually helped the Natives write their language and maintain it.

The current revitalization of the Alutiiq language was largely funded by compensation from the Exxon-Valdez oil spill. The settlements from the disaster provided the money to open the Alutiiq Museum. Regular access and practice of the language can continue to evolve with technology to keep it relevant. New words are created so that people can speak without having to break into another language.

**SP:** If the non-Alutiiq reader has looked up the words in your poetry, they'll see that sometimes the Alutiiq phrases are directly translated in the following line, but not every time.

**AC:** When you read Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, you've got these clusters of languages, and the assumption is that you are either "educated enough" to know those languages, or you have access to translate them. Of course, now, with the internet, we have much more access to translate. But when you have this colonial overlay, this question of access is even more pronounced; when you give a text to a student who doesn't have the same education as you had, and you say, "You don't understand this language? Why not?" there are historical prejudices rooted in that expectation. So it is a question of access, as well as a question of mimicking—how much do I want to provide that access? All of the words in the collection are searchable because I myself had to take them from the online library; my own access was limited. So, if you're willing to look up the languages in the *Cantos*, why not be willing to look up Alutiiq online? Sometimes the phrase is enough, and I want there to be a gap, the unknown meaning. Other times the meaning is so important that I want to give the English translation, but I don't want to make it easy for you. I want to preserve access, but point out the inequality of access, just like anything else.

**SP:** The novelist Tommy Orange has expressed his frustration with identity becoming “internalized, and then performative by nature”<sup>337</sup>. I wonder if you’ve experienced this.

**AC:** I remember, before my collection was published, I went to see the movie *Neither Wolf Nor Dog*. The film centers on the idea of how to tell the story, how it gets perceived, especially that romanticizing notion. Around the same time, there were several news reports of Native writers who had been claiming indigenous identity, but no Native entities claimed them back, so there was public pushback; they didn’t have any credentials or paperwork, which is a problematic requirement in itself. It’s the only cultural situation where you have to prove your identity by presenting your degree of blood. But it’s because there remains a temptation and opportunity to exploit; these writers were deliberately misrepresenting themselves because they knew that “Nativity” sold in certain circles.

Meanwhile, I had this book that I was writing, grounded in my indigeneity, but I grew up in central PA passing as white, with little understanding of what it meant to be Alutiiq. Before this project, my only experience with my culture was the research I did to write scholarship essays for college. At times, it did feel like I was being called on to be performative in ways I questioned. I worried about misrepresenting my culture and tradition in seeking to be a sincere participant. It took a lot of talking to mentors, and my family, asking them how they felt about the work, about complexities of identity and belonging, to overcome what sometimes felt like imposter syndrome. I had to sit with my motives, interrogate those motives just as I was interrogating historical records in the book itself. It was important for me to remain grounded in my own family history and my own experiences. The book touches on Alutiiq history because having learned that history, I can’t ignore it. It’s my history too. It shapes my understanding and experience of the world. But I’m not trying to pretend I grew up on Kodiak, fishing for my dinner, fighting for recognition.

I accept that some people are not going to accept where I belong or who I am. There are over 500 recognized Native Nations in the United States, with different histories, cultures, and beliefs—you can’t expect them all to have the same view on every issue. I grew up removed from a large part of who I am, where I’ve come from—through the actions and by design of those who would erase that history. It’s not a common experience, perhaps, but it’s also not

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<sup>337</sup> In an interview at Shakespeare and Company on his novel *There There*, Tommy Orange says: “Like with a lot of oppression, it gets internalized, and then performative by nature, and even if you’re not performing for the outside, you’re performing for your fellow native people. What makes you native? Some people overdo it to overcompensate, and some people resist. There are all different relationships to it, based not only on an internal definition, but the way we know what it looks like. [...] There’s even this annoying layer of having written a native book [...] am I performing indigeneity by doing this?” (Orange, Tommy. “Tommy Orange on *There There*”, 29 May, 2019, 7:00 PM. Shakespeare and Company Bookshop. <https://shakespeareandcompany.com/podcast?playlist=629>.)

uncommon. So, my voice can reach this audience, and that's another reason to continue doing this work, to push back against a narrative of erasure, of lessening.

**SP:** What is inspiring your work now?

**AC:** My next project is looking at the stories we tell ourselves to survive—in terms of violence against the landscape, women, indigenous people—and looking for the patterns, for underlying connections, at how stories shape our understanding and worldview and then trying to envision something hopeful out of it. That is, I'm trying to write with an awareness of the current barrage of crises—political, social, climatological—and the gravity of the situation without giving in to a defeatist mentality. It's hard to write some days because you think, what is a poem going to do? But I can't not write, so I have to imagine a way forward. In my poetry, I look less towards convincing others who already adamantly disagree with me on these issues, and instead think about the next generation, how to open them up to thinking differently.

### Annex 3: A Personal Interview with Allison Adelle Hedge Coke

Date of interview: July 25th, 2019

Place of interview: Modern Languages Association (MLA) International Symposium in Lisbon, Portugal, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Palma de Cima, 1649-023 Lisboa, Portugal.

**Stephanie Papa:** I've been thinking about your expression "echo-wrinkles", which you use in *Streaming*; reverberating events and sentiments that shake collective social outlooks as well as personal experiences, like currents that collide into the same flow of water. In *Streaming*, you link the Pando massacre with the Pando tree, the stability of cosmological cycles to the stability of community, Mohawk steel workers in the 20th century to the fall of the Twin Towers. Your work aligns both cosmological and terrestrial scales. I'm thinking in particular about your poem "Platte Mares", which links visual movements to natural cycles without explicitly naming any connections. How do you explain these overlapping movements in your work?

**Allison Adelle Hedge Coke:** I want the connections to happen to the reader, so they come into it through what it is, instead of a didactic or linear sensibility. When I feel it, I want them to feel it too, to take them on the experience.

**SP:** You also recorded a soundtrack to *Streaming*, which is a meeting of jazz and blues, sound experiments, and responses to your reading. In many poems, particularly celebratory poems like "Summer Fruit", there seems to be a deliberate musicality in your word choice, syntax and punctuation. Can you talk about the influence of music in your poetry?

**AAHC:** For some of these poems, I heard the music of them for over a year. It just comes to me, like a radio comes on. I heard all the different parts of the music, and one day it was very clear where the words were. Some of them I heard in one sitting.

I think music is the sound of consciousness. They're the same thing. In some ways, for me, they're inextricable. If I sit long with it, it becomes very apparent what needs to be articulated. I'll stay with the musicality of it and study what that is.

For the poem "Summer Fruit", the beginnings of it suddenly appeared and I had to find the coordinates by listening, by tending to it. And then the connections that are made in language happen usually instantaneously. I suddenly know what it is that I've been hearing. It's like moving into a dream, you're in the dreamscape for the longest time, and then suddenly it's apparent what it is, the stories and the soundscapes. It could be my own or another's.



There are two love poems in *Streaming*, one is “Summer Fruit”, and another one that is a complicated love poem, and it slipped into another area of the book. I traveled to Colombia with Sherwin in 2005, to Medellin. While we were there, we retraced steps where during the war, which was still ongoing, and at some of the sites we were reading, murders had taken place recently during Pablo Escobar’s reign and during the civil war. We were reading in an apartment complex—there had been executions in that same square—and there was another poet there who had a little crush on me. I knew I wasn’t going to date him because I was leaving, but he held my hand briefly. That poem came to me through the music that was played there at our reading, and I heard that music one day in my head, and so I wrote about that place and what happened there, so that poem was for the people who had died, but also there were people who dressed up like conquistadors, which embodied these colonial problems, and then this more romantic gesture. It was a complex moment when we were paying tribute to those who were murdered, to the people that live in the neighborhood, seeing a conquistador colonial reenactment, which trickled down to where we were then. So everything is connected.

**SP:** You do have other poems which I also read as love poems in a way; “Niño de la Calle” about a boy on the street dependent on drugs, or “Was Morning Call”, about being in Jordan with your son, and embraced with generosity and music.

**AAHC:** We had a difficult welcome there. When we got there, we realized the people organizing our trip were dishonest. But there were Sufi people there, during this one confrontational moment, and they started singing and asking what was wrong, and the women came and surrounded my son and I and got very close to us, to protect us.

After that, we went all over Jordan with very good company, and went out with Jordanians and had a beautiful time. People were very generous to me. I wrote in prose blocks, it was more of a streaming of experience, being whisked around.

**SP:** Do you mind talking about the process of deciding to use expressions or words in Cherokee or Wyandotte in your poetry?

**AAHC:** It depends on the piece. If we’re in tall grass and we’re going to need to make a camp or dance, or anything, the tall grass is better if it’s flat, and if we’re going to sleep on it, it’s even better if it’s flattened in a way that it’s woven. So there’s a stepping process that we learned as kids to make a camp in tall grass, and it has to do with laying down your feet so the grass turns into a weave, in a circle. Basically, when you’re done it’s a mat. That coordination is very much like dancing because it’s very orchestrated, and it sets you up to lie on your back under the sky. So there are stories for all of that, there are stories for things that are happening in our place here

and how they come into the world. Just as I was walking into this building, I heard a cicada and stopped to enjoy that music. Within that there's an origin story, the story goes that there were people underground, an emergent story. They called them Mooneyed travelers. There are other deities with other origins, so "streaming" is talking about motion, these things come at the same time, the past and present. Let's say you're doing something very intentional, and you win the Nobel Prize, some will say that an ancestor in your past feels that and they have a prophecy, they know this person is coming in the future. It's a way to look at the temporal states as coexistent. Insomuch, when you're weaving the grass and the earth, and you're setting yourself up to look at the sky, the origins that we connect with in the world bring up the origin story. The time of the year was the cicada season, so they were everywhere, some of us rode on them, some of us ate the yellowjacket soup<sup>338</sup>, so everything is part of understanding that placement, how things become part of us and there's an immersion within the place, of all of these things coming together and that's where we find ourselves.

And then there's this repetitive notion of language: [reciting from the title poem "Streaming" of her collection] "kettle, beans, cornfield. I'm hungry"<sup>339</sup>. That's what life really is, following our hunger; we're curious, we're looking introspectively, and our needs are so simple, we have a kettle. It's an attempt to look at how things come together and the field of understanding is streaming, because it's moving by. There are several scopes within it, the movement within it sometimes articulates more intense periods. So it's interesting that they selected that term "streaming" to relate to online digital activity too, because everything is streaming, things are going in and out of our bodies.

**SP:** It sounds like language then also comes from something that is in a continuous "streaming", within the present and past at once.

**AAHC:** Usually for me it's something that I know in that language that is called for in the piece. The piece calls for it and the language comes.

**SP:** In "Streaming", you provide the English translation, but in other poems you don't. For example, in your poem "1973", referring to the occupation at Wounded Knee, you use *Leciya o iyokipi*, literally meaning "over here the people are happy" (*Streaming* 38).

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<sup>338</sup> Hedge Coke is referring to traditional narratives which she depicts in "Streaming": "Some of us flew them, cicadas/Leonids, / riding backbump, flying—" (original spacing, 3), and "lightning fired, sycamore clothed, fire, furnishings for home: / hot cicada, yellow jacket soup, strawberry jam/nectar" (original spacing, 6)

<sup>339</sup> This phrase is found on pages 1, 6,7,8,10 of the collection *Streaming*. The poem "Streaming" is dedicated to Sherwin Bitsui and the poet's son, Travis.

**AAHC:** I translate it so everyone can be part of the poem. “Over here the people are happy”. It’s a song line, from 1973, during the occupation. The love of my life died of leukemia and is buried there. As a 15 year old, he was one of the teenagers occupying. A lot of the people in the occupation trenches, the ones who lived there, were teenagers. Being in the earth in a bunker or trench, it’s similar to Lakota, being in a lodge is similar to being in the womb, relates to being in the womb, relates to being in the mother, and being cradled. It’s a short piece because the occupation was very short in the sense of our time, so you don’t need a lot of words. I let it go out with a song that meant to make things OK again, “over here the people are happy”. It’s a restorative ending, it wasn’t really meant to be translated, it was for the people that occupied. It’s a bit of a calling too, I could mean changing worlds, it could mean over in this camp, it could mean many things.

**SP:** Some native writers have expressed their frustration of identity getting internalized, and then performative by nature, or misinterpreted, stereotyped or misunderstood from those outside of their particular indigenous culture. Do you have any thoughts about this?

**AAHC:** I think it’s different for every poet, I think it’s different for every culture they represent, there isn’t an easy answer, there really isn’t a native poetry.

For example, Chadwick Allen did a wonderful job on *Blood Run*, he did it all himself and didn’t tell me what he was working on. He got so much of *Blood Run*. But he assumed I knew a Christian story, but I didn’t know about that story. Certain stories are iconic, and translate into a different storyscape, despite the fact it’s not the one that somebody knows. Because people are people.

There are many nations, and it depends on each community. I teach in California, and there are many native tribes that are rarely talked about, some aren’t federally recognized. There are so many native nations that are not even in the context of talking about native literature, and that all changes because people can have status, lose status, there is all this criteria and pecking order, which is a human thing, you expect it. I’m mixed race, if someone makes a statement about authenticity, you might say, well we’re all wearing Western clothes.

Every experience is valid. Even within cultures, the clans are very different, the families within that clan are different and have different duties, and the structures within those families, there are different lineages at play. I was recently speaking at the Tulsa Artist Fellowship, and there was a young writer who told me that my writing has “Indian” ideas in it and she was against that. I said I think it’s generational, for us we’re still just telling our family stories, it’s something that’s always there, we’re still hearing them. For me, I married into other people and learned the

language from being there. I break into the language without thinking about it. It's part of you and it comes out when you need it.

I don't push my poetry, it happens when it happens, it's a natural thing. With Sherwin, for instance, he learned his language from his grandfather, but he made the effort to learn the language, to get a deeper understanding, and his reasoning is very impacted by it. We were talking before about the language being very verb-centred, so when you're in that consciousness of course it'll be very active, that may not be applicable in English.

**SP:** I read in your memoir that your father was also telling stories all the time.

**AAHC:** My father lived with me for the last four years, my son came back from China for 6 months to take care of him, so I could go teach in Hawaii for a break and then go back to my father. He had 27 strokes during this period, and at one point the strokes affected him, and he thought he was a teen in WW2 and spent days waking up in different languages. One morning a nurse said, "I didn't know your dad spoke my language". This was in Oklahoma City. I asked, "what tribe are you", and she said Cheyenne. And I told her that he isn't Cheyenne, but he often worked trading with Cheyenne people through his wife, she was partially raised there and learned their ways. They went back up into Canada and came back three times. So he knew Cheyenne from her knowing it. We travelled extensively [in North America] when I was younger, and spent time with other different people. His way of being in the world was to learn as much as you can of a person's language. Bring gifts and adjust to the people. The rivers know them, the trees know them and the birds know them. So if you do things in their way, respecting that, you'll be recognized and have an easier time. We were always taught this, learning songs as well.

From him, I feel a sense of mutual respect, and allowing ourselves to see things in a different way, being in a place to take things in as opposed to always bestowing.

**SP:** Your poetry carries a very strong message against the ecological disruption of climate change, with complex intricacy and vast awareness, from glacial melt to natural disasters, tracing the beginning of human neglect to settler colonialism. You write about the link between overproduction and forest fires in the southwest and Marfa in *Burn*. Your tone is one of urgency, listing species of plants and animals that are either critically threatened or will be if this continues. What are your thoughts right now on these issues, and how do you navigate this as a poet?

**AAHC:** I'm going to go back to my Dad. When we were kids we were talking about this. It's still shocking to me to see other people not believing it's real, because we grew up knowing

about it. We haven't even seen the half of what's going to take place. It's the portend of how things are going to come out. We asked him what we should do, what we need to do to help the earth. And he said, when she gets tired of us she'll shake us off, and we won't be here but the earth will be a better place.

It will be OK whether we make it through or not, so in some ways, I'm still there. I would like to think, in the hope for everybody, that a consciousness will occur through something simple like a song that will resonate throughout the world, and there will be a change of heart.

So I would like to think this is going to be the event. But what we're seeing now, it may be what shakes us off.

**SP:** What are your projects now if you don't mind me asking?

**AAHC:** I'm in between a few projects. One has to do with a certain species that there is only forty left of. I'm using each individual to speak through a different scope of what's happening. Each poem encapsulates the individuals within the species.

**SP:** *Blood Run* also has different human and non-human voices speaking. It makes me think of Arthur Sze who talks about decentring. These voices are away from the self, not a linear narrative or a confessional "I". It seems to be a kind of decentring, as Sze says, to highlight the interconnected web of experience and language, a less egocentric expression of the individual. Are you consciously decentring in your poetry, or do you see this in a different way?

**AAHC:** My children would come to the class he taught at IAIA<sup>340</sup>, and he would treat them like anyone else in the class. I wrote an essay called "Szeism" about what he did for all of us and how he changed the field we're in.

We talked about the "I" in this way as well. The first course I took with him was on translating Chinese poetics, so we learned radicals to translate the poems. I would do one literal and one poetic translation, and there was a poet/translator named Arthur Waley, and in class, I said to Arthur [Sze], I can't stand this translator. And I said, "I, I, I", British "we", and it's never in the Chinese. To translate the Chinese, I'd use Lakota first, then I would gradually move through Cherokee, then Wyandotte, then English, to get to what I need it to be. So that I didn't have the "I,I,I". When I want to discuss the "I" in poetry, there is a place where I can enter, I come there when there is an opening, after everything is in place. Just like when you move into a room and

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<sup>340</sup> The Institute of American Indian Arts is in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Arthur Sze began teaching there in 1984, and is professor emeritus. Hedge Coke graduated in 1993, and Bitsui graduated three years later, in 1996.

there are things happening in the room, you let it happen, and then you eventually get to your place, and then you say Hi, I'm Allison, if you need to. And a lot of times you don't need to, or maybe you're doing something that is very large, universal, and then you come down to an "I", and then we can talk. If you can think of it having a funnel shape, but otherwise it's unnecessary. Arthur laughed and said Chinese people don't like him either. He'd also use "We" and it's not in the Chinese, there's a collective "we", but that's not the same.

**SP:** I find that in scholarly contexts, these linguistic intricacies are often dismissed, with a priority towards questions of identity.

**AAHC:** When you're in your poet head, you lose all of that. What I tell people is to just imagine that there are roots going through your feet down below where we're standing, so deep that there is water and you can draw it up into yourself when you need it, you close your eyes and let the water come up. You ground yourself. Use the body as a tool, rather than machine technology, the body is the tool.



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### Abbreviations

“*exhibits*”: “*exhibits from The American Water Museum*”

DAPL: Dakota Access Pipeline

PI: Personal Interview

*WMBWAA*: *When My Brother Was an Aztec*

“When the Beloved [...]”: “When the Beloved Asks What Would You Do if You Woke Up and I Was a Shark?”

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