UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
Poetry

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2p00j139

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 42(2)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Miranda, Deborah A.

Publication Date
2018-03-01

DOI
10.17953/aicrj.42.2.miranda

Copyright Information
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, availalbe at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

DOI 10.17953/aicrj.42.2.miranda

Deborah A. Miranda

RAISED BY HUMANS

My mother abandoned me.
Left me behind, didn't look back.

She had lovers: Alcohol, Heroin, Despair—
followed them far up the coastline from our homeland

to the interior of a strange place: dark green firs
and man-made lakes full of jagged stumps

rising out of the waters that drowned them.
My mother abandoned me, but my aunt and uncle took me in.

They bought me clothes, bathed me, fed me every night.
I waited for my mother to come back.

It wasn't the first time. But it was the hardest.
She finally showed up with Trickster/Con Artist/Coyote.

Together we rode off in his white pick-up truck
north to the rain. They locked me in a tin house,

went carousing while I huddled each night alone.
Sometimes I escaped to surrounding woods,

DEBORAH A. MIRANDA is an enrolled member of the Ohlone/Costanoan Esselen Nation of the Greater Monterey Bay Area, and is of Santa Ynez Chumash lineage as well. She teaches literature and creative writing at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. In 2015, her book *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* won the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award and was shortlisted for the 2014 William Saroyan International Prize. She feels a special affinity with UCLA: she researched material for *Bad Indians* while a visiting scholar at UCLA's AISC and was born at a UCLA hospital. All works are the property of the author and are used with permission. "Raised by Humans" and "Indian Country" were previously published in *Raised by Humans* (San Fernando: Tía Cucha Press, 2015). "Indigenous Physics: The Element Colonizatium" will be published in the *Tupelo Anthology of Contemporary Indigenous Poetry* (North Adams: Tupelo Press, 2019), in press. More of Deborah Miranda's work appears on her blog, http://badndns.blogspot.com/.

ate huckleberries and drank from a muddy creek,
slept buried in dried pine and cedar needles. But like a tamed fox

I always went back to my captivity for dinner, begged
for a crumb of something.

Sometimes I got it. Sometimes I wolfed
a meal down greedily, not caring who saw my starvation.

Sometimes the bowl was empty—nothing, no one,
and I hung around waiting, whimpering, chained

to my cage by a metal only the human heart
knows how to forge.

Indian Country

For John T. Williams, and all Indians living on the street

1.

On Broadway or 1st Ave, on Capitol Hill
or Pioneer Square, the Indians gather
in doorways or benches or grassy bits of park.
They sleep, sell Real Change, tell stories,
carve little totem poles, share cigarettes,
wait for the bars to open—
for the shelters to open—
for the soup kitchens to open
wait for the world to open.
This is Indian Country, potholed streets
Indians trails leadings up and down steep sidewalks;
Indian graffiti, scars
across the faces of men
from old families of carvers,
women from clans of basketweavers,
all falling out
of the American Dream.

They call me sister when I walk by:

sister I'm a long ways from home
sister you look like my Auntie
sister ya got a spare smoke
sister take this, just a little gift,
sister can I give you a blessing?
Their breath smells like the beer bottles
from my childhood. Beautiful hair gone
spare and silver, eyes vomiting all
the scary things about being Indian
that I ran real hard to leave behind,
tried to hide under the stink of my shame.
If I say no, they wave me on with a shrug,
if I give them money they assure me they won't
spend it on drink, if I stop to admire
carvings or drawings or beading
they stand silent.
They never say the word "buy,"
just, "Whatever you think is right sister."

I don't give as much as I might;
afraid mine could be the fatal dollar
that keeps them out of the shelter
or lands them in the morgue.
I give enough
to ease my conscience,
get them another hour.
I know I'm feeding the meter
of Colonization,
paying the rent on a parking space we should own,
but I can't keep them warm or sober or clean.
I'm not a good sister.
I'm not even a good Indian
and this isn't survival.

2.

Another dead Indian on the street today,
brother, another "misunderstanding" with a cop—
he had a knife,
he was a carver,
he was Indian
he was alive
that's still a crime in this day and age.
He was alive,

sometimes just barely,
half deaf, brain soaked in alcohol,
but his fingers
could still read wood.
Today he bled on the street
he bled on the street
he bled on the street
he bled out
on
the street,
the curves of an old design
spilled out of his body—
and when I heard,
all I could do was cry.

What's a few more tears, brother,
in this land with all the marrow sucked out?
Just the memory of your big swollen hands
holding mine, the words of a blessing
slipping from your mouth
onto my bowed, lost-daughter head.
All you had left to give
the last time we met
and I took it.
Now I'll have to carry it with me
the rest of my sorry ass Indian life,
remember how hard you worked
to recall the words,
remember you:
remember where the Indians gather, wait
on the downtown streets,
in the parks
on the benches,
by the Market—
remember I can't ever run away
from this love.

The Language of Truth

In 1769, the arrival of two Spanish ships in Alta California coincided with a total eclipse of the sun, in conjunction with the shock of a powerful earthquake. "So it seemed," wrote Junipero Serra in his diary, "that the insensible things of earth and heaven had in this way manifested themselves in the new conquests as heralds and advents to the benighted gentiles, to incline their hearts to receive the truths of the gospel, proclaimed by the ministers of the living God."

The giant snakes stirred inside the earth,
struck a few hours after dawn. Thrown down
on our faces, we cried out—rocks thrust
upward, fearsome roar rattled our ears—
how our Mother writhed! Then Sun
disappeared mid-day, covered
by Moon's broad face; star-beings
shone like abalone shell in sudden night.
Our star-mapmaker offered prayer
to each sovereign direction; light
crept back, though it felt a lifetime
till we breathed balance again.

So we were wary when a ship—
bigger than a whale—came over the horizon,
and men, more corpses than living bodies,
crawled from floating grave to our shores.
Pale skins, hairy faces, blue-eyed, green-eyed,
brown-eyed, they died and died. The sands
beneath their white tents stank of death.
Did they not know how to catch fish?
Did they not know to seek out berries,
heavy on the bush? Did they offend
their gods, or had they traveled beyond
the reach of their gods?

Another ship arrived, pale but abler men
who buried and buried; then men on foot,
leading strange gray deer burdened with food
and hard heavy tools sharp as our best obsidian.
When the beasts lay down, exhausted,
the strangers beat them. Still the animals
did not get up. In the morning, men raised
barren prayer trees; in long skirts, men chanted

ugly words without meaning, hands waving
bowls of smoke, insane gestures in the air.

Was it the end of the world? Now,
I wonder we did not hear the warnings.
Some of us broke traditions of welcome;
where once we would have offered
baskets of meat and sweet dried cherries,
now we drove off the pale men, their strange
stupid animals not-deer, not-elk. *Vacas.*
Their spirits were sick, unwell. Unbalanced.
We drove them all to the north. Some of us
said even that was not far enough. Now,
I do not think any distance could spare us—
we should have listened when Earth spoke!
When Sun and Moon warned us! We did not.

Today we die of disease in their missions,
our open sores weep; women and children
serve as vessels of rape and rage.
Some say the pale men killed their wives
—none came with them. Others say their women
revolted, exiled the pale men here,
and on an island across the sea,
those wise women live peaceful and free.

We cannot see the sun of our next
generation. We cannot feel the earth
beneath our blistered bodies.
We did not listen. At night,
or behind trees in daytime, in fields
of strange crops, beneath blows from leather
cat o' nine tails, we pray: let enough of us
live to tell this story. We will memorize it
in our hearts. Let us live; we will teach it
to our children. If we live, we will heed
our thunderous Mother's voice:

Her dark language never lies.

When My Body Is the Archive

When my body is the archive,
researchers leave their tracks
on my language, my religion,
my inheritance. When my body

is the archive, my stories belong
to someone else, gatekeepers
don't share their passwords,
someone else gets the credit,

applause, a paycheck for my work.
When my body is the archive,
my grandmothers are data points
proving our inevitable demise.

When my body is the archive,
researchers insist only they know
the right way to read me, yet
my fingerprints only unlock

secret rooms. When my body
is the archive, I hear an ocean
of a million untold stories
roaring for release, like tinnitus

of the soul. When my body, *this
body*, is the archive, I carry my research
with me to the grocery store,
dentist's office, my mother's funeral.

When my body is the archive,
the archive sits down beside you
on the plane to that Indigenous
Symposium in Frankfurt.

When my body is the archive,
I am an uncomfortable anomaly,
a ghost who goes from exotic
token to pain in the ass like *that*.

When my body is the archive,
the archive raises its hand to ask
about historical trauma, interrupts
your presentation on pre-contact

gender roles, rips the headdress
off your child at Halloween; yes,
the archive goes home with me
at night, takes up ¾ of the bed,

forgets to take its Metformin, asks
if I want the rest of that chocolate donut.
When my body is the archive,
the archives become flesh and blood

with a salty genealogy, a hunger
for truth, rattling beloved bones
that hold everything sacred—
and you understand at last:

the archive was never inanimate,
never dead;
the archive was never
yours.

Indigenous Physics: The Element Colonizatium

1. The elimination of a substance from a living organism
follows complex chemical kinetics.
For example, the biological half-life
of water in a human being
is 9 to 10 days, with adjustments
for behavior and temperature.
A quantity of carbon-14 will decay
to half its original amount after 5,730 years.
After another 5,730 years,
one-quarter of the original will remain.
And so on.

Obviously, the half-life of a substance
depends upon the substance itself—
measure for toxicity, fierceness, sheer venom.
The research at hand for us today, then, is clear:
what is the half-life of Colonizatium?
Does Colonizatium reduce to half
its initial impact in 500 years?
In 1000 years?
At what point
does Colonizatium become unstable?
Is the half-life of Colonizatium constant over the lifetime
of an exponentially decaying
Indigenous body?

2. To quote a famous Indigenous physicist, *sometimes there are complications.*

The decay of a mixture of two or more materials,
which each decay exponentially but with different half-lives,
is not exponential.
Take nuclear waste.
Imagine a mixture of a rapidly decaying element *A*,
with a speedy half-life of 1 second, and more gradual decaying element *B*,
with a half-life of 1 year.
In minutes, almost all atoms of element *A* will have decayed
after repeated reductions by half, but
very few of the atoms of element *B* will have done so,
as only a small percentage of its half-life has elapsed. Thus,
the time taken for such a mixture to fall to half its original value
cannot be easily calculated.

The element Colonizatium is much like nuclear waste:
an unequal mixture of toxic events
with wildly different half-lives.
Start with invasion, war, starvation, rape, murder—
Indian boarding schools, reservations, outlawed religion,
shame.
Include an on-going bombardment of toxic events
over a period of decades:
termination, adopting-out, domestic violence, poverty,
substance addiction, incarceration rates, diabetes,
blood quantum debates, history books, mascots,
white shamanism, fake ndns,
anger.
A periodic table of traumatic elements.

3. Given the difficulties
in determining the half-life of Colonizatium,
we might argue the necessity of redirecting
our efforts into other
more profitable calculations.
However,
despite the probabilistic nature of the inquiry,
this as-yet-undiscovered formula
is thought to be paramount for our research
into a chronological prediction
of the Post-Colonial state. Recent studies
indicate that the mixing of elements in unequal toxicities
and immeasurable psycho-social dynamics may best be gauged
not in mathematics
or statistics
or theoretical constructs,

but in the three Indigenous elements
Story, Dance, and Song.

In other words,
Deep Science of a pre-Colonial origin
such as
formulas and algorithms encoded
within ceremonial circles, drums or clappersticks,
the spiraled helix notes of song,
diagrams of precise footsteps
on discrete portions of empowered earth;
stories plotted like fractal geometry,

the patterned asterisms of stars,
chemical kinetics hammered out
on the bodies of rocks.

Key to such explorations—
the re-emergence
of a fourth Indigenous element:
Dreaming.
This component, long rumored to be permanently lost
or unstable fantasy of treasure-hunters,
possesses shape-shifting abilities
which have allowed it to survive long periods of hibernation,
enabling structural recuperation and regeneration.

Preliminary work that combines Dreaming
with the three known elements
reveals two astonishing facts:

> First) a Post-colonizatium status is, in fact,
> impossible to achieve.
>
> Second) Story, Dance, Song and Dreaming
> do not calculate nor predict
> the half-life of Colonizatium.

Rather,
when applied to the Colonized subject,
these four elements
hasten decay of Colonizatium,
pull the heavy history into themselves,
break it down

the same way maize, mustard greens, pennycress,
sunflowers, Blue sheep fescue, and canola
transform heavy metals.

The same way water hyacinths suck up mercury, lead, cadmium,
zinc, cesium, strontium-90, uranium
and pesticides,

the same way bladder campion accumulates copper,
Indian mustard greens concentrate selenium, sulphur, chromium.

The same way willow, *Salix viminalis*, absorbs uranium and petrochemicals.

And—
once the willow's bio-mass concentrates heavy metals,
once Story, Dance, Song and Dreaming do their work,
the willow rods must be woven
into baskets
in what might be called
a miraculous exponential,
were we not, of course, privy to the facts.

We must revise our aim, therefore, toward rapid
decay of Colonizatium,
or, De-Colonization.

4. Start with Story.
Work your way
home.

Huwa.