Decolonizing the Body

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Decolonizing the Body:
A Critical Reflection on
The Poetry of Deborah Miranda, Natalie Diaz, and Tommy Pico

A Thesis by
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ABSTRACT

Decolonizing the Body:
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by Daniel J. Miess

The prevailing narrative about California’s history, and in specific the way that it discusses the Spanish Colonial system and the Gold Rush, glosses over the genocide of her indigenous inhabitants and the oppression experienced by those who survived these historical traumas. By focusing on the works of three indigenous poets (Deborah Miranda, Natalie Diaz, and Tommy Pico) who were born in Southern California and whose indigenous history predates White Settler Colonialism in this state, we can gain a fuller picture about the truth of California’s past. Through the lens of Indigenous Queer Theory, we can understand how these three Queer Indigenous Writers have sought to engage with their histories and the ways that Queer bodies have intersected with these histories and also with the contemporary world. This article will make use of relevant details from current events and the past so that the reader can understand how these works of literature engage with American and European literary traditions. By doing so, they will gain a broader idea about how their stories are a part of the American story and, consequently, will provide the reader with a more nuanced perspective about what it means to be Queer and Indigenous in the United States.
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When I began my research, I asked myself as I explored the poems of Deborah Miranda, Natalie Diaz, and Tommy Pico: "(1) In what way are these poets ‘American’ and ‘Californian?’ (2) In what way are these poets Indigenous? (3) In what way are these poets “Queer?” (4) In what way do their texts reflect all three characteristics at once?” As I explored their texts, I began to see that these three identities (Californian/American, Indigenous, and Queer) cannot be separated easily from one another. The American story began before the Europeans came to this continent. As I investigated theory and indigenous history, I became acutely aware that before European colonization, almost every indigenous culture in this country had specific ways to describe sexual and gender diversity that the English language cannot often fully express. So, terms like "gay" or "lesbian" or "trans" or "LGBTQIA" or "Queer" or even "Two-Spirit" often fail to adequately capture how indigenous people saw intimacy and gender among their respective cultural group. I also learned that how Settler Colonialism affected each cultural group was and is sometimes very different.

Even the concept of borders does not fully capture peoplehood. For a moment, if we look at the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay, which is the tribal nation that Tommy Pico is a part of, they are also part of a larger cultural group (the Kumeyaay) that crosses the California/Baja California border. The Mojave are split between two nations, the Fort Mojave Indian Reservation and the Colorado River Indian Reservation. Their tribal communities cross the Arizona, Nevada, and California borders. While Mojave and Kumeyaay are related to each other linguistically, their histories differ after colonialization. The Mojave successfully resisted colonialization for much
of their history after Spanish and American settlers sought to possess their lands. The Viejas band of Kumeyaay is among a classification of Native Californian tribes called the Mission Indians, which were given that name by the Spanish Missions system. Both the Mojave and Viejas band of Kumeyaay are federally-recognized tribes, while the Ohlone and the Chumash (which are part of Deborah Miranda's cultural heritage) are not. Both the Ohlone and Chumash speak unrelated languages. The Mojave are between the Fort Mojave Indian Reservation and the Colorado River Indian Reservation. Each culture has individual histories, languages, and stories that define themselves as people, and so indigenous history in California and the United States is a series of complexities. How White Settler Colonialism has affected and continues to affect specific nations is different.

I would like to add that the Federal government neither recognizes the Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation nor is it recognized by the State government. At one point, the Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation was a recognized tribe, but in 1899 had its tribal status removed after it was deemed by an anthropologist to be culturally extinct. Recently, Oprah Winfrey interviewed the Mvskoke Cree Poet Laureate. When Winfrey asked Harjo about what she felt about Gavin Newsom's apology, she said that it should be up to the indigenous people of California how they interpret his words.

When High Country News reported this event, some indigenous representatives expressed apprehension including Louise Miranda Ramirez, who is one of Deborah Miranda’s relatives:

Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation Chairwoman Louise Miranda Ramirez says she didn’t receive an invitation to be at the ceremony. Ramirez suggested that the governor make the executive order “stronger by acknowledging and granting state recognition to
California tribes.” She also called for the return of Catholic Mission lands that were promised to her and other Mission Indian tribes but were never given. “The apology should be more than the paper and his signature,” she said. (Krol)

Within the matrix of the United States legal system, when a tribal group has tribal status, they are not separate from the United States legal system, but rather are considered semi-autonomous. In other words, some laws are unique to them that govern each nation. However, these entities do not have complete independence. For instance, when the fight for marriage equality was spreading across the country, individual tribal nations recognized marriage equality ahead of the Federal government or even state governments. On March 3, 2009, Kitzen and Jeni Branting married on the Coos Bay Reservation in Oregon after the tribal nation had passed a law recognizing same-sex marriage ahead of the Oregon State Government. However, other nations still have yet to recognize marriage equality, such as the Navajo.

In Kevin Bruyneel’s book, *The Third Space of Sovereignty* (2007), he speaks about the relationship between the United States government and local governments when he says:

In response, the United States, primarily state and local governments and citizen groups but also the US Supreme Court, increasingly views tribal sovereignty as a political expression that is out of (another) time, and therefore a threat to contemporary American economic life and political space. Present-day American resistance to the economic and political developments spurred by renewed tribal sovereignty is the contemporary example of Césaire’s claim that it is ‘the colonized man who wants to move forward and the colonizer who holds things back…’ The temporal impression is that tribal sovereignty is out of time, a notion that can be broken down into three forms of temporal
displacement: (1) the tribe has run out of time in making its claims; (2) the tribe's claims are based on archaic premises or promises, from another time, which are not applicable in modern American time, and (3) contemporary indigenous economic and political development has outpaced the historic boundaries of tribal sovereignty. Thus, it is not an expression of sovereignty at all but is rather a wild, reckless form of special interest activity that threatens American civil society and political life. (172)

What Bruyneel is pointing out here, is the way that non-Natives often situate the oppression of indigenous people in this country. When non-Natives begin to discuss the oppression of indigenous people, they situate oppression as something that has happened in the past without realizing that there are ongoing issues that are still affecting the lives of indigenous people today. The Indigenous figure often viewed as the Edward S. Curtis portrait or the racialized image of the indigenous woman that was removed from the Land O’ Lakes butter packages this year and not a flesh-and-blood human being. When an Indigenous Nation attempts to assert their legal right to lands stipulated in various treaties, there is often a push-back against their right to sovereignty. In some cases, in a bizarre turn of events, the Indigenous Nation is viewed as the colonizer and not the US Government.

Bruyneel then gives an example of this from 2003, when Arnold Schwarzenegger’s campaign fed upon anti-tribal sentiments:

By this time, tribes were portrayed as the unfair colonizers of the state because they had gone so far, so fast, as to outpace the historical bounds of their sovereignty, thereby transforming themselves into special interests instead of sovereign entities. I mark 2003 as a turning point because, during that year's gubernatorial recall election, this negative
image played an important role in California politics when Arnold Schwarzenegger successfully drew on an undercurrent of antitribalism, provoking it to rise to the surface of American political life. (Bruyneel 179)

So, often when indigenous people attempt to carve a space out for themselves, the White Settler State seeks to assert itself as having a right to places rightfully belonging to these respective nations. Just as these individual nations have tried to carve out a physical space for themselves, a homeland, so indigenous writers have sought a literary space that they can call their own. My analysis will demonstrate how these poets have grappled with the relationships that Queer and Two-Spirit people have had with their communities. I will also show how these writers reclaimed these critical roles, and I will detail how these poets see themselves as a part of the greater queer landscape. In doing so, I seek to demystify a homogenous indigenous or queer sensibility.

Current Poet Laureate and member of the Mvskoke (Creek) Nation, Joy Harjo writes in her essay “The Art of Resistance” (2004) that:

We (Indigenous people) are born into dynamic systems. They are bound together by language, woven with complex layering of myth, stories, and songs… What especially makes indigenous cultures unique is the relationship to the land. Land is a being, an entity, a repository of meaning. There is an ongoing relationship between human beings and the land. It is a keeper of our bones, stories, and songs. (Harjo 124)

As a means to situate this conversation about indigenous literatures from this country, an excellent place to start is the land itself and how the over 570 different tribes in this country have developed distinct cultures based upon their relationship with the earth itself and how it spoke to
them as they lived off of the earth. What Harjo is saying in this article is that the earth not only carries the bones of their ancestors, but the landscape gave their stories and songs birth. Therefore, the poems that I will be discussing in this article reflect a connection or disconnection with the land.

Natalie Diaz’s poetry is centered within her Mojave community and life on the reservation. Deborah Miranda’s poetry is centered within a community without tribal status. Issues of territoriality, invisibility, and a fight for federal recognition are often reflected in her work. Tommy Pico places himself more firmly within the LGBTQ community, and specifically the gay community of New York. However, even in his case, he returns to his family in San Diego. However, while his work reflects upon concerns unique to the Kumeyaay and within indigenous people at large in this country, he also reflects upon issues that impact gay men in New York City. Therefore, his writing is perhaps, unique in that his culture is on one coast, but his books often reference the other.

Queer Indigenous Poets have sought to decolonize literary space not only by talking about the subject of Indigeneity but also drawing from the notion of critical sovereignty, as they bring together indigenous erotics and poetics in exciting ways and seek liberation both Euro-American sexual and gender norms and the tradition of Anglophone poetry itself. Just as they search to break free from heteronormative identity by delving into the notion of critical sovereignty, they also explore indigenous erotics and poetics in exciting ways and seek liberation from both Euro-American sexual and gender norms and the tradition of Anglophone poetry itself. Mark Rifkin has articulated this particularity about Queer Indigenous literature, in the following way: "...attending to the Sovereign Erotic can open toward an erotics of sovereignty, reimagining peoplehood, and placemaking in ways that register the complex entwinement of unacknowledged..."
survivals, unofficial aspirations, and the persistence of pain… these moments implicitly raise the question of how to understand the relation between bodies – and their sensory and affective capacities – and “homelands,”” (Rifkin 31). In other words, White Settler Colonialism had multiple expressions. When White Settlers imposed their concepts about gender and sexuality upon indigenous societies, they imposed a binary upon communities that conceptualized sexuality and gender often in more diverse ways that their European counterparts. Just as indigenous languages were suppressed, so were Queer voices. The indigenous erotic re-imagines the American landscape to include societies whose sexualities and genders were as diverse as the languages that they spoke and liberates these voices from the “closets” of history.

The late Native American Literary Critic, Paula Gunn Allen, was among the most influential writers who laid the foundations for contemporary Native American Literary criticism. Her critical works are still influential among many Native American and First Nations literary critics. In particular, her influence is felt among Queer and Two-Spirit Indigenous Literary Critics because of how she fused concepts surrounding Indigenous Sovereignty with Queer erotics. In turn, the impact of Audre Lorde is particularly evident within the development of Allen’s critical philosophy.

As an example, Audre Lorde writes in her essay, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” that:

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. (The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism 127)
Audre Lorde’s critical philosophy can be paralleled with what Paula Gunn Allen writes in her book *Off the Reservation* (1999):

Angry women, indeed angry people, are waking up everywhere. We have extremely excellent reasons for that anger, even for rage. But our anger must be empowered by reason; it must feed as much on truth, beauty, delight, and freedom as it possibly can do so that it will at last yield the sweet fruit of love, peace, and re-entry into the world of the Great Mysteriousness. (Off the Reservation 89)

Comparing these two works, we notice a similarity, a belief that anger is not an end to itself, but that anger is a necessary feeling to change. Their statements differ in that Paula Gunn Allen also addresses a spiritual component to change; however, as we will notice later that Lorde does mention that there is a spiritual component to the erotic. So, for Allen, anger is not the only thing that brings about change, but anger must temper itself with both reason and a groundedness in mystery.

These parallels can be found elsewhere. As an example, both Lorde and Allen speak about the erotic and how violence often stems from suppression of the feminine erotic. Lorde maintains a distinction between the erotic and a pornographic in her essay “Uses of the Erotic” (1984) saying that:

As women, we have come to distrust that power, which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. So, women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be
psychically milked; much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters. (Uses of the Erotic 53)

Now, one can notice some similarities when you compare this with Allen’s critical work when she speaks about rape culture as a result of inequitable power structures in *Off the Reservation* (1999):

But the issue of the origin of power is central to the question of how a rape culture can become one where violation of bodily and psychic integrity is unthinkable – if not forbidden, mind you, but never considered. For as long as we live in a social system that defines right on the basis of group or personal above-ness, or superiority, rape must continue, as must the depredations connected with racism, destruction to the biosphere, elitism, homo- and lesbophobia, child abuse, and all the subtle and gross manifestations of trickle-down conceptualizations of the nature of the good, the real, and the wholesome. (Off the Reservation 67)

So, Lorde and Allen found an issue with power structures that empowered one gender and disempowered other genders. Both link the spiritual with the erotic and state that the purpose of sexuality is to be nurturing and lifegiving in the sense that it awakes the creative potential of both partners. In contrast, patriarchy sucks at the marrow of anyone that is not male, heterosexual, or white.

Their influence can be found in the critical essays, poetry, and memoir of poet and critic Deborah Miranda. Deborah Miranda connects violence and the suppression of the erotic in her introduction to *The Zen of La LLorona* (2005) when she writes:
…Both love and the erotic are at odds with the violence and domination that structures any colonizing or patriarchal culture. Thus, in colonization and patriarchy, love is turned into grief, and the erotic is distorted into the pornographic oppression and exploitation of the bodies of women and children, and thus eventually, men. These oppressors are anyone seeking power in a patriarchal system – men and women – and the system, once the creative/erotic element betrayed, perpetuates itself…. But it is curiously twinned stories of my indigenous California people, and my mother’s inconsolable grief, that allow me to ride out a devastating current. And why does any of this matter to anyone but myself? At this point in global history, we are all La Llorona’s children.

(Zen of La Llorona 3)

In Mexican and Indigenous lore, “La Llorona” is the ghost of a woman who comes to steal children and drown them. From contemporary North American history, the figure of Andrea Yates comes to mind who drowned her children in 2001. However, the legend of La Llorona is much older. It details the story of an indigenous woman who was rejected by her husband and drowned her children. By saying that "we are all La Llorona's children," Deborah Miranda is saying that women often pass down the wounds of oppression down to their children.

Native American Literary Theory does share critical approaches with African American Literary Theory and Postcolonial Literary Theory. What distinguishes Indigenous Literary Theory is its emphasis on specific communities and each community’s identity, along with the relationship each community has with the land. Often other literary critiques focus on the individual instead of a collective identity.
Paula Gunn Allen writes in her essay “Savages in the Mirror” that for many indigenous communities, the good of the whole and that whole including the Earth surrounding that whole benefits every person that is a part of that matrix:

Indians are called primitive and savage not because they commit atrocities, everyone commits atrocities in one way or the other. Indians are designated primitive because they place the good of the group and the good of the earth before that of the self. The community is the greatest threat to the American Individual Ethic, and it is the community that must be punished and destroyed. Not because Americans take much conscious notice of community, but because community is what a human being must have to be human in any sense, and community is what Americans deny themselves – in the name of progress, in the name of growth. In the name of Freedom. In the name of the Hero. (Off the Reservation 29)

So, every person and every living being in a community are a part of a living community. To quote the passage by Harjo at the beginning of this article, “What especially makes indigenous cultures unique is the relationship to the land,” and, “There is an ongoing relationship between human beings and the land.” What distinguishes Queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit Critique from other critiques of Queer people of color, is that instead of developing a community outside of the hegemonic structure to find acceptance and vitality, these critiques seek to empower the person through social structures within their respective indigenous communities.

Even the late Jose Esteban Munoz acknowledges that disidentification “is not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to
follow a conformist path if they hope to survive in a public sphere” (Munoz 5). Queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit critique often see heteronormativity is one manifestation of patriarchy and Settler Colonialism. Therefore, the liberation of the Queer Indigenous Person can be found through engagement with their cultures either by reclaiming lost traditions or by developing a more profound sense of rootedness within the matrix of their societies.

What critical sovereignty means is to honor and respect literary works created by indigenous persons in this country, considering the individual cultures from which the writer arises. So, instead of placing a Pan-Indian identity upon each writer, we focus on cultural specifics while as well, acknowledging inequities and injustices that face indigenous people at large. From water rights to violence against indigenous women and the Queer community, the poets that we will be reading address these issues from their perspectives.

Now, as we speak about erotics and how Queer theory applies to critical sovereignty, we recognize that often gender and sexuality have traditionally been viewed as being more diverse among these individual cultural groups than among most Western cultural groups. Instead of seeing homosexuality and gender diversity as an abomination, these cultural groups have seen gender diversity and homosexuality as being an integral part of their social DNA.

Mark Rifkin suggests that “The effort to insert American Indians into the ideological system of heterosexuality imposes an alien social logic, while also discounting the particular ways family and household formation are central to native peoples’ functioning as polities” (When Did Indians Become Straight 7). In other words, heteronormativity is a colonial structure that was thrust upon these cultural groups and is used to
prop up patriarchal social structures. In contrast, many indigenous social structures in this
country are matriarchal and therefore have different conceptualizations of what family means.

Some important current critics in the field of Queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit
critique besides Mark Riffkin who is the Professor of English and Women’s and Gender
Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (he wrote *Sexuality, Nationality, Indigeneity* -- a special edition of Lesbian and Gay Quarterly – in 2010, *hen Did Indians Become Straight?* in 2011, *The Erotics of Sovereignty* in 2012, *Settler Common Sense* in 2014 and *Beyond Settler Time* in 2017); include Daniel Heath Justice who is Professor of First Nations and Indigenous Studies and English at the University of British Columbia (he wrote *Our Fire Survives the Storm* in 2006 and *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* in 2018; and Qwo-Li Driskill who is Associate Professor for the School of Language, Culture and Society: Women, Gender and Sexuality studies (their critical works include *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions is Theory, Politics, and Literature* in 2011 and *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory* in 2011. I would like to add that I add that I had considered included Andrea Smith’s critical work into this essay as it was included in many academic journals, however, because of unethical conduct and her fraudulent claims to indigenous status, I am declining to mention her critical work here.

Scholarship on Deborah Miranda’s poetry and prose include a chapter about *The Zen of La Llorona*, “Landsapes of Desire,” in Mark Rifkin’s book, *The Erotics of Sovereignty* as well essays such as “A Similar Place” by Theresa Warburton who is Postdoctoral Fellow in American Studies and English at Brown University; “Intervening
in the Archive: Women-Water Alliances, Narrative Agency, and Reconstructing
Indigenous Space in Deborah Miranda’s *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* by Shanae
Aurora Martinez who is Assistant Professor of English at California Polytechnic
in San Luis Obispo, California; “One Fragment at a Time: The Literature of Deborah
Miranda and Wendy Rose” by Kristin J. Leonard who is a doctoral studies student in
education at Northern Arizona University; and “Reinscribing Sovereignty: History,
Adaptation, and Medicine in the Poetry of Deborah Miranda” (included in the
*The Adaptation of History*) by Rose Gubele who is Associate Professor at the University
of Central Missouri. I also found Deborah Miranda essay for *GLQ: A Journal of Gay
and Lesbian Studies*, “The Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide: Gendercide in
Spanish California to particularly helpful when looking at *Bad Indians*.

Relevant scholarship pertinent to the discussion of Natalie Diaz’s poetry include
essays such as “Renouncing and Rewriting Myth” (included as a chapter in
*Women Poets and Myth in the 20th and 21st Centuries: On Sappho’s Website*) by
Stephanie McKenzie who is Associate Professor of English at Grenfell Campus,
Memorial University in Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada; and
“Mexica Warrior: The Amerindian Vision of Natalie Diaz” by Rigoberto Gonzalez who is
both a poet and Professor of English and Director the MFA Program in Creative Writing
at Rutgers-Newark, the State University of New Jersey. I found Rigoberto Gonzalez’s
essay to be particularly thoughtful and vital as it does detail Mexican cultural
influences on Natalie Diaz’s poetry.
Until recently, aside from book reviews, there has not been significant scholarly research that explored Tommy Pico’s poetry. However, “Networks with Benefits” by Stephanie Burt, who is Professor of English at Harvard University, was published this year. She also wrote a book review, “Varieties of Appetite,” previously that I also find significant.
Deborah Miranda is both an enrolled member of the Ohlone Esselen Nation and is also of Chumash heritage on her father’s side. Her mother was of French and Jewish ancestry. Miranda’s poetry explores the stories of California’s indigenous people, in particular, the Ohlone and Chumash.

Many of Deborah Miranda's poems could be said to be formed by survival, not only the survival of her family and her ancestors behind her but the survival of other indigenous people, in particular the indigenous people of California. Her writing seeks to make visible what has been rendered invisible, and in particular, a culture that was determined to be “culturally extinct” in 1928 by the US government. Just as Ohlone culture was rendered to be extinct or invisible, so the histories of third-gender and queer individuals were rendered invisible too.

Miranda writes in her essay “Bones Speak: Excavation and Reunion” about her history growing up as the child of an Esselen/Chumash father and a white mother and was disconnected from her indigenous community stating that:

I didn’t grow up knowing that any Native writers existed. Born in Los Angeles, 1961, of an Esselen/Chumash father and white mother, I left California at the age of five. My father was in prison, my mother re-married; she, my step-father, and I moved to rural Western Washington, about an hour south of Seattle. My tribal connections were cut, and although my mother told me I was Indian, she did not know the name of the tribe or anything but the fact that it had been declared extinct. No Native writers appeared in my
school curriculum from first grade to my eventual graduation. The American Indian Renaissance, as the surge of writers in the 1960-1970s is sometimes called, remained invisible to me. Then, in my early thirties, I participated in a week-long poetry writing workshop. Janice Gould (Koyangk’auwi Maidu) was workshop leader; the first Native poet I had ever spoken with, the first California Indian I’d met outside my family, and my mentor of Indigenous literature. (Native Voices 289)

Miranda then further describes her exploration of indigenous literature and, along with that, how she reconnected with the Esselen/Ohlone Costanoan Nation. It is clear that for Miranda, her writing is to render visible a culture that had remained invisible to her for many years and to empower other indigenous writers as they express their unique voices and culture.

This chapter focuses on four of Deborah Miranda’s poems. In the beginning, I am focusing on a poem called "Wildflowers" from her first collection Indian Cartography (1999), and am focusing on what flowers symbolize in erotic poetry. Much has been written about poems in The Zen of La Llorona (2005) that explore the figure of La Llorona. Instead, this essay will focus on the poem "Deer." “Deer” is a rather graphic description of rape, and how the issues are explored in this poem are particularly felt among indigenous women. The third poem, “Lies My Ancestors Told for Me,” comes from her mixed-genre memoir Bad Indians (2012). I will explore how lying was a necessary means of survival for Miranda’s Ohlone and Chumash ancestors and how telling the truth comes from a place of privilege. The fourth poem, “Decolonizing the Alphabet,” is taken from her collection of poems Raised by Humans (2015). It explores how both Indian Boarding schools and the current educational system have silenced indigenous language, and how Indigenous writers are using the language of oppression, English, to fight back against oppression.
In Miranda’s first collection of poetry, *Indian Cartography* (1999), she first explored themes and concepts that were later more fully fleshed out in both her subsequent collections of poetry and in her memoir. In *Indian Cartography*, Miranda explores themes that are often explored by other North American writers, that of the Native connection to the North American landscape. For instance, in Joy Harjo’s poem “A Map to the Next World” (2000), Harjo tells the reader, and in specific, readers who may become indigenous writers that, “You must make your own map (*How We Became Human* 129).” This map is different from the White Settler maps, which divided and occupied the American landscapes. In “Mapping the Land” (2006), Denise Sweet speaks about an elder who spoke about an intuitive relationship with the landscape by learning about the landscape “Like the back of your hand” and “You learn the land by feel (*Palominos Near Tuba City* 129).” One of the projects that Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo has announced that she will be starting in September, is to create an interactive digital map of indigenous poets in the United States, yet again returning to similar concepts.

Mark Rifkin writes that "Peoplehood inheres in the circulation of people's shared experiences of intimacy with each other and with the space they occupy. This connection is lived not as a formal political identification, as a thing distinct from romantic or familial attachment, but as an erotics as inseparable from the feeling of selfhood through the senses" (*The Erotics of Sovereignty* 81). So the register with which these writers have experienced these landscapes is through the senses, something intuitive, the created experiences and connections these landscapes have with people, versus land as something to be occupied and possessed.

Deborah Miranda describes the awakening of the self and the awakening of sexuality as an undomesticated wildflower in “Wildflowers” (1999). Within the Western tradition, often the experience of awakening the soul of a person is tied to phallic imagery. For instance, in the
Genesis account of Adam and Eve, it is the phallic image of the serpent, that becomes the vehicle of knowledge. In William Blake's poem, "The Sick Rose," he says:

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O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy. (Blake 23)
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In this case, it is by the "worm" or the phallus that liberates a woman's sexual appetites, instead of the woman herself coming to enlightenment upon her own or through her connection to other women. Perhaps, this idea was passed down from Greco-Roman ideals, as is particularly evidenced in the story of Cupid (Eros) and Psyche or the union of the erotic and the emotional. However, the flaw of this poem is that it assumes that women’s enlightenment and sexual awakening are dependent on a complimentary male partner to realize itself. Now, when placed against examples from women’s literature, the reader will notice a difference. Before the advent of women’s liberation, women would describe their sexualities as being either “hidden” or owned.

For example, Emily Dickinson uses the image of the cut flower in “With a Flower” to describe homoerotic desire:

```
I hide myself within my flower
That wearing on your breast,
You, unsuspecting, wear me too—
And angels know the rest. (177)
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The flower that Dickinson gives to a presumably female figure (maybe her sister-in-law) becomes an extension of her personality. The commas in this poem, give this poem a
breathlessness, almost mimicking her heartbeat as it beats faster. When she says, "I hide myself within my flower," she says that her sexuality is something to be kept private. The intimacy of the flower "on your breast" is significant because it speaks of the desire to touch another person's body. In this case, the woman that Dickinson admires not only wears the flower that Dickinson has given her but, in some fashion, carries "me too" or an extension of Dickinson. The dash following this, adds a pause to this poem as if there is something that she is deliberately leaving out something that only the lover in this poem knows. The line "angels know the rest" seems to indicate that there may have been a physical encounter with someone or else, that what Dickinson felt was kept secret. When she speaks about "angels," using religious imagery hints at perhaps some religious guilt.

Dickinson ends this poem with these lines:

> I hide myself within my flower,  
> That, fading from your vase,  
> You, unsuspecting, feel for me  
> Almost a loneliness. (179)

The element of the "vase" indicates that the flower is plucked and now, only fades. After the actual or imagined sexual encounter, Dickinson feels longing after the subject of her desire has departed. Dickinson also presumes that the woman that she desires longs to touch her, too, when she says, "You, unsuspecting, feel for me." The last line, "almost a loneliness," indicates that whomever Dickinson loves may not feel the same way for her, but at least in part.

What makes Blake and Dickinson similar is both examples have a level of domesticity. Blake’s rose is domesticated, and the flower that Dickinson gives to the object of her affections has been plucked. Both have been conquered. In the poem "Wildflowers," even though Deborah Miranda connects sexual imagery with floral imagery, the kinds of flowers that we encounter in
this poem are different. These flowers have not been plucked or conquered. Instead, they are living and are independent of the “I” in this poem. The focus of this poem is women's empowerment, rather than a top-down structure with men at the top.

As Miranda approaches the subject of female sexuality and the use of flowers as a metaphor for women's sexuality, she has divorced the phallus from this equation. She begins her poem, "Wildflowers," with these words:

Some flowers fold up  
at night like prayers  
clasp petals around  
a virtuous core. (22)

The use of the word "night" is suggestive. In other words, the night is traditionally thought of as the time that people are intimate, but instead, "folding up" indicates a sense of reserve. "Like prayers" is deliberate; she is referring to traditional Christian sexual mores. "Clasp petals around a virtuous core" is suggestive of not just chastity, but even more than that, women who take a vow of celibacy, female monastics.

Others gape open  
through sunless hours  
like eyes refusing  
to admit they can’t see  
what scares them. (22)
This type of woman described here is titillated by the erotic, but instead of acting on desire, look from afar. "Eyes refusing to admit" indicates that they are tempted by desire but cannot "admit they can't see what scares them."

The use of flowers often is used to describe sexuality because of the way that flowers are a part of a plant’s sexual reproduction process. For example, in "The Sick Rose" by William Blake, an "invisible worm" has found the rose's bed of "crimson joy." However, here this imagery is different. In this poem, Miranda has eliminated a phallic symbol. Instead, she deliberately celebrates women's sexuality based upon its merit. The use of the word "core" in this poem seems to indicate that sexuality is something inherent; it does not need to be awakened by another.

One flower dangles
her pink lips curled
out, or down – (22)

“Pink lips” is a reference to the genitalia. “Dangles” indicates that her sexuality is on display. Instead of hiding her sexuality, she flaunts it. By dangling out and down, it demonstrates the effects of gravity and, therefore, a connection to mother earth.

already she is heavy
with tiny seeds.
They darken inside
her lengthening pods. (22)
Here Deborah Miranda is referring to the creative/erotic force within women. "Heavy with tiny seeds" relates to fertility. "Darken" indicates the dark, the mysterious, the void. In other words, Woman becomes the Creatrix. From the depths of being, she creates life.

The evening wind
pushes at them
through the thin membrane
but it’s too soon;
she won’t split open. (22)

Here the pod has become motherhood. The seeds have become children. “It’s too soon” means that she nurtures her children and waits until they are ready to face the world on their own.

Certain flowers have no faces
but thrust like hands
out of crumbly earth. (22)

"Thrust like hands" seems to indicate greed. Having a face in this poem seems to indicate an inner sense of self-awareness. Being without a face suggests a lack of self-awareness.

long white fingers
stabbing crazily,
They are compasses
who find Magnetic North
in every direction (22)
"Long white fingers" seems to indicate how some women have become instruments of patriarchy. "Stabbing crazily" appears to be a reference to backstabbing and competition for male attention. "Finding the Magnetic North in every direction" means that they try to make the subject of every conversation about themselves, aka self-centeredness.

And always there cluster

tiny round purple
gold or blue blossoms,
one who rely
on massed roots
for existence. (23)

"Always there" seems to indicate a place, perhaps a bar. The ones day in and day out are at the same watering hole. The "purple, gold or blue blossoms" are the popular ones. "Massed roots" speak of the masses and mass media. In other words, instead of looking inward for self-renewal, they continuously look for self-validation and rely on capitalistic structures to thrive.

At twilight I walk

through that barren landscape

where nothing needing care
grows, where abandonment
suckles survival
from all that is tender. (23)

The “I’ in this poem is an “I” speaks of the poet. “Nothing needing care” speaks of independence. “Abandonment suckles survival from all that is tender” speaks both of loneliness and pain and the lessons learned from both.
I learn to step
off the dirt road,
cross the ditch
singing with crickets,
go into the tallest grasses. (23)

Both “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost and “Wildflowers” talk about roads. While the path that Frost takes in “The Road Not Taken” is “grassy and wanted wear (Frost),” human hands have altered the landscape that Frost inhabits – and therefore, is an extension of the colonized landscape. "The dirt road" in Miranda’s “Wildflowers” is already "the road less traveled by” in Frost’s poem. By "crossing the ditch," Miranda enters the untamed world or indigenous space. At the time that Miranda wrote the poem (Indian Cartography was published in 1999), the Defense of Marriage Act had just been signed into law (1996). It was not until 2000 that Vermont recognized its first Civil Unions. So, at the time, that same-sex relationships were not considered valid.

Finally, Miranda ends by saying:

Sharp seeds and thistles
cling to my hair,
bite my ankles,
welcome me in their
tangled, scrappy ways. (23)

The "sharp seeds and thistles" refer to the lessons learned from experience. The "sharp seeds and thistles" are the untamed elements of sexuality. Therefore, it is the seed, the creative feminine force that liberates a woman's sexuality.
The choice to tie erotic imagery with the landscape is deliberate because the landscape is often conceptualized within erotic terms. For instance, the French word “Tetons” in “The Grand Tetons” means “breasts.” Therefore, intimately the land has a body as well. Here her body interacts with the landscape or a natural body. The natural landscape is not just a metaphor, but it also binds human beings together. Going “off the dirt road” is tapping into the untamed natural world of ourselves, the part of ourselves that refuses to be domesticated.

Mark Rifkin writes eloquently about Miranda’s second collection of poetry, *The Zen of La Llorona* and says that this work, “explores the disavowed space of mourning, or more precisely of melancholy; to illustrate forms of Indigenous subjectivity that evade or exceed the parameters of federal recognition” (Erotics of Sovereignty 97). The haunting in this collection is the figure of La Llorona, the figure of a ghost of an indigenous woman who, after being betrayed by the Spaniard who claimed ownership over her, drowned her children. Miranda describes this figure in the introductory essay to this work called “The Legend(s) of the Weeping Woman.” Miranda says, “The Indian woman, whose name may have been Maria, Martina, or even Malinche, bears beautiful children whom she loves even as they tie her more tightly to her captor... When the Spaniard betrays the Indian woman... she takes up a knife, slits the throats of her dear babies, and throws their bodies into the river” (1). This image of “the weeping woman” is the subject of several of her poems, such as “The Zen of La Llorona,” “Advice from La Llorona,” “Drowning,” “La Llorona's Daughter” and “Dar a Luz.” La Llorona for Miranda symbolizes the wounded creative, vital, and erotic energy within women. This collection moves from a place of woundedness to a place of healing.

When the late Native Studies critic and member of the Laguna Pueblo, Paula Gunn Allen addressed the issue of rape in *Off the Reservation* (1998), she wrote:
The ‘civilized belief that the strong must prevail over the weak, the superior over the inferior, the violent over the peaceful, and the order of patriarchy over all, leads inexorably to rape, ‘ethnic cleansing,’ the devastation of all who are not members of the elite ruling class that is always male, and to fascism in its subtle and glaring forms. The only way to transform rape culture it to dismember patriarchal civilization in all of its myriad forms and expressions… The issue of the origin of power is central to the question of how a rape culture can become one where violation of bodily and psychic integrity is unthinkable – not forbidden, mind you, but literally never considered. For as long as we live in a social system that defines right on the basis of group or personal above-ness, or superiority, rape must continue, as must depredations connected with racism, destruction to the biosphere, elitism, homo- and lesbophobia, child abuse, and the subtle and gross manifestations of trickle-down conceptualizations of the nature of the good, the real and the wholesome. (Allen 66)

In other words, the reason for sexual violence results from power structures, and the ways that these power structures have sought to dominate other people. Deborah Miranda and Paula Gunn Allen would agree that to heal society; we must dismantle these power structures, in particular the structures of patriarchy and colonialism. Also, they would agree that by restoring matriarchal systems that had been in place before the Europeans had settled the Americas, that for indigenous societies, they could come to a place of wholeness.

In the introduction to Deborah Miranda’s first collection of poetry, The Zen of La Llorona, she also addresses the issue of patriarchy and sexual violence, "…both love and the erotic are at odds with the violence and domination that structures any colonizing or patriarchal culture. Thus, in colonization and patriarchy, love is turned into grief, and the erotic is distorted into the
pornographic oppression and exploitation of bodies of women and children, and thus eventually, men. These oppressors are anyone seeking power in a patriarchal system – men and women – and the system, once the creative/erotic element is betrayed, perpetuates itself (3).” In a similar vein, Qwo-Li Driskill says in “Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic” (2004) that: “Sexual assault is an explicit act of colonization that has enormous impacts on both personal and national identities and because its connections to a settler mentality, can be understood as a colonial form of violence and oppression” (Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic). So, colonization and patriarchy seek not only to possess the body, which is the land or a series of lands and the natural landscape surrounding it, but it also aims to control the bodies of those who live off of it. One aspect of control is homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny. The other element of control is sexual violence.

Miranda addresses violence against women in her poem, called "Deer." There is a possible intertextual relationship between her work and that of Joy Harjo because both use the deer as a metaphor for women’s sexuality. Joy Harjo, as an example, uses the image of the deer in "Deer Dancer" to refer to a young woman who danced naked in a bar and flirted with men that were there, and yet, was innocent and unaware of what she was doing. In both poems, the woman’s body is exploited. In Harjo’s poem, a woman with uninhibited sexuality is shamed for dancing naked in a bar. In "Deer," Miranda takes us to a hunting scene.

She says,

They hang her in the barn, head down, tongue fat,
dripping blood. I am left alone
for a moment, venture close to stroke dark fur
made rough by winter; that is when she is whole.

and the dogs. But what I will remember is
the way rough men’s hands turn back the hide, jerk
down hard to tear it from her body. A dull hunting

The hide disappears – left untanned, taken
to the dump. Years afterward I walk
out to the barn, scrape my foot against
the stained floor beneath the crossbeam
never tell anyone

I’ve been taken like that. (10)

The first indication we have that she may not be talking about just a deer hunt is when she says, "I am left alone." The reader is uncertain if she is referring to herself as the bloodied deer dripping with blood or if she is an observer. We pause with her as she strokes the fur of the animal. So, it is not the hunt that violates the animal; it is the stripping of its hide.

When she says, "What I will remember is the way rough men's hands turn back the hide, jerk down hard to tear it from her body." This is a description of sexual violence. The hide of the deer is its innocence. Just as the hunters take the hide from the deer, so, a woman's dignity is taken from her. "The hide disappears – left untanned, taken to the dump" mirrors reality and speaks to the reality of the sexual assault and murder of indigenous women. Many such crimes are unsolved every year. "Years afterward, I walk out to the barn, scrape my foot against the stained floor beneath the crossbeam," now Miranda draws upon memory. "I've been taken like that," means that she has survived an event like this. Now, relevant to North American
Indigenous conceptualization of identity, is that “I” does not just include oneself, but the community that makes up the “I.” So, therefore, the “I” in the poem is a collective “I” and points to experiences not only within both Chumash and Ohlone communities but the greater community of indigenous women in this country.

The Indian Law Resource Center’s website details the enormity of sexual assault among Native American and Alaskan Native women saying that:

In the United States, violence against indigenous women has reached unprecedented levels on tribal lands and in Alaska Native villages. More than 4 in 5 American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence, and more than 1 in 2 have experienced sexual violence. Alaska Native women continue to suffer the highest rate of forcible sexual assault and have reported rates of domestic violence up to 10 times higher than in the rest of the United States. Though available data is limited, the number of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Native women and the lack of a diligent and adequate federal response is extremely alarming to indigenous women, tribal governments, and communities. On some reservations, indigenous women are murdered at more than ten times the national average.

Statistics define the scale of the problem, but do nothing to convey the experience of the epidemic. They tell part of the story, but fail to account for the devastating impacts this violence has on the survivors, Indian families, Native communities, and Indian nations themselves. Native children exposed to violence suffer rates of PTSD three times higher than the rest of the general population. (American Indian Law Center)
So, the deer in this poem represents Indigenous victims of sexual violence, in particular, those cases that have yet to be resolved. By using poetry to describe sexual assault, Miranda is making the experience personal to the reader, instead of making the victim of the crime a statistic. The intended audience of this poem is personally unaware of the magnitude of this issue.

Deborah Miranda’s *Bad Indians* is a mixed genre piece that includes non-fiction, poetry, excerpts and photographs that creates a collage of the past and present, to tell the truth of what happened to the indigenous people in California, in particular, those communities labeled as "Mission Indians," that share a common history following Spanish Colonization (along with subsequent occupation from the Mexican and United States governments and the persistence of these people in the face of genocide and attempts to erase their cultural existence). Kristan Leonard says regarding Deborah Miranda’s literature that, “Decades of exploitation, discrimination, and de-humanization are part of a little-known, suppressed California history which led to the near-destruction of the Indigenous California population. It was a near-destruction so complete that Native Californians still struggle to reconfigure the devastation and fragmentation of their Indigenous California heritage” (Leonard 27). Theresa Warburton adds, “In her memoir, Miranda provides a history of the California missions that confronts the one-dimensional, flat, and worst of all, untrue story that is taught to California youth through the fourth-grade mission project, which requires all students to complete a project on one of California’s twenty-one missions” (Warburton 44). *Bad Indians* knits together stories that Miranda has gleaned from the past, and has imagined what was missing, creating a mixture of narrative and poetry that captures felt experiences. This portion of the article focuses on “Lies My Ancestors Told Me,” and what the “truth” really is.
Adrienne Rich writes in “Woman and Honor: Some Notes on Lying” that:

The liar lives in fear of losing control. She cannot even desire a relationship without manipulation since to be vulnerable to another person means for her the loss of control…In speaking lies, we come inevitably to the subject of truth. There is nothing simple or easy about this idea. There is no ‘the truth,’ ‘a truth’ – Truth is not one thing or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. The pattern of the carpet. (On Lies, Secrets and Silence 187)

She is speaking from a Settler perspective, whose family benefited from privilege – a family of both European Jewish and Northern European descent – and whose father married a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant woman in the Deep South. Therefore, by the process of assimilation and by being untruthful about her background and sexuality, she was able to retain the control of status and respect within society. Therefore, truth-telling was integral to dismantling systems of oppression. However, we may ask ourselves, “What is the perspective of someone from an indigenous perspective?”

Deborah Miranda includes the poem, “Lies My Ancestors Told for Me” within her memoir, Bad Indians. She begins the poem with these words:

Riddle: when is a lie the truth?
When is the truth, a lie?
When a lie saves your life,
that’s truth; when a lie saves the lives
of your children, grandchildren
and five generations forward,
that’s truth in a form so pure
it can’t be anything
but a story (38)

Rich and Miranda agree truth is a complexity. However, Deborah Miranda and the late Adrienne Rich come from two different perspectives. While both have identified as lesbians, Rich came from a place where her truth could be spoken in safety. So, what Rich risked when she came out of the closet is social standing. On the other hand, Miranda’s perspective is as a queer person of color and as a queer Native person. For non-white queer people, it may be riskier to disclose or live out their identities. For example, a disproportionate number of trans people who were murdered in 2019 were people of color.

Instead, Miranda is positioning love as truth. What one does out of love – a maternal love that saves lives – is part of the truth. What could be lost by telling the truth is not social status but the lives of loved ones. So, while Miranda situates this poem in a historical setting, the phrase "five generations forward" seems to indicate that the past influences the present.

She then adds in the poem that:

After the mission broke
Up, it was better to lie
Like a dog about blood,
Say you are Mexican
Mexican Mexican Mexican
put it on the birth certificates
put in on the birth certificates
tell it to the census takers
tell it to the self-appointed
bounty hunters who appear at your door looking for Indians Indians Indians and when you tell that lie tell it in Spanish (38)

In the book, *Reservations, Removal, and Reform: The Mission Indian Agents of Southern California: 1878-1903*, Mathes writes that "California passed from Mexican to American control with the signing of the Treaty of Hidalgo in 1848, ending the Mexican-American War and marking a change in status for the region's Indians. While the Spanish and Mexican governments viewed them as citizens, recognizing at least a possessory right to their lands, the new American government would deny them citizenship for generations, with little regard for their land rights. (4)" During the mid-19th Century, United States Army units, vigilante groups, and bounty hunters targeted California's indigenous populations. So Miranda is talking about the survival of the Ohlone and Chumash, and how her ancestors preserved their families. “To lie like a dog about blood” is lying that one has Spanish ancestry when someone does not. Mestizos, who were of European and Spanish (and in some cases African) ancestry, were treated differently than their Native counterparts. So, “lying about blood” meant crossing a boundary within classification systems.

The poem then adds these lines:

Grandfathers lie about where you’re going when you slip out at night, retrieve your dancing clothes
whisper the truth
and bare Indian feet
beat against the earth
beat beat beat like children begging
to be let back inside

Don’t teach old songs
to your grandchildren,
don’t make the regalia
in front of them… (39)

Capt. Richard H Pratt is famous for coining the phrase, "Kill the Indian, and Save the Man."
While the grandfathers' native identity has been sublimated, their identity remains. Though
White Americans attempted to kill their native identity, these men were not successful. When
she says, "beat like children begging to be let inside," she is both talking about both home and
heart, when she says, "like children begging to be let back inside." Also, the ritual was
performed outside the home, in the elements of nature. It was the natural world that would
disguise their actions from their children, perhaps, just in case one of the children should reveal
what they were not supposed to say. However, Miranda is also mentioning that certain traditions
died with them when she says, "Don't teach old songs to your grandchildren, don't make the
regalia."

In *When Did Indians Become Straight*, Mark Rifkin writes that: “The Esselen people were
declared ‘extinct’ by both government officials and non-native experts, casting persons of
Esselen descent as a vestigial remainder who bear a reproductively transmitted substance (blood)
divorced from *tribal* identity (*When Did Indians Become Straight* 129).” Miranda buckles against the idea that the Esselen/Ohlone were culturally extinct. Though identity is passed down in "whispers" and is fragmented, it still exists. Although this identity is hidden from Euro-American anthropologists, hidden identity does not equal an extinct identity.

It is significant that the grandfathers “slip out at night,” or that something of a sexual nature was going on. The “regalia” that they were told to make in front of children was genderbending and, therefore, because to “make them in front of” the children would be subversive to colonial, patriarchal norms. Deborah Miranda’s essay “Extermination of the Joyas” can shed some light on this poem that was included in her memoir, *Bad Indians*. She writes, “I suggest... that those people who may have identified or been identified as *joyas...* became either same-sex *jotos* who engaged in secret sexual relationships with other men or they became adult male or female members of the community with important roles as caretakers or ‘grave tenders’ of Native culture” (*Extermination of the Joyas* 270). Miranda proceeds to re-tell the story of Kitsepawit Fernando Librado, a Chumash individual who sought out traditions that were being lost among the Chumash. He also apparently cross-dressed. So, in this case, the truth that Miranda is hinting at is many things, both indigeneity in general and indigenous gender diversity in particular. So, queer-phobia is one aspect of White Settler Colonialism.

In her collection of poems, *Raised by Humans* (2015), Deborah Miranda sandwiches the rest of her poems between two poems that reference the alphabet. The Spaniards first used the Latin alphabet as they taught Spanish to the indigenous converts. In “Alphabet of Lies,” we will see obvious religious references. We are also reminded of the legacy of the Indian Boarding School system and how the educational system in this country still discourages the use of indigenous languages in the classroom. Often, language preservation programs are led members
of the community who are passionate about preserving the culture. Without appropriate attention in the classroom, often indigenous students are told implicitly that their languages and cultures do not matter. White cis men often dominate systems of higher learning, and these educational environments can be oppressive by denying indigenous history and by teaching a version of history that erases indigenous past. In "Alphabet of Lies," she lists how lies impact indigenous communities. For instance, when she says, “Anthropologist lies advertising certificates of authenticity” (Raised by Humans 1), she references how phony certificates of authenticity are created by anthropologists to pass off phony "Native Art" as being authentic. When she says, "BIA lies breeding bastards nobody wants to claim (1), she was referencing how “Baby Veronica” was separated from her indigenous Cherokee family, and because of her birth mother’s lies was adopted by a non-Native family.

At the end of her poem, she says:

Learn the drill. Teach your children.
Alphabetize. Civilize.
Reservation. Termination.
Savage. Savage. Savage. (8)

First, she mentions “alphabetize” or refuse to teach indigenous children in their language and instead teach children in English. Second, she says “civilize” or to punish children when they speak their indigenous language or reference their indigenous cultures. Third, “reservation” means how indigenous people were either relocated to reservations (such as the Cherokee to Oklahoma) or were placed upon reservations, which were often whittled down portions of tribal lands. Fourth is the termination, or once a tribal group is considered culturally extinct, such as the Ohlone, they are stripped of tribal status. The last line mentions what this communicates to
native children that somehow, they are "savages" or less than human and emphasizes how White Supremacy is written into our legal system.

“Decolonizing the Alphabet” is located at the end of her collection of poems, *Raised by Humans*. Instead of referencing the alphabet directly at the beginning, it is not until the second canto that Miranda chooses to use an acrostic. Instead, in the beginning, she references the body.

She writes:

Literacy starts with flesh
ripped from the backs of my ancestors,
inscriptions by soldier’s whips,
a priest’s cudgel, the ranchero’s lariat;
scars scrawled at Indian Boarding Schools,
cfabs across knuckles, buttocks, shoulders, knees;
learn this holy language, it will make you civilized. (69)

Deborah Miranda is playing with words. Instead of "the word became flesh" as the Gospel of John, she mentions, "literacy starts with flesh." In other words, for indigenous people – especially those who were educated through the missions and later government schools – often, education and violence were tied together. She tells us why many people stopped speaking their languages. Often indigenous people were punished for "acting Indian" or speaking their indigenous languages. When she mentions the “inscriptions by soldier’s whips,” she is telling us that language was forced upon people through violence. The “priest’s cudgel” emphasizes how religious violence was forced upon them, and the lariat underlines how they were treated like cattle. By referencing specific parts of the body, she references abuse, “knuckles” as in a ruler by a Catholic nun slapping across the knuckles, “buttocks” seems to suggest sexual violence,
“shoulders” suggests laborers who lift and “knees” because these clubs were used to cripple those who tried to escape.

In her introduction to The Zen of La Llorona, she links patriarchy to violence. In this case, these actions show how education was an instrument that the patriarchy used to crush the indigenous spirit. In “Decolonizing the Alphabet,” Miranda chooses to end the poem with resistance.

She says toward the end:

You never imagined this:
your alphabet betraying its duty
defecting to our cause, going Native,
becoming indigenous to this land because
we give birth to it with our blood. No wonder
our books are banned, our children told
don’t read that, don’t write that. Don’t read,
don’t write. Don’t.
We've learned too much. (71)

Many tribal nations are facing the reality of language extinction. Sometimes, the few speakers of these dying indigenous languages have worked tirelessly to preserve their languages. However, when Miranda writes about “the alphabet becoming indigenous to this land,” she is saying that indigenous peoples are now using English to confront injustice and to dismantle patriarchy. Language becomes indigenous because it is advancing indigenous concerns. She is also saying that for many indigenous communities, they use the Latin alphabet when teaching their languages to their children (except the Cherokee, which have their own script). When she
says, “our books are banned,” she is referencing decisions like that of the Tucson Unified School District, which chose to ban the book *Rethinking Columbus* in 2012. Because the book challenged White Settler narratives about colonialism in this country, the School District decided to ban this book, along with other books by Native and Chicanx authors. Truthout states that this book, along with *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko and other books written by indigenous authors were banned by the school district (Truthout). So, when books like *Ceremony* and *Rethinking Columbus* subvert dominant White Settler narratives, they are using the language of the oppressor and are confronting dominant historical narratives. In this way, while white people thought that they could use education “kill the Indian, but save the man,” they were unsuccessful because now indigenous people are using the language of education to subvert the intentions of White Settlers and instead, speak the truth about themselves.

In this last chapter, we have learned about indigenous womanhood, natural space, and the erotic and how we see these themes in “Wildflowers. In “Deer,” Miranda demonstrates the reality of sexual violence. In “Lies My Ancestors Told For Me,” we learned how Miranda’s ancestors had to retreat into a closet to survive and how these identities still asserted themselves in the shadows. Finally, in “Decolonizing the Alphabet,” we learned how the Indian boarding school and contemporary educational system seeks to erase indigenous identity and how indigenous people are using language to fight back. If there is a thread that connects her work, it is that of the indigenous body in the past and present, and how these experiences speak the truth in contrast to historical and contemporary narratives about indigenous personhood.
CHAPTER 2. THE BODY SHAPED BY THIRST: 
NATALIE DIAZ

Prominent Literary critic in the field of Indigenous literary studies and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Literature and Expressive Culture, Daniel Heath Justice, writes in Why Indigenous Lives Matter (2018) about the significance of poetry as a form particularly suited to convey the effect of indigenous experience:

Poetry distills the rage, pain, and defiance of Indigenous peoples, who remain under ideological and physical assault by settler populations that so often insist that our continued existence is an affront and an impossibility. However, given its intimate subject matter, its sensual rhythms, and its bittersweet distillations of love and longing, poetry is an ideal form for naming the fierce beauty of contemporary Indigenous personhood. (Justice 60)

Natalie Diaz’s poetry reflects rage, pain, and defiance. As we discuss her collections of poetry, When My Brother was an Aztec (2012) and Postcolonial Love Poem (2020), we will view how elements such as her brother, her beloved, indigenous women, and the body in its various forms. When she discusses the figure of the brother in her poems, invariably, she also discusses the attendant figures of the mother and father. Sometimes she feels rage at what her drug-addicted brother brings upon her family; at other times, she feels empathy for the pain that he inflicts upon himself. She also feels sorrow for her mother and father, who let themselves be subjected to her brother’s chaos and how he abuses the household. The defiance present in her poetry can be traced throughout the history of the Mojave history. The ‘Aha Mahav’ throughout their history have exhibited resistance to colonial occupation under the Spaniards, Mexicans, and
now the Americans. This continuous resistance is still going on today as the Mojave continue to assert their rights to the Colorado River, whose course has been altered to water the lawns of Southern California.

For this essay, I will focus on a selection of her poems in her first collection *When My Brother was an Aztec* (2012) and then proceed to other poems from her most recent collection of poems, *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020). What I will do is show how Natalie Diaz explored themes in her first collection, and how she develops them further along with themes of drought.

An example where we can find how Diaz draws upon her Latinx heritage is in her poem “When My Brother Was an Aztec,” which also serves as the name of her first poetry collection. The name of this title reveals an intertextual relationship between this text and that of other Latinx authors. Among the most obvious of connections is that with “My Father was a Toltec” by Ana Castillo. This influence is also felt in Esmeralda Santiago’s memoir *When I was Puerto Rican.* Since *My Father was a Toltec* (1988) and *When My Brother was an Aztec* (2012) are both poetic works and the titles of each nod to the names of pre-Columbian indigenous people from Mexico, the relationship between these two literary works is more apparent. Both poems begin similarly, with the first line to “The Toltec” by Castillo is “My father was a Toltec” and the title of “When My Brother was an Aztec” (which functions as a first-line) being similar. However, aside from Mami or the Spanish word for “Mommy” in Castillo’s poem, the cultural references to Mexico are absent. The poem is short and captures the fast-paced action of the streets in Chicago. Another example of intertextuality between both poems is the use of the word “bad.” In “The Toltec,” Castillo says, “Everyone knows he was bad (3),” using "bad" to mean "cool" rather like Michael Jackson sang in his song, "Bad" or as in the slang term “bad-ass.” So, in the tenth stanza of this poem, when Diaz uses the phrase, "Like all bad kings" (2),
she is referencing "The Latin Kings," the name of the street gang just as Castillo references the Toltecs in Chicago.

How their works differ, are the culturally specific elements in “When My Brother was an Aztec.” By pointing to the pre-Columbian cultures of the Mexica (who built Tenochtitlan) and the subsequent Aztecs, Diaz is emphasizing the indigenous character of Mexican culture and is connecting US indigenous communities to those South of the US/Mexican border. Natalie Diaz’s poem “When My Brother was an Aztec” follows a step pattern like that of the step pyramids along La Avenida de Los Muertos or The Avenue of the Dead in Teotihuacan. However, instead of the steps going up, they go down, matching the brother’s descent into drug addiction. Which leads us to the basement:

He lived in our basements and sacrificed my parents
   every morning. It was awful. Unforgivable. But they kept coming
   back for more. They loved him, was all they could say.
   
   (When My Brother was an Aztec 1)

She layers on top of the contemporary image, the horrific imagery of historical human sacrifice among the pre-Columbian Aztecs. When she says he “sacrificed my parents every morning,” she gives the brother an almost priestly role. By doing this, she ascribes to the brother an almost godlike status, perhaps mirroring how her parents treated their son. Perhaps, the figure of the brother in this poem is not just her brother or a family member that felt like a brother, but males who played similar roles in their families. By positioning “it was awful” and “unforgivable” before, “but they kept coming back for more,” she leads the reader through her mental processes. Our initial response is to blame the brother for doing this to her parents,
however, she adds, “but they kept coming back for more,” acknowledging that her parents were responsible for enabling the brother’s addiction:

It started with him stumbling along *La Avenida de Los Muertos*,

my parents walking behind like effigies in a procession

*(When My Brother was an Aztec 1)*

In the imaginary, she brings the reader to the Temple of Quetzalcoatl in Tenochtitlan. By centering the imaginary in pre-Columbian Mexico, at *La Avenida de Los Muertos* in Tenochtitlan in Mexico, Diaz draws upon imagery indigenous to Mexico and, therefore, is pointing her finger at issues specific to indigenous North America. It is as if her brother is a king, and her "parents walking behind" in the real world are chasing their wayward son, and have become objects or “effigies in a procession.” She is also pointing out gender disparities, where the male children are afforded leniency. However, she is absent from this procession, which perhaps indicates her refusal to participate in this dynamic and not to enable her brother. So, probably, her role as the queer member of the family is as the observer, apart from heteronormative structures.

When she describes her parents as being “like effigies” in a procession, she transforms them into both object and sacrifice. Her brother is treating them as a means to an end, and her parents feel that this is their fault.

As her brother’s addiction continues, she uses death to describe both her parents and her brother when she says:

They forgot who was dying, who was already dead. My brother quit wearing shirts when a carnival of dirty-breasted women
made him their leader, following him up and down the stars—

They were acrobats, moving, twitching like snakes—They fed him

crushed diamonds and fire. (1)

Here the word “who” becomes important as does the words "forgot" and "they." At various points, both her parents and brother are the "they." In some sense, the three of them were dying inside, and what has died is dignity—both that of her parents and that of her brother. Crystal meth becomes "crushed diamonds," and the fire is apparent, the fire that burns from the lighter that her brother is using to smoke his pipe. A "carnival of women" indicates that these women are a blur of faces that her brother is dragging home with him, and their faces have become a blur. "Twitching like snakes" seems to indicate the physical tremors methamphetamine addicts experience when coming off a high.

She also hints at meth psychosis when she says, “He thought he was Huitzilopochtli, a god, half-man half-hummingbird.” Huitzilopochtli was both the hummingbird god, hence why her brother thinks of himself as “half-man, half hummingbird” (1). Her brother thinks of himself as a god, and as being invincible. Huitzilopochtli was also the god of war, and so, not only is her brother thinking that he is violent, but he is also subject to violent outbursts. When she says, "Neighbors were amazed my parents' hearts kept growing back—It said a lot about my parents, or parents’ hearts. My brother flung them into cenotes” (1). So the brother does not consume the heart as the Aztecs would have done. Instead, he throws it away or "flung them into cenotes” or sinkholes in the Yucatan peninsula that the Maya used to toss offerings for their dead.
David Carrasco writes in his essay "Uttered from the Heart" (1999) that the Spaniards "were excited and scandalized by the extraction of hearts (sometimes their own) in human sacrifice, while on the other hand, they learned that the concept of “heart” had something to do with the native conception of ‘center’ or ‘essence.’ They found that everything important had a ‘heart.’ There was the ‘heart’ of the mountain, the ‘heart’ of the town, the ‘heart’ of the sky, the ‘heart’ of the tree, and certain individuals, whom the Spaniards labeled hombre-dioeses (man-gods) were considered to be the ‘heart’ of social groups.” (Carrasco 3)

So, what seems to be on the surface to be a standard description of grief becomes something else. What the parents were sacrificing, was not just their emotions, but a part of who they were, perhaps even that divine essence in themselves. While the parents cowered down in fear of their son, it is they who deserved respect as a “god.”

What is somewhat unique about how Natalie Diaz plays with imagery in this poem is that unlike traditional victims of human sacrifice among the pre-Columbian Aztecs – captives of war – in this case, the victims were her parents. By using imagery in this way, she is underscoring how she felt horror and rage at what her brother was doing to her family and the power her parents and the “carnival of women” allowed him to have over them.

In “Mexica Warrior” (2017) Rigoberto Gonzalez writes about Natalie Diaz’s work in When My Brother was an Aztec by saying:

Disease such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and diabetes are known plagues on the country’s Native American reservations, and one explanation is the cultural displacement of the indigenous tribes—their relocation and isolation from their native landscapes, the
subsequent dependence on government assistance, and the introduction of non-traditional diets. (Mexica Warrior 98)

Gonzalez is correct when he describes the debilitating effects of White Settler Colonialism. However, I believe that he ignores the elements of resistance in this poem. Even the phrase, “Like all bad kings,” followed by a reference to the “green baseball cap turned backwards with a Mexican flag” (2), appears to indicate an appropriation of Mexican cultural pride and a rejection of White Settler norms.

The role of dreams is essential for the Mojave. In recent years, Mojave elders have become concerned about how the Mojave language has become an endangered language. They believe that while their children and grandchildren may have dreams that are designed to guide them as people, these dreams may not come in English, but Mojave. Without knowledge of their language, they will not know what their dreams mean. So, perhaps, one of the reasons why she chose to direct the language program was in one way to counter rootlessness that led the figure of the brother in her poems to spiral down into a path of drug addiction. On a PBS Newshour broadcast, she said, “What they (the elders) worry about, maybe the dreams are coming to the kids, but maybe the dreams are coming to them in Mojave” (PBS Newshour). So, as she describes how dreams help to guide youth as they reach into adulthood, she describes her brother as refusing to grow up or a “Peter Pan wannabe. Peter be wanna pan” (When My Brother was an Aztec 64) in “A Brother Named Gethsemane.”

The way that Natalie Diaz discusses the woman's body is significant. Whether a woman is conventionally beautiful in “The Last Mojave Indian Barbie” or is an amputee in “A Woman
with No Legs,” Natalie Diaz is clear that the women in her poetry are equally deserving of respect and desire.

In a recent email conversation that I had with Natalie Diaz, she wrote:

I would say, at least today, that I try to treat every body and person on my page like the body of a beloved, which in my mind is a way of desire, a more possible type of love, and beyond both sexuality and gender. The hardest people to "love" as well as my friends and my lovers, all deserve the attention and the touch of hand or language or eye. (Diaz)

Anne Anlin Cheng writes in her essay “Wounded Beauty: An Exploratory Essay on Race, Feminism and the Aesthetic Question (2000)” about how beauty standards and class are interrelated by saying:

Much of what has been written about beauty's relationship to femininity speaks—sometimes with and sometimes without self-consciousness—to and from an exclusively middle-class white paradigm. And much of what has been written about beauty's relationship to racism has presumed that a racialized individual's relationship to gender discriminations is analogous to, if it does not simply double, the burdens of racial oppression. But at the conjunction of racial and gender discriminations stands the woman of color, for whom "beauty" presents a vexing problem both as judgment and solution.

(Cheng 192)

So, as we discuss "the fierce beauty of Indigenous Personhood," as Daniel Heath Justice mentions, how is this different from the "middle-class white paradigm?" And, how does Diaz reflect beauty in her work? Furthermore, how does Diaz's work both confront the Western stereotype of what is beautiful and what is beautiful to her? The women in Natalie Diaz’s poetry
either deviate from Western beauty conventions such as amputees in “A Woman with No Legs” and breast cancer survivors in “Top Ten Reasons Why Indians Are Good at Basketball” in *Postcolonial Love Poem* or attempt to model themselves after these standards such as “The Last Mojave Indian Barbie.”

In “Ride ‘Em, Barbie Girl: Commodifyiing Folklore, Place, and the Exotic,” Jeannie B. Thomas describes Mattel’s use of superficial indigeneity by saying that:

> Invariably the Dolls of the World version of Native American Barbie is dressed in what—under the influence of Hollywood’s frequent emphasis on Plains-Indian-style dress with a little Southwest color thrown in—has come to be pervasive in popular culture and could be described as an Anglo’s construction of a generic Indian: buckskin, feathers, fringe, and turquoise. … Mattel’s Native American descriptions are further examples of the commodification and simplification of such terms associated with folklore studies as authentic, ceremonial, and tradition; they are also combined with idiosyncratic contemporary terms... (Thomas 74)

Natalie Diaz references the generic indigenous iconography in her poem, “The Last Mohave Indian Barbie.” She says:

> Wired to her display box were a pair of one-size-fits-all-Indians stiletto moccasins, faux turquoise earrings, a dreamcatcher, a copy of *Indian Country Today*, erasable markers for chin and forehead tattoos, and two six-packs of mini beer bottles—when tilted up, the bottles turned clear, when turned right-side-up, the bottles refilled. Mojave Barbie repeatedly drank Ken and Skipper under their pink plastic patio sets. Skipper said she drank like a boy. (26)
The moccasins (from the Plains tribal nations), turquoise earrings (from the Diné/Navajo), and a dreamcatcher (from the Ojibwe) all refer to elements from vastly different indigenous groups in this country. Therefore, she is referencing a stylized picture of indigeneity based upon what many White Settlers in this country think about what being indigenous means in this country or quoting an unfortunate phrase, "You all look the same." The erasable markers leave the reader feeling that perhaps it is white people who get to determine what indigeneity is in the popular imagination. The beer bottles also play on stereotypes that "all indigenous people drink." The fact that Skipper describes “Mohave Barbie” as “drinking like a boy,” seems to say that perhaps, “Mohave Barbie” is outside traditional gender norms about what being feminine is and, therefore, suggest that her gender presentation was not completely gender-conforming.

Further along in the poem, Diaz adds, “There wasn’t any diet cola in their cute little ice chests, and worst of all, Mojave Barbie couldn’t find a single, soft spot on her body to inject her insulin” (When My Brother was an Aztec 26). The element of diet cola in this piece links the figure in this poem with the figure in “A Woman with No Legs.” The “Woman with No Legs” drinks “water & Diet Coke from blue cups with plastic bendy straws” (When My Brother was an Aztec 16).

“Mohave Barbie” dares counter the narrative of White Settler benevolence by mentioning that the Mojave at one point had to “eat a few horses” (When My Brother was an Aztec 26) and also disputes the Land Bridge theory by saying that the Mojave Creation myth was right – “It’s true. I’m from Spirit Mountain,” (When My Brother was an Aztec 26) – and therefore, no longer fits inside "the box" that White Settlers place fit around indigenous people in this country, her white friends no longer welcome her.
As the prose poem continues, Diaz hints at the fetishization of Indigenous women when Ken, “wanted Mojave Barbie to wear her traditional outfit” and “begged Mojave Barbie to wrap her wide, dark hips in the ‘Mojave Death grip’” (When My Brother was an Aztec 27). When the affair ends, and Barbie is forced to leave, she is forced to fit into another indigenous stereotype, “a job dealing blackjack at some California casino,” (When My Brother was an Aztec 27).

Stephanie McKenzie is not entirely accurate when she says that, ”‘Mojave Barbie’ represents the forced dislocation of indigenous peoples” (Women Poets and Myth in the 20th and 21st Centuries 127), in that it seems that Sanchez seems to point to “forced dislocation” as being situated in the historical past. While it is true that Diaz links the past and the present, and that part of that story is dislocation, it would be unfortunate to situate this poem in the past. In the second to last sentence in this prose poem, Diaz indicates that “Mojave Barbie had flipped them off” in an act of resistance. So, this poem ends with a rejection of White Settler culture and an affirmation of her own indigenous culture in an act of defiance.

Natalie Diaz’s recent collection of poems, Postcolonial Love Poem, further develops upon concepts found in When My Brother was an Aztec. Perhaps, one theme found throughout this collection, that is not in the previous collection, is that of drought and thirst and how that is a metaphor for desire. When she was asked if her new collection contrasted with the old collection, she said that instead of the new collection contrasting with the old:

It is the next space, the space after the first book. The brother still appears. The land is still the body. The space that might feel new, or more revealed or more open or more vulnerable is that I bring the body of love and desire to the page, whether that is the body
of the brother, the body of a friend, the body of my lover, the body of land or water, etc.

(Diaz)

In her poem, “Postcolonial Love Poem,” the imagery of drought and the erotic imagery often co-mingle. She says:

I dismount my dark horse, bend to you there, deliver you
the hard pull of all my thirsts—
I learned *Drink* in a country of drought. (1)

In this case, Diaz compares the thirst for water with erotic desire. Diaz bends down to her beloved just as a horse bends down to take a drink of water from a trough. Her thirst is not just sexual, because "water" is traditionally used as a metaphor for the emotions. Therefore, what Diaz is describing is both physical, emotional, and even spiritual longing.

When she says:

There are wild flowers in my desert
Which take up to twenty years to bloom. (1)

Unlike the flowers mentioned previously in Miranda’s poem “Wildflowers,” these flowers are scarce, as there are years in the desert when the spring blooms are sparse. However, she is saying that the desert is like romantic love, only revealed in the middle of deep longing. In this case, she is saying that it has been a long time since she fell in love with someone.

This poem then takes on darker aspects as she describes possible kinkier aspects of the erotic experience and continues with the imagery of wildflowers which, an element that we saw in our previous chapter on Deborah Miranda. Here the wildflowers are those of the desert:
Arise the wild heliotrope, scorpion weed,
blue phacelia which hold purple the way a throat can hold
the shape of any great hand—

*Great hands* is what she called mine. (2)

These lines appear to refer to erotic asphyxiation as a part of the love-making experience. Here Diaz is not offering us a domesticated version of queer eroticism, but rather an eroticism that explores desire and pleasure between two women.

The last three lines speak about rain as a metaphor for change:

The rain will eventually come, or not.
Until then, we touch our bodies like wounds—
the war never ended and somehow begins again. (2)

What Diaz is saying is interesting, counter to traditional conceptualizations of love as “rain,” it is more like thirst in the middle of the desert. This metaphor contrasts itself against the conventional conceptualization of “love drying up.” Here love is what sustains two people when there is no rain. Love fills the absence within oneself. Diaz is also acknowledging the impermanence of relationships. Therefore, the focus is not on how long love will last but the pleasure of love for as long as it lasts.

In Natalie Diaz’s titular poem, “Postcolonial Love Poem” within her most recent collection of poems *Postcolonial Love Poem*, she describes the erotic encounter between her and her beloved using the metaphor, “Until then, we touch our bodies like wounds” (*Postcolonial Love Poem* 2), hinting at a kind of brokenness. Women that are labeled broken are described in both collections of poetry *When My Brother was an Aztec* and in *Postcolonial Love Poem*. 
For example, in “A Woman with No Legs,” she describes a woman “Trades her clothes for faded nightgowns & loose like ghosts” (*When My Brother was an Aztec* 16). The reader is led to believe that the clothes that the woman used to wear and her connection to her sense of femininity have now become replaced “nightgowns.” The choice of the word “ghosts” makes us feel that this woman has become like a ghost among her people, as being invisible. Perhaps the reason that she “doesn’t attend church services cakewalks or Indian Day parades” (*When My Brother was an Aztec* 16) is as a result of shame and instead “lives years & years in beds & wheelchairs stamped ‘Needles Hospital’ in white stencil.” The fact that she has a wheelchair, perhaps indicates that this woman should still be a part of her community and feels ashamed.

In “Top Ten Reasons Why Indians Are Good at Basketball,” she also seems to hint at a breast cancer survivor for whom basketball has become “the left breast of a Mojave woman three Budweisers into a Saturday night” (*Postcolonial Love Poem* 41). The right breast’s absence seems to indicate a possible mastectomy. When Diaz ends *Postcolonial Love Poem* with “the war never ended and somehow begins again,” she connects back to the historical past, to what would later be called the Mojave War, which happened between 1857 and 1859. What Diaz is saying that both ‘Aha Mahav resistance to White Settler colonialism has continued from that point in history until the present day and that the United States government's war on the water rights of the 'Aha Mahav continues today.

Natale A. Zappia, who is Associate Professor of History and Director for Sustainability at California State University – Northridge, writes his book about Mojave history, *Traders and Raiders*, that:
In the twentieth century, as the important of the Colorado and Gila Rivers and their ability to feed western cities only grew, Natives continued to defend their right to the life-giving waters where the Kwikumat and his people emerged centuries earlier. This time, warfare took place in the halls of academia and in federal and state courts, a battle that continues today. (Zappia 144)

What Zappia is pointing to here, is how the indigenous warfare engaged in the 21st century. Instead of the battle being experienced on the battlefield, the right to have indigenous voices heard in diverse subjects like Paleontology, History, and Literature is itself an act of resistance. Also, Zappia is speaking about indigenous water rights and how unresolved battle over the use of the Colorado River will most likely extend for many years to come. So, when Diaz says that “the war has never ended,” she is speaking about the fight for indigenous sovereignty.

Like “When My Brother Was an Aztec,” Natalie Diaz returns to the imagery of sacrifice in "Catching Copper," which instead draws upon Ancient Greek mythology rather than Native Aztec. While Diaz subtly references violence in “When My Brother Was an Aztec,” in "Catching Copper," Natalie Diaz chooses to focus on the reality of violence among Mojave young men. She begins this poem with the line, "My brothers have a bullet." Unlike "When My Brother Was an Aztec," which addresses the personal relationships within specific family structures, by addressing Mojave men as "my brothers," Diaz is not just addressing one brother in particular. Instead, she is addressing other young men in her community that are like him. Diaz says in one place, "My brothers lose their bullet all the time... (9)" In other words, often gun violence is not intentional, but rather is done in a fit of rage. Later she adds, "My brothers search their houses, their bodies for their bullet, and a little red ghost moans” (9). When she uses
the phrase “little red ghost,” she says that often little children are accidentally injured or killed in the crossfire.

When she says:

   My brothers kiss their bullet
   in a dark cul-de-sac, in front
   of the corner-store ice machine,
   in the passenger seat of their car,
   on a strobe-lighted dance floor.

   My brother’s bullet
   Kisses them back. (10)

When she uses the phrase "kiss their bullet in a dark cul-de-sac," the "dark" implies mistaken identity. However, Natalie Diaz does not stop there, because she also mentions "in the passenger seat of their car" or a possible drive-by shooting and "on a strobe-lighted dance floor" indicates gang violence in a public place.

In both *When My Brother was an Aztec* and *Postcolonial Love Poem* when Natalie Diaz references mythology, both Aztec and Greek, she is often using violent or erotic imagery. As “Catching Copper” progresses she references Ancient Greek sacrifices to Zeus:

   My brothers’ feed their bullet
   The way the bulls fed Zeus—
   burning, on a pyre, their own
   thigh bones wrapped in fat.
   My brothers take a knee, bow
against the asphalt, prostrate
on the concrete for their bullet. (11)

By using the phrase "feed their bullet," she seems to be tying addiction and violence together. When she uses the phrase "the way the bulls fed Zeus," she is blaming the gun industry and a lack of gun control as being partly to be blamed for the issue. "Take a knee, bow" adds religious imagery into this poem. In other words, their deaths prop up the "good guy with a gun" narrative, which has become a religion.

At the end of "Catching Copper," Diaz demonstrates how Natives are often presumed to be violent by nature. When she says, "you could say my brothers bullet cleans them" (11), she says that these men "had it coming" and that justice is served. "Makes them ready for God" seems to indicate that Diaz is tying religion and violence together. “Cleans them” seems to reference a sinful nature that they need to be cleansed from, so the American public presumes that they are always the “bad guy.” By drawing on Western mythology, instead of Aztec mythology, Diaz is stating that the problems within indigenous communities are tied to systems of oppression enforced by hegemonic structures. In other words, these problems would not exist if they did not exist under a White Settler state.

In "The First Water is the Body," Natalie Diaz describes the intimate relationship the Mojave have with their landscape by saying that:

The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States—also, it is a part of my body.

I carry a river. It is who I am. ‘Aha Makav. This is not metaphor.

When a Mojave says, Inyech 'Aha Makavch ithuum, we are saying our name. We are telling a story of our existence. The river runs through the middle of my body.
In this case, she is saying that she is part of the river. The Colorado River is a part of her body. Usually, in Western concepts of landscape, it is the human who goes into the landscape, and when the traveler walks into the countryside, there is maintained a distance.

A classic example comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature:"

As when the summer comes from the south, the snowbanks melt, and the face of the earth becomes green before it, so shall the advancing create its ornaments along its path, and carry with it the beauty it visits… The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation—a dominion such as now is beyond his dream of God—he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight. (Emerson 33)

Immediately, one notices a couple of things about this passage. Women are not a part of the equation. Emerson implies that men, and not women, have a right to subdue the land. At the time that Emerson wrote his essay, the United States was expanding westward. Tied to westward expansionism, was an idea that it was man's God-given right to subdue the earth and "primitive inhabitants," and the earth was there for men to take. The indigenous inhabitants often were not seen as fully human, and a strict separation between the earth and humanity was maintained. In contrast, Diaz's homeland is not "over nature"; instead, she is a part of the river. For the Mojave, the Colorado River is who they are, it binds them together as a culture, and it is their identity.

The Mvskoke Creek Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo, writes the following about the way that many indigenous peoples see their relationship as being with the land as being, "What especially makes
indigenous cultures unique is the relationship to the land. The land is a being, an entity, a
repository of meaning. There is an ongoing relationship between human beings and the land. It is
the keeper of our bones, stories, and songs." (Harjo)

Depending on where a culture is situated, the rivers or mountains, or sky or ocean may
become a focal point for that individual cultural group. However, what Harjo is saying here is
that for many indigenous communities, there is an interdependency between humans and
landscapes. Mark Rifkin, as was mentioned in the introduction, writes that “Attending to the
Sovereign Erotic can open toward an erotics of sovereignty, reimagining peoplehood, and
placemaking that register the complex entwinement of unacknowledged survivals, unofficial
aspirations, and the persistence of pain (The Erotics of Sovereignty 31).” When Diaz writes,
“We are telling a story of our existence. The river runs through the middle of my body,” the
river has become the receptacle of stories, not just her story but many stories throughout history.
These stories are not just that of past and present people who have lived in that place, but the
whole of natural life, including the river that lives in that place.

Diaz then continues this poem by saying:

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

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

Often Natalie Diaz chooses to leave words and phrases in Mojave and Spanish untranslated.
The choice to leave Mojave untranslated is reflective of her work trying to revitalize the Mojave
language. This both leaves certain parts of the text as private and is an act of resistance. Diaz
connects two separate issues, language loss and the depletion of the Colorado River, together. While recent rainfall in the winter season of 2018/2019 did help to alleviate immediate concerns, the conditions that led to the drying of the river are still in place and, if left unabated, will lead to the destruction of the river.

In 2010, the Smithsonian wrote an article detailing Peter McBride's work documenting the Colorado river through photography. Most notable was that freshwater from the Colorado River, at times, no longer makes its way to the Gulf of Colorado.

In the article, Peter McBride says, "I never knew much about where the river went and where it ended," he says… McBride knew the delta was suffering, but he was surprised when he visited it for the first time. “I spent two weeks walking the most parched, barren earth you can imagine," he recalls. "It's sad to see the mighty Colorado River come to a dribble and end some 50 miles north of the sea" (Smithsonian)

Diaz links language death to the death of the river and emphasizes that the same forces that lead to the depletion of the Colorado River also lead to the endangerment of the Mojave language. She points her finger at the American viewing public that both looks on horror at the conditions of the Colorado River, but is unwilling to do anything to remedy the situation. What she is saying is that the destruction of her culture is not in some past, but rather, is ongoing when she says, "When they have drunk dry my river will they join the mourning procession across our bleached desert.”

As the poem progresses, she says:

What does the ‘Aha Makav mean if the river is emptied to the skeleton of its fish and the miniature sand dunes of its dry silten bed?
If the river is a ghost, am I?

Unquenchable thirst is one type of haunting. (50)

The reason that she chooses the word "ghost" is that a ghost no longer has a body. A ghost wanders in a world of ether looking for form. Because the ‘Aha Makav see the river as both a living being and it is something that they carry in themselves if the Colorado River dies, so will they be left with absence or a type of thirst. The reason that she uses the word "thirst" is that once the river only is held in memory, the ‘Aha Makav will long for something that no longer exists.

This poem contains both Diaz's pain, but the pain of her people and the natural world surrounding her. To reference the quote by Daniel Heath Justice in the beginning, “Poetry distills the rage, pain, and defiance of Indigenous peoples (Justice 60).” Diaz is defiant by her sarcasm in the line, “In future stanzas, I will try to be more conservative (46),” as if she is talking back to a literary critic. This poem also is filled with rage, such as in the place where she says, “When they have drunk dry my river will they join the mourning procession across our bleached desert (47)?” What makes this poem unique is that the reader is not led to consider just what Diaz or the ‘Aha Mahave feel, but also the Colorado river itself.

As we have noticed, Natalie Diaz attempts to capture both the brokenness and resistance among the Mojave and how the relationship both she and her community have with the landscape and river that surround them. Toward the end, we explored themes of drought, both as a metaphor for love and as a reality experienced by the Mojave as they experience climate change.
On February 25, 2019, Tommy Pico tweeted:

here's the low down on my books: IRL is the crush poem. Nature Poem is the relationship poem. Junk is the break up poem. Feed is going to be the reconciliation poem. The cycle's cycle. I'm dizzy. Hi. (Pico)

IRL (2016), Nature Poem (2017), Junk (2018), and Feed (2019) are four long poems that act as four parts of a larger whole. IRL speaks about the creative process and explores issues of blood quantum and cultural appropriation. Nature Poem explores indigenous stereotypes, colonialization, and his connection and disconnection with the natural world. Stephanie Burt writes in “Networks with Benefits,” that, “Nature Poem becomes a meditation on urban Native experience, so often erased in non-Native expectations, as well as an effort to disorder old forms of knowledge or supposed knowledge, about ‘nature’ and selfhood, belonging and sex (Networks with Benefits).” Junk explores how people are treated like trash, the meaning of Junk as consumption and waste, the meaning of Junk as in junk food while deconstructing the American mythology of American exceptionalism. Feed feels like a Twitter feed at times, and often “Tweets” break into otherwise unrelated passages. It describes food and details the relationship that his Kumeyaay community has with food and how a Western diet has made the Kumeyaay susceptible to diabetes. Each book is written in a limited timeframe, and each book explores conversations on social media surrounding news events. However, as his tweet suggests, the four books should be considered as part of one whole and ideally read together.
Often themes in his books are repeated over again, not just within the book-length poems as an enclosed unit, but the four books sequentially. His words can seem fast-paced at times, mimicking the fast-paced lifestyle of the cities where he has lived (New York and Los Angeles). Sometimes, it seems that Pico will deliberately distract the reader, almost like the way Twitter notifications distract us. But, there’s a reason for that. He is testing us to see if we are paying attention. Doris Sommer writes in her essay, “Resisting the Heat,” “(Resistant texts) seem calculated to produce desire. Their books will aggressively claim power, if only the power to exclude, to say no master’s (dividend bearing) interest. Before they can refuse attention, they have to elicit it” (Sommer 417). Some of the words that come to mind when reading Pico’s poetry are intelligent, gritty, and bold. Stephanie Burt writes in “Varieties of Appetite” that, “Sentences, scenes, visions fall apart in shreds, and readers follow, immersing ourselves in the maelstrom of Pico’s mind (Varieties of Appetite).” The deliberate chaos of Pico’s language is bold enough to provoke us to move in further, silence ourselves in the presence of a fearless voice, and walk into a landscape just as expansive as *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, as Stephanie Burt has similarly acknowledged in “Varieties of Appetite.”

This essay will explore themes in Pico’s writing running through the oeuvre, instead of just a detailed explanation of each book. The first is the connection between the erotics and creativity, and what that reveals about Pico’s creative process. The second is the reality of racism and how that has affected indigenous people in this country. The third is about how Pico navigates reality and what the elements of ghosts and names reveal about his texts.
i) The Creative Process, Eroticism and the Urban Indian

In *Creative America* (1962), James Baldwin describes the creative process as something that must be cultivated through a process of aloneness:

Perhaps the primary distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate that state which most men, necessarily, must avoid; the state of being alone… The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place... The aloneness of which I speak is much more like the aloneness of birth or death. It is like the fearless alone that one sees in the eyes of someone who is suffering, whom we cannot help. Or it is like the aloneness of love, the force, and mystery that so many have extolled, and so many have cursed, but which no one has ever understood or ever really been able to control. (Baldwin)

In other words, to create, an artist must spend time alone with him/her or themselves, because the process of finding the truth or "the purpose of making the world a human dwelling place" begins inside oneself. When discussing how he views the creative process, which Pico calls “Muse,” he often refers to the relationship between himself and his creative process as being like being in a romantic relationship. So, when he describes how this relationship, he uses imagery from queer male relationships.

In *IRL*, Tommy Pico writes:

Really there are four states of Muse:

- Solitude
- Intimacy
Anonymity
Reserve
Solitude carries a deck
of cards. Intimacy brought
lube. Anonymity is here
I think. Reserve gives gift
certificates. Obviously.
The influence of Muse
is not unlike being under
the influence, the way a poem
is spontaneously drunk

-------------------------------------
The Temple of Muse
is all around you. Don’t patron-
ize me, tradition
is a cage Conflict constant The
argument to post Will take
more on and more alluring
forms. Muse must be chased! (IRL 30)

When he says that, "Solitude carries a deck of cards," immediately the reader is led to think of two things. One is that of someone playing solitaire, a game of one, where cards like ideas are shuffled. The other is that of a tarot deck, where meaning is created by images that tell a story. When he says, "Intimacy brought lube," he is referencing how sexual lubricant can make the sexual act more pleasurable and is also saying, that intimacy and its relatability provide a way for the reader to enter the work. When he says, “Anonymity is here/I think," the line break happens
between the here and I. "Space" indicates something absent or missing. That missing element is a queue that some things are kept secret. When he says, “Reserve gives gift certificates,” he means that there are elements that the reader can construct on their own. The work of the poem is not solely the poet’s, and so, a “gift certificate” means that the reader gets to construct meaning from the elements.

Audre Lorde wrote in her essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” that:

It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – formless and nameless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understand. (Sister Outsider 36)

Both writers describe the creative process using sensual or erotic language. For Lorde, the pain and joy of childbirth are like the creation of a poem. Pico describes creativity utilizing the metaphor of sexual activity. Presumably, Pico sees himself as the passive recipient or “the bottom” and Muse is the “top” – and for that reason, the creative process enters his psyche gently before entering into stronger emotions. Perhaps, giving birth or having sex are excellent metaphors for creativity because our feelings are, in part, something that is physical. So, using the language of physicality instead of rationality becomes a perfect lens to see the creativity, because like physical sensation is chaotic and unpredictable. The image of childbirth and the image of sex both speak about the connections human beings make of both mother/child and lover/lover. It is in these connections, along with that of our relationship to the land, that
ultimately lead to a more profound sense of connection with ourselves – the source of all creativity or as Mark Rifkin writes in *The Erotics of Sovereignty*, “Such interactions (erotics), usually deemed the most personal and intimate, serve as touchstones for a broader conception and narration of selfhood” (The Erotics of Sovereignty 27). So, it is the lens of the erotic that Pico uses to develop a deeper connection with himself.

Pico says that just like a relationship, "Muse must be chased!" Pico also hints that there is something sacred about poetry by writing that “The Temple of Muse is all around you.” In other words, creativity is an almost spiritual experience. When he says, “Don’t patronize me, tradition is a cage,” he is saying that he finds literary conventions to be confining. By tradition, he is talking about Western literary traditions and perhaps, even his indigenous traditions. He is telling us that he does not have to leave his indigeneity behind to be a poet. Unlike the two previous poets, Deborah Miranda and Natalie Diaz, Pico mostly leaves the conventions of contemporary poetry behind, in favor of language, which borrows from pop culture and music.

Tommy Pico writes from a perspective as both a queer man and as an indigenous person who sometimes feels as if he is treated as a novelty, reflecting the prejudices of white gay and bi men. On the other side, he also feels a distance between him and his Kumeyaay background. As we explore his work, we will explore the work of a man who walks between worlds and walks a road, not unlike an alley between buildings either in New York City, where he lived for many years or in Los Angeles, where he currently lives.

In her essay on indigenous women’s erotics, “Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy,” Deborah Miranda writes that, “Indian writing has often been stereotyped as ‘nature poetry,’ leaving Indian poets to wrestle with this problematic imagery. We know that if we use
natural landscape as metaphor, we are being predictable, but on the other hand these are not ‘just’ natural images to us. Often, the natural world contains much religious, culturally specific importance that it is impossible to ignore but difficult to negotiate” (144). In other words, Native American/Indigenous American poetry is often typecast, that certain subjects addressed by Native American/Indigenous authors, and until recently, were often unpublished by mainstream presses.

These sentiments are reflected in Nature Poem by Tommy Pico. For example, he writes:

I can’t write a nature poem
be it’s fodder for the noble savage
narrative. I wd slap a tree across the face,
I say to my audience. (2)

There is a narrative in Western society that reduces Indigenous / Native American culture as effortlessly floating through a mystical landscape. As I had mentioned in the introduction, Paula Gunn Allen writes that ”Indians are called primitive and savage not because they commit atrocities, everyone commits atrocities in one way or the other. Indians are designated primitive because they place the good of the group and the good of the earth before that of the self” (Beyond the Reservation 29). In other words, contemporary indigenous communities and consumerism are at odds with each other, because often modern indigenous communities are concerned about protecting the needs of a community. In direct opposition, consumerism only seeks to enrich the individual at the expense of everyone else. While it is true that Native spiritual traditions often contain respect for the sacred landscapes around them and that these landscapes helped to create their songs and stories, there is a difference between recognizing
specificities (and how land, water, air, and the stars are seen and respected) and a glossed-over view indigeneity that relies on generalities. The indigenous stereotype creates a distorted indigenous narrative based upon "the noble savage" who, after having bravely fought "the good fight," finally surrenders to White Setter Colonialism. In the 1960s and '70s, the environmental movement used this narrative to popularize itself. Even as recently as 2015, in an ad for Dior, Johnny Depp was dressed as a Native American medicine man, and was promoting a cologne by the name of “Sauvage.” The cologne is a remix of a 1996 cologne by Dior of the same name. Not only does this appropriate Native American culture and promote some sort of generalized identity, but capitalizes on this same trope. Perhaps, to add insult to injury, the Dior website describes the cologne as “powerful and noble,” evoking the unfortunate mischaracterization of indigenous people as “noble savages.” The reason that these images are offensive is that indigenous figures become caricatures, situating the indigenous person in an idealized past. Also, many indigenous authors have used natural imagery within their poetry, and there is a joke among Native American poets about “nature poems.” So, maybe this is why he is buckling against this narrative is that he is also confronting this stereotype.

Then Tommy Pico continues from there, describing his experiences as an American Indian person and having a man attempt to pick him up at a pizza parlor in Portland, Oregon.

He has one of those cracked skin summer smiles.

He keeps talking like I want to hear him
Like he’s so comfortable
Like everybody owes him attention

I’m a weirdo NDN faggot
He puts his hands on the ribs of my chair asks do I want to go into the bathroom with him

Let’s say it doesn’t turn me on at all.

Let’s say I literally hate all men bc men are animals –
This is a kind of nature poem I would write about. (2)

When Pico mentions the “cracked skin summer smile,” the reader is left wondering if Pico is finding this attribute endearing or otherwise. However, the next lines indicate that he feels otherwise.

He keeps talking like I want to hear him
Like he’s so comfortable
Like everybody owes him attention (2)

In other words, the unnamed man in this poem automatically assumes that Pico would be interested in him as well as anyone in society. The subject is operating out of a place of privilege in the Queer Male community. When Pico says, "I'm a weirdo INDN faggot," he is doing two things. First, he is saying that he is not privileged, but also, using "INDN faggot" he is taking an activist stance, instead of colluding with privilege, he is reacting against it.

He then seals up his position with:

Let’s say I literally hate all men bc men are animals –
This is a kind of nature poem I would write about. (2)
The reader here is left wondering, is Pico somehow stating that, perhaps, he even hates himself at least in this poem? Does he sometimes feel somehow enslaved by his baser instinct? Does the word “all men” includes himself within this all. Or does he see himself as being something else than male or in another category of maleness than some of the men that he has encountered? It seems apparent that he does find “men” attractive when he adds:

Don’t like them tweeting, texting, um *peeling rubber wetsuits off in the parking lot*

sweatpants no discernible underwear lookin like whatever

Or! When they slick back swab the deck pocket square shoulders –

The wave, the fade, the bang bangs.

Men dancing is fine tho.

Or like maybe men in socks? I dunno. (3)

Tommy Pico gives us some indication when he italicizes, "peeling rubber wetsuits off," followed by, "sweatpants no discernible underwear lookin like whatever." In other words, he is paying attention to them stripping down. He cannot help but look; he cannot help but participate.

Within American literary traditions often when winter is discussed in poetry, the language about winter describes the beauty of winter. As an example, Wallace Stevens wrote in “The Snow Man” that "One must have a mind of winter to regard the frost and the boughs of the pine-trees crusted with snow" (Stevens 8). Pico buckles against this notion. In *Nature Poem*, he treats winter as something to be cursed at and not worshipped.

He says that:

Winter is a death threat from nature, and I don’t respond well to predation –
It’s not like summer, death in the form of barking men
Takin issue w/the short shorts and the preen and the queenly holding hands

god forbid u step into the gnashing cold for a fizzy water and grapes
forget yr keys, the cell battery
dies n yr roommates out of town with their holiday families

There’s no exposure in Southern California,
no clanging heat in San Diego.
In LA? The snow comes in a can. (Nature Poem 5)

So, here he is buckling the notion that we must “commune with nature,” instead he is saying that he is unable to do that, at least during a New York winter. During the cold of winter, there is a genuine concern about exposure to the cold, which could result in hypothermia and death. Pico cannot fight back as he does with a gay basher. The position of "dies" indicates that he thinks that he could die, just as his battery dies.

Further down the page, Pico adds that winter did not feel real to him when he grew up in California: "Cold was a curiosity, like rain. A ghost. No. A reanimation, a flourish of calendar art and novels with families in living rooms, huddled in a blizzard's fist" (Nature Poem 5). In other words, he is saying that the experience of cold was not real and only lived by his power to imagine it. Because he grew up in Southern California, and rarely, if ever experienced snow, snow was something he experienced in his dreams. Pico contrasts the imagined winter with the real winter of New York City, saying later that, "Winter is a death threat from nature, and I don't
respond well to predation” (Nature Poem 5). In other words, reality means that he has to survive and worry about what will happen if he does not cover-up. If he is locked out of his apartment, he could die from hypothermia.

ii. Racism: Both Past and Under the Trump Administration

The Atlantic wrote an article about the racist language the 45th President has used and how his divisive rhetoric has prioritized “desirable” certain immigrants over others, feeding upon the racist tendencies among many White Americans.

On January 11, 2018, during an Oval Office talk with several U.S. senators about protecting immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries in a new immigration package, President Donald Trump unleashed a word that Americans aren't accustomed to hearing from their president.

“Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” Trump reportedly asked. (He later denied having said this.)

Months earlier, Trump had reportedly complained that Nigerian immigrants would never “go back to their huts” and Haitians “all have AIDS.” He doubled down at the Oval Office meeting. “Why do we need more Haitians?” Trump said. “Take them out.”

In their stead, Trump spoke of taking in immigrants from great European countries like Norway, and also from Asian countries, since they could help America economically.

The private conversation leaked. Shithole snatched the headlines. But what made this moment historic, what made this moment unprecedented, was not merely the misuse of a
vile word. It was the racial hierarchy Trump constructed with that language. He placed whites over Asians, and both over Latinos and blacks from “shithole” countries. (Kendi)

The *Atlantic* seems to indicate that Trump was responsible for creating a racial hierarchy. However, these hierarchies are already in place. What he did instead is feed upon the negativity of many of the people who voted for him in the 2016 election and reinforced pre-existing prejudices that may have been swept underneath the carpet. In *Junk*, Tommy Pico describes the racial hierarchies in our country and how the lives of indigenous people have been treated like garbage.

He writes:

> I’m from a place where ppl became Garbage A pile to remove Junk is an upgrade Poverty is like this: you keep everything until the wheels fall off and then you eat the wheels I go dull in the dull blast of words Let’s address this now: being broke is not the same as being poor Poverty is a trau ma It sticks Mangled like a long thin silver chain in the Junk drawer (47)

When Pico says, “I’m from a place where ppl became garbage,” he is saying that the Kumeyaay were treated as disposable. When Pico is making a distinction between “poverty” and “being broke,” he is that there is a difference between being in a cycle of economic oppression (Poverty) and temporarily not having enough money to pay the rent or food (being broke). When he says, poverty “sticks mangled like a long thin silver chain in the Junk drawer
that I sort of loved…” he is saying that Poverty leaves emotional trauma. When he says, “Figuring out how to make a sad person laugh…” he is saying that humor was a coping mechanism. By using a silver chain as a metaphor, he is also stating that the Kumeyaay were not always impoverished, but the “junk drawer” or a system of oppression is responsible for these conditions.

The place he is talking about is California. In an article on the History Channel website journalist Erin Blakemore writes about truth of the California Gold Rush and the subsequent genocide of the indigenous inhabitants that were living there:

Gold! Gold from the American River!” Samuel Brannan walked up and down the streets of San Francisco, holding up a bottle of pure gold dust. His triumphant announcement, and the discovery of gold at nearby Sutter’s Mill in 1848, ushered in a new era for California—one in which millions of settlers rushed to the little-known frontier in a wild race for riches.

But though gold spelled prosperity and power for the white settlers who arrived in California in 1849 and after, it meant disaster for the state’s peaceful indigenous population.

In just 20 years, 80 percent of California’s Native Americans were wiped out. And though some died because of the seizure of their land or diseases caught from new settlers, between 9,000 and 16,000 were murdered in cold blood—the victims of a policy of genocide sponsored by the state of California and gleefully assisted by its newest citizens. (Blakemore)

In Nature Poem, Pico refers to this tragedy when he writes that

In the mid 1800s, California wd pay $5 for the head of an NDN and 25 ¢ per scalp—man, woman, or child. The state was reimbursed by the feds. (55)
The oppression of California’s indigenous inhabitants did not end with the Gold Rush. California’s indigenous people were often the victim of unscrupulous landgrabs. However, in *Junk*, Pico indicates that America’s Indigenous people are still often treated like cattle.

Pico says that:

> How do we protect ourselves from car commercials and the border patrol? Mom and Amber hands behind their heads facedown on the asphalt at the checkpoint. There is something sick about accusing an NDN of being an illegal immigrant. And something like white ppl where was your green card when the sun never set? Seeing how borders are erected in part to pen in the poor. Planet money jumps over under in & out borders as a matter of course. This is my heroic, sweeping sentiment. This is my red love.

Here Tommy Pico describes an incident where his mother and another family member are detained at the border because the border guards think of them as "illegal immigrants." What Pico does here, also demonstrates the real reason for prejudice against undocumented immigrants, racism. When they are “facedown on the asphalt,” the reader is left with the possibility that they were forcibly thrown down on the pavement. He also pinpoints the reasons why this happened, the color of their skin in a case of apparent racial profiling when he says, “There is something sick about accusing an NDN of being an illegal immigrant.” Perhaps, one of the reasons why he finds the word "border", so offensive to him as an indigenous person is that...
the Kumeyaay is a cultural group that crosses the border between California/Baja California borders.

ii. Of Ghosts, Spirits and What is Real

Perhaps, one question every human being asks is, "What happens to me after I die?"

Funerary rites are designed to offer the dearly departed a peaceful passage into the afterlife. Various religious and spiritual traditions believe that the faithful or the good or those whose family members have performed a prescribed ritual will cross over peacefully to a state of peace or rest or will have a favorable rebirth. However, what happens to those who do not? According to some, traditionally, the afterlife of those who have lived badly is a hell state. In other traditions, a being will become a ghost. A ghost is sometimes seen as a tortured being who is unable to cross over.

Octavio Paz, who was both a Mexican Poet and Nobel Laureate, wrote in The Double Fame makes a connection between eroticism and ghosts saying:

Poetic testimony reveals us to another world inside this world, the other world that is this world. The senses, without losing their powers, become servants of the imagination and let us hear the inaudible and see the invisible. But isn't this what happens in dreams and in the erotic encounter? When we dream and when we couple, we embrace phantoms. (2)

A person who is rendered invisible is sometimes seen as a ghost because usually, people will say that ghosts only rarely make themselves visible. Those who are invisible cannot rest because justice has not been served. Hence, why some prefer to say "Rest in Power" rather than "Rest in Peace." As mentioned previously, Natalie Diaz also mentions haunting in her poem,
"The First Water is the Body." When she talks about the drying up of the Colorado River, she says, "Unsoothable thirst is one type of haunting." In other words, the thirst is for something that is not there and only remains in the imagination.

In one place, Pico says, "Last night I had a dream that I was a ghost who gave blowjobs and that is pretty much the experience of dating in the city" (Nature Poem 20). When Pico uses the description of himself as a "ghost giving blowjobs," he is talking about anonymous sex because he does not have a name. Like Octavio Paz, he connects the erotic sexual encounter with ghostly imagery. This line is left on a single page, full of blank space, surround by text both on the previous page and the next. It is as if Tommy Pico is floating on the page, somehow disembodied from the text. Its singularity makes the reader pay attention to it very carefully. Indeed, that line floats like a ghost on the empty page. The words themselves speak of feeling detached from his body, that he is doing the action, but is not a full participant. A part of himself is elsewhere.

In another place in Nature Poem, he says:

Let’s say I’m coiled by the part in the Al Green Song “Love & Happiness” after the toe-tap beginning when the guitar twang lifts a musk of mmmmmgh into the air.

Let’s say you’re talking to me when this happens and yr feelings bruise but literally I can’t hear you

and in fact I no, no my finger to yr face when you

or that drop in “Mine” in Beyoncé where she says “no rest in the kingdom”

I have the vague feeling in the thoroughfare of my thought process

like I care what yr saying **ghostly**
recognition of the fact that yr getting insulted, but srsly? Give me a minute.

This absence of a reason—but a flood that feels reasonable to me—is this I wonder is this, natural.

or does music turn me into a sociopath?

My roommate Danny says music makes you gay, but only some ppl realize this is happening (Nature Poem 41)

So, when he uses the word "ghostly" in this passage, what does he mean by this? First, the spaces in this passage give us some context. The spaces between "can't" and "hear you" or "ghostly" and "recognition" along with the place where Pico deliberately leave out text after, "and in fact I no, no my finger to yr face when you…" tell the reader that it is as if Pico has earbuds in his ear or he has his music on full blast in his room and is trying to tune out his roommates. Perhaps, he has just smoked cannabis, as he mentions in other places in his book. He uses "ghostly" in this passage that, in this case, he is disconnected from his roommate, and his roommate has now been relegated into another world that he can choose either to engage with or not engage with.

When Pico references Kumeyaay belief systems in IRL. He says:

and I know I’m not
supposed to use real
names—Where I’m from,
in the valley I lived in
for thousands of years,
once someone has passed
or pushed or pressed
into the next life that I don’t
believe in, their name
is forbidden. Reference them,
but don’t use the name bc
is distracts them from
heaven Sullies the peace
they rest in. (IRL 18)

A variety of cultures have naming conventions, often accompanied by a naming ritual. When Catholic monastics join a religious community, they take upon a holy name. Many traditional Jews will not speak the name of their child until the name is given during the brit. Historically, Christian communities would not name their child until after baptism; thus, the first name is sometimes referred to as "the Christian name" in the United Kingdom. In current protests, often, the victims are police brutality named. By naming something, we make them real. For many trans people, to hear the name they were assigned with at birth or “deadnaming” is an insult because it is bringing forward an old identity that was forced upon them. To name something is to give it power. Pico is telling us that for the Kumeyaay, to say someone's name after they have died "distracts them from heaven/Sullies the peace they rest in." In other words, like a ghost, their spirit is not able to cross into the afterlife. By calling on the person's name, they are no longer exist just as a memory but, instead, are they brought into the present.

Later, Pico breaks with this convention:

…Lead me back
to the water of belief
Mina, Guadalupe, Geo and Beam,
Stoney, Ricky, Berto,
Dessy, Woody, George,
Lula, Reya, Robin, Bunty
Beebee, Tina, Lucky
Why am I the one left?
Why do I have to know
so many dead?  (IRL 18)

Almost like the Litany of the Saints in the Catholic Church, Pico is listing the names of deceased loved ones and asking them for help. Perhaps in asking them to bring him back to belief in "heaven that I don't believe in." He is bringing them from the other world, from the imaginary, to help him. Perhaps he is just connecting with the aspects of these people and their accompanying memories, but these spirits become real to him. By asking, "Why do I have to know so many dead people?" he is doing two things. He asks himself what systems of inequity have caused Kumeyaay to die before their time, and he is also asking himself if he has become a ghost.

In Feed, when exploring the subject matter of loved ones who have passed away, he writes:

    My spirits are protective
    of me. They’re above me now, a cloud of light plugged
    into my back. I want to stay alive and now they feed me and flow out
    of my hands    This
    was our vow—but sometimes the vows you take to stay
    protected came at a time when you were particularly
vulnerable. Necessarily. My spirits surround me like a cloud of disapproving aunties, keeping most of you at bay. A child-hood merged into my love-space So compacted, that compartment Is there room for a lover… (32)

When he says, "My spirits are protective," perhaps he means this literally and believes that the spirits of his loved ones are with him now. Maybe, instead, these memories which remain in the imaginary somehow interact with his present. When he adds, "78 MILLION ACRES OF OUR OCEANS OPENED UP FOR OFFSHORE DRILLING," he is doing two things. First, he is deliberately entering headlines into his text, just as if it was a Twitter feed. At the same time, he is saying that this is what is leaving him vulnerable. The news has left him in a tattered emotional state. Perhaps, too, he is also saying that these memories are what helps him get through. In other words, memory is more real than the present.

In sharp contrast to the names that Tommy Pico references in his work are the names that he chooses not to reference. For example, when he says, “Reading the news used to make me feel more knowledgeable and in that way more aware and in that way more powerful  Now I just want to dye (my hair) Flaming Asteroid for President 2016”(Junk 40) he is speaking about the current president.

In another place, Pico chooses to blackout where Donald Trump’s name would be:

“Ben Affleck’s Massive Back Tattoo Mocked”
lol, Good one CNN. Who cares about the “president’s” unconstitutional shenanigans and the NDAs and the NRAs? We’re talking about Ben Affleck’s back.

IS ***** GIVING AUTHORITARIANISM A BAD NAME? (67)

By choosing to block out Donald Trump’s name, he does not give the president power. By not naming the president, the president is a ghost, an illusion, and Pico can keep his distance from him. Pico references his actions directly, just as the Kumeyaay refuse to name their loved ones. However, Pico is choosing not to summon the current president into his reality, into his imagination. In this way, the friends that he chooses to name are more real than the current administration. In this way, just as white people are referred to as ghosts in Maxine Hong Kingston’s Warrior Woman, so the President also becomes a ghost.

After Pico references how the president used language like, “tamed the continent” and said, “we aren’t apologizing or America,” he then deliberately leaves out the names of Tomi Lahren and refers to her instead as, "that white crisis actor lady who advocates for police brutality" (27). Then, he continues and refers to Sarah Huckabee Sanders as "the mouthpiece" (27). So, for Pico, having a name gives that person a reality; they are no longer a ghost. By choosing to name people in his works, he gives them importance; by leaving out their names, they are illusions because the lives they live are based upon lies.
EPILOGUE

At the beginning of this article, I had asked how the poetry of Deborah Miranda, Natalie Diaz, and Tommy Pico reflected Queer, Indigenous, and American/Californian sensibilities. I have detailed how their poetic works demonstrate both Queer sensibilities and the place of Queer people within their societies, and how their stories and histories counter popular narratives in this country, along with the idea of American exceptionalism.

While threads of sexual and gender diversity, of the survival of their specific communities and the story of marginalization, can be found in each of their works, what makes the three different is how they described their experiences. So, how Miranda, Diaz, and Pico have encountered both their specific tribal communities and the American landscape are sometimes in very different ways. Pico, for instance, is not an academic, and his work often draws from popular culture and the Urban Indian experience. When he describes the experience of growing up on the reservation, there is a distance geographically and perhaps, emotionally. The reservation is a place he goes to but not a place that he currently inhabits. Along with this, is a fierce determination not to be the typical Native poet, but rather, to be defiant against society’s expectations of what both Queer and Indigenous writers should be. Also, he did not finish his MFA in Creative Writing at Sarah Lawrence College (both Miranda and Diaz are academics and are professors at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, and Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, respectively). What makes Miranda different from Diaz and Pico is that she belongs to a nation that does not have federal recognition status, and so does not belong to a community which has had specific protections that the others do. In particular, her work often is concerned with weaving together fragments of a past to demonstrate cultural
continuity. What makes Diaz different from Pico or Miranda, is the way that she centers her work among the Mohave people. The landscapes of her poems, more often than not, take place on the reservation or the landscapes sacred to the Mohave.

To quote Deborah Miranda, the English language is “defecting” to the indigenous “cause.” It is becoming indigenous, not because it is a language spoken traditionally by a specific tribal group, but because it is now being used to speak back to the White Settler state. As I began to read critical texts from indigenous people, it became more apparent to me that from a critical perspective, American land is first and foremost indigenous land shaped by occupation. North American literature, both indigenous and non-indigenous, directly or indirectly, is formed by the history of Settler Colonialization and the traumas created by it. So, American soil is, first and foremost, an indigenous space that has been occupied and commodified. What these three poets demonstrate is how efforts to silence, erase, and assimilate their nations have not been successful and speak not only to the resilience of individual people but the communities that they belong to. Their poetry points not just to a past, but living literature experienced first by the body.

“As Per Twitter Thread.” Received by Natalie Diaz, *As Per Twitter Thread*, 13 Oct. 2019.


“As Per Twitter Thread.” Received by Natalie Diaz, *As Per Twitter Thread*, 13 Oct. 2019.


END NOTES


iii I had seen Andrea Smith’s work in both academic journals and also in a collection of essays. When I did a web search to find out who she was and where she is a faculty member, I came across information regarding her unethical claims to being an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation, when she was not Cherokee. At first, I was unsure if I should include any citations from her with a note stating issues, or to not even mention her work at all. Eventually, I spoke with Deborah Miranda, Daniel Heath Justice, Bethany Schneider, and Mark Rifkin. I include their comments here.

4/19/2020
Hello Dr. Miranda,
Our Mutual friend CMarie Fuhrman referred to me when I asked her this question.

I came across a series of articles in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. One of the articles was yours, of course, and I also read Andrea Smith’s.

I'm a graduate student at Chapman University, and I've been working on the introduction to my thesis, which discusses your work, and that of Natalie Diaz and Tommy Pico. The question that I wanted to ask is this: Is it still appropriate to use Andrea Smith’s critique because of questions surrounding her Indigeneity?

Thanks for your help,
Daniel Miess

Hi Daniel,
That’s a darn good question! I can’t say that I have any first-hand knowledge about the issues around Andrea Smith and/or her work. I personally have not used her simply because I haven’t found her research deep enough. But I would suggest that you ask the editors of that *GLQ* volume – they might have more info than I do.

Much respect,
Deborah

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Apr 20, 2020

Dear Drs. Justice, Schneider, and Rifkin,

I am in MA in English Graduate student at Chapman University and am currently writing my thesis on the poetry of Deborah Miranda, Natalie Diaz, and Tommy Pico and am using Queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit Theory. I came across the Indigenous edition of *GLQ*, which the three of you had edited. I already posed a question to Deborah Miranda, and she recommended that I ask you. In 2015, after that edition, questions surfaced regarding Andrea
Smith's claims to Indigeneity. In your professional opinion, is it still appropriate to use her critique, or would you recommend that I look elsewhere?

Thanks,

Daniel Miess

Dear Daniel,

Thank you for reaching out, and I wish you all the best with your work. It is always of paramount importance to engage and prioritize the work of indigenous scholars. It is your choice as a scholar whether or not to use Smith. But, should you choose to be in conversation with her work, I think that you must acknowledge and take on the issues directly.

I hope this helps – and remember, it is just my take. I am white, and the opinions of scholars of color who are addressing this question should guide your steps more than my opinion.

Best Wishes,

Bethany Schneider

Dear Daniel,

Thanks for writing.

By the time that the issue originally was published in 2010, serious questions about Dr. Smith's claims to be Cherokee had been raised (particularly by Cherokee citizens) and she had agreed to stop making such a claim. In 2015, the entire matter and Dr. Smith's continued claims, despite her previous promise, became more widely public.

I think that there are two main issues at stake in cases like this one: the quality of the scholarship, and the ethics of citation.

The fact that Dr. Smith is not Native does not mean one cannot or should not cite her work. As Bethany observes, work in Indigenous Studies should prioritize the work of Indigenous scholars. However, many non-Native scholars are active and valued participants in Indigenous Studies. The issue in this vein, then, is the quality/value of her work. Do you think it’s good? Do you think it meaningfully contributes to what you’re trying to do?

The second issue is more difficult. By “ethics of citation,” I mean not only prioritizing Indigenous scholars’ work but also thinking about the act of citation (assuming its more or less positive, rather than critical) as a promotion of someone’s work. If someone has engaged in sustained unethical behavior, which I believe that Dr. Smith has, do you want to promote that person by recirculating their work? Of all the people one might cite and engage, to signal boost that person’s work?
Also, on this page you can find the statement (from October 2015) issued by the Council of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association on Indigenous Identity fraud -- https://www.naisa.org/about/documents-archive/previous-council-statements/

Hope that helps –

Mark

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Thank-you Drs. Schneider and Rifkin,

This has been more than helpful. I suspected that what you were suggesting was the case. I had already chosen to use citations from other theorists. In my introduction, I will frame her critique this way, “In the past, Andrea Smith's critical work had been anthologized and mentioned elsewhere. However, because of her unethical claims to Indigeneity, my choice has been not to list her work in a list of relevant research.”

Best,

Daniel Miess

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Hi Daniel (Miess)

Apologies for the delayed response. I concur with both Bethany’s and Mark’s comments on this matter, and I think that your response is a good one. One other thing worth considering: part of the problem with Smith’s work—even the good scholarship she produced—is that she was incredibly over-represented in citation and conference/public talk as the constant go-to voice for issues around gender violence, which obscured or displaced the very important work of Indigenous feminists. This happens a lot on a range of subjects and deserves more attention, and it extends well beyond unethical behaviour as noted in the Smith case—even thoughtful and ostensibly ethically committed scholars can take up significant space that displaces other important voices, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, that should be part of the conversation. This might be useful to incorporate into your response as well.

Thank you for reaching out in such a thoughtful way, and best of luck with your thesis project!

All Good Wishes,

Daniel (Justice)

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iv It is quite significant that the Norton Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism fails to include Native American, First Nations, or any Indigenous Literary criticism within its compendium, and in my opinion further editions should address this.


vi vi ‘Aha Mahav is the indigenous name for the Mojave people. The terms Mohave and Mojave are used interchangeably as I saw in a recent email. For the sake of continuity, I chose the spelling used on the Fort Mojave Indian Reservation Website