Rehabilitating a Blood Stain: Love Poetry as a Tool of Native Survivance

Introduction: Paving Alternative Futurities

Halfway through the titular and opening poem of *Postcolonial Love Poem*, author Natalie Diaz makes a bold assertion that will end up defining the atmosphere of her entire collection: "We pleasure to hurt" (1). Indeed, the collection is teeming with binary oppositions of a similar nature—love and violence, dark and light, creation and destruction— all working to illustrate the particular affection the speaker feels for their lover. The existence of these oppositions assuredly transcends simple explanations: Diaz is not writing about the simultaneous and inescapable presence of pleasure and pain in every romantic relationship. Rather, Diaz's inclusion of these dichotomies throughout her collection work toward more political and decolonial means and are employed to demonstrate the complexity of loving in the aftermath of colonialism.

A major pillar of decolonization is that it will not come about as a result of inaction, in that the only way that decolonization efforts will prove fruitful is through targeted, sufficient action. These efforts have many faces, however the goals remain the same: to dismantle current structures of colonized knowledge and to return the voice and creation of knowledge back to Indigenous peoples. Thus is the goal of this collection, which finds Diaz relaying what it is like to live and especially love in the aftermath of colonial violence and displacement. As such, the poems within the collection contain at large and are defined by their proclivity toward oppositional portrayals, seemingly portraying both advancement and retreat…productivity followed by fruitlessness. As a consequence, the reader may see Diaz's account as unproductive, ultimately proving the fruitlessness of recent decolonization efforts. However, my analysis will argue just the opposite. Particularly, love poetry containing and concerning the aftermath of colonialism on romantic, familial, and natural relationships acts as a nuanced method of

decolonization. By including themes of violence, erasure, and grief in her love poetry, Diaz transforms the love poem into a decolonizing method and a tool of Native Survivance. While love exists despite all of the violence, erasure, and grief, the inclusion of such reminds the reader that the fight toward decolonization is nowhere near over. How deeply are those able to love in spite of being told they are unlovable, that they can still love in spite of all the pushback against it. The mere existence of these binary oppositions is proof of a continuing march; so, while Diaz is saying "Love Anyways," she is also saying "Fight Back."

The particular methodology that I apply to Diaz's collection throughout my analysis borrows from Anthropology; particularly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Smith's book surveys the effect of colonialism on research practices, offering alternative methods of investigation which places Native Americans as the agents of examination over their own stories. Smith's proposed methods of research and analysis are vital in order to turn the dominant method of research, that of which has direct ties to imperialism and colonialism, on its head (1). Indeed, Smith writes that "the collective memory of imperialism has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about Indigenous peoples was collected, classified, and then represented in various ways back to the West and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized" (1). The cycle of colonized knowledge is a dangerous and ruinous one that finds the colonizer writing Indigenous stories in *their* own words before relaying these fabricated narratives back to them as genuine. These narratives are both faulty and defective in themselves and dangerous in how they silence those who they are written about. Under the system of knowledge in which Smith is attempting to reverse, Indigenous voices are silenced and made secondary in the writing of their own histories.

The goal of Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* is to create a framework in which colonized knowledge is retroactively yet progressively decolonized in order to center the Indigenous voice. It is notable that the practices Smith puts forth in her methodology do not just focus on present and future narratives and histories, however puts a direct emphasis on correcting and recentering fraudulent narratives of the past. Going back to previously regarded histories and, in the process of their revision, putting the pencil in the hands of Indigenous communities so that they can write their own histories for themselves. This is vital because "research has never really demonstrated that it can benefit communities – because the benefits never reach Indigenous peoples or are used as a ploy or tactic to coerce Indigenous communities into sacrificing their cultural values…surrendering control over basic decision making in their own lives" (Smith 282). I have witnessed these methodologies in action: recent decolonization efforts at the American National History Museum in New York's Manhattan throughout the past few years came about as a result of the exposure of certain exhibits' racist underpinings. These exhibits observed and promoted the most heinous of colonized knowledge, displaying harmful and biased narratives of marginalized groups and passing them off as true. Bringing these damaging exhibits to light was essential for decolonizing efforts: exhibits such as the Northwest Coast Hall underwent positive renovations which repositioned the agent of narrative control back into the hands of the Indigenous groups whose stories were being told. While I did not visit the exhibit prior to its renovation, I have seen it in its new orientation, and the way in which the exhibit *completely* centers the Indigenous voice in a way that decolonized what was previously colonized knowledge is substantial.

While Smith's proposed system of decolonizing methodologies has doubtlessly lended itself as beneficial and indispensable in anthropological and archaeological scholarship and

research, I offer that these methodologies contribute particularly well to literary studies as well. Just as with anthropology and archaeology, narratives in literature have a history of domination and imperialist conquest, which have advanced incorrect and prejudiced information about marginalized groups. Further, I argue that Diaz's collection, in the same way, acts as a method of decolonization that recenters the Indigenous voice as the agent of narration, rewriting histories in their correct way.

A particular focus on decolonizing practices in literature is not new, however, as scholarship has pointed out how exposing structures of knowledge built on oppression while also furthering decolonial systems can help foster social connection and harmony. In "An Examination of Poetry for the People: A Decolonizing Holistic Approach to Arts Education", Nicole Rangel discusses these specific capabilities of a decolonized framework, specifically how "A decolonizing pedagogy centers authentic dialogue, which is dependant on one's willingness to love— to allow for the changes that occur when a person broadens one's perspectives, increases one's participation, and entertains new possibilities for self and society" (538). Indeed, approaching literary studies from a decolonizing perspective or creating literary art with a decolonizing objective can further compatibility and harmony.

Nevertheless, it is considerable that a particular focus on decolonizing practices in the literary field is almost exclusively contained in pedagogy. While there are ongoing conversations surrounding how considering decolonization can positively impact literary studies, these conversations are almost solely reserved to the teaching of literary studies and not the practice or experience of engaging with the literature on a personal and singular level. Reasons for this exclusion are elusive, however they most likely stem from a particular shyness surrounding the use of terms interdisciplinarily. While I believe this resistance is not malicious and is

unintentional, pushing past this barrier is fundamental in the realization of a politically charged and influential poem. The term decolonization here is particularly significant for its active resistance and presence in an unquestionable and fully realized future, which literature stamps with every written word.

Postcolonial Love Poem feels so full of energy and life because of its rootedness in an active restitution of Native language and history. The collection acts as a powerful decolonizing methodology because its poems of love and desire simultaneously contain elements of a seemingly opposite nature: violence, erasure, grief. The presence of these elements are proof of both resistance and an active, continuing march forward. These notions, I argue, position the collection as a tool of Native Survivance— a term created by Gerald Vizenor. In his book *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, Vizenor writes that "Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. Survivance is greater than the right of a survivable name" (1). Native Survivance is the active practice of presence and resistance, a continuing, definitive claim of occupation (Vizenor 11). Diaz's collection acts as a tool of Native Survivance in two capacities. First, the constant and devoted existence of love and desire throughout the text acts as a continuing form of resistance against postcolonial aftermath. Second, the existence of the aforementioned binary oppositional elements of violence, erasure, and grief and how they illuminate the ever continuing fight against postcolonial aftermath and the necessity of decolonial efforts are, in themselves, modes of presence.

While scholarship, review, and praise of Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem* exists, the collection is ultimately underappreciated in its significance as a masterful piece of literature and as a guide of poetry as decolonizing methodology. Reviews of Diaz's collection praise both its

powerful and charming representation of queer love and its unabashed portrayal of postcolonial aftermath, yet literature has yet to touch on how both of these aspects work together in a reciprocal manner indicative of activism and resistance. Nevertheless, scholars in the field of literary studies have touched upon Diaz's talent for relaying what is often difficult to put into words: the symbiosis between body and land, the difficulties of navigating queer relationships among internal and external conflict, and the vulnerability necessary when writing about generational and familial trauma. Relaying those indescribable aspects of life that often remain nameless is indispensable when fostering connections on the page and beyond the page. While the attachments that Diaz writes about are not new, the vivid and precise explanation of them are.

It seems that, when considering what Diaz has to say about her collection, that she agrees on the power that the love poem can hold in advocacy. In a Tin House Between the Covers interview with David Naimon, Diaz acknowledges that "the idea of the Love Poem to me is an energy much larger than I am…from cosmos to dirt to mountain. That, to me, feels very ecstatic". It is true— the love poem is a powerful and effective medium that can hold the world and more between its lines. It makes sense that the love poem acts as perfect territory for decolonization and the promotion of Native Survivance, because it fosters the same connection, reclamation, and futurity that the former strives for. The love poem, then, acts as a vessel in which activism can grow and flourish.

Further, this analysis will examine the elements of Diaz's collection seemingly oppositional of love— violence, grief, erasure — and how these interact with and exist simultaneously with love while also furthering the poetry as a decolonizing methodology and a tool of Native Survivance. In section one, I will examine the pervading force of violence throughout Diaz's collection, and how this violence coexists with pleasure and desire. In section

two, I will turn to the violent undoing of erasure, the effects of which harm body and land equally and simultaneously. Finally, in my concluding section, I offer an analysis of the unabating presence of grief to show that postcolonial repercussions do not just exist in the time of their occurrence, but that they permeate deep within the bones of the body and into the future. These themes do not exist to provide a sense of doom, however, but to prove a sense of presence and resistance. The point of this presence is that it exists not only into the future, but into forever.

Section I: Violence

The binary oppositions that permeate throughout Diaz's collection begin with the first and titular poem, "Postcolonial Love Poem", which takes the reader through the mental and physical struggles of trying to love while still in the tight grip of the colonizer. That, while love can be used as an escape from and a shield against colonial violence, that same violence impacts how and if the displaced are able to love. The effects of violence are apparent from the very first lines, as Diaz writes, "I've been taught bloodstones can cure a snakebite, / can stop the bleeding— most people forgot this / when the war ended. The war ended / depending on which war you mean: those we started, / before those, millenia ago and onward, / those which started me, which I lost and won— / these ever-blooming wounds" (Diaz 1). Bloodstones, a Native American symbol of the connection between the spiritual and physical world, are said here to aid the violent bites and wounds of the colonizer, which cause never-ending suffering and pain for Indigenous peoples as they still feel the incessant effects of colonial occupation. The relationship between the speaker and the colonizer, in turn, has begun to affect the relationships that the speaker has with others— particularly lovers. Specifically, the speaker states that they were "built by wage. So I wage love and worse" (Diaz 1). Not by force, but by nature alone, that which has been done unto the speaker, the speaker feels that they do unto others– as they feel

that their desire has the ability to be as transitory and inflicting as the exploitative use of the indigenous by the colonizers.

The triangular relationship between colonialism, violence, and love is explored further in the following lines, as Diaz writes that "We pleasure to hurt, leave marks / the size of stones— each a cabochon polished / by our mouths. I, your lapidary, your lapidary wheel / turning— green mottled red— / the jaspers of our desires" (Diaz 1). The first line here continues the theme of the intersection of love, violence, and the way that colonialism affects the way they love, as the speaker feels that the love and desire that they have for their lover has an undertone of violent intentions. It highlights the sadistic nature of love: a love that can hurt and leave bruises. The stone and jewel symbolism in the following lines is telling as well. On the most plain level, marks like stones are long lasting, deep, indelible. However, the stone as a symbol can also symbolize a dual heftiness. On the one hand, they can signify a strong-willed resistance, and on the other, the heaviness and long-lasting impact of trauma. The specific stones mentioned here are striking, as the speaker states that they polish cabochon— a stone polished and cut for beauty purposes— with their mouth. Here, it seems that the speaker is detailing how they have been exploited for the aesthetics of others. Further, by being used as a lapidary wheel, the speaker feels used by and for love, as the colonizers have once used them and their ancestors.

Among the darkness, though, there is light and hope, that which is granted by the beacon of both ancestral and romantic love. In the following lines, the speaker states that "There are wildflowers in my desert / that take up to twenty years to bloom. / The seeds sleep like geodes / beneath hot feldspar sand / until a flash flood bolts the arroyo, lifting them / in its copper current, opens them with memory— / they remember what their god whispered / into their ribs: *Wake up and ache for your life*" (Diaz 1). The wildflowers within the speaker, that of which signify

indigenous unity and harmony, take time to grow, as they have been put to sleep by the oppressive nature of colonial conquest. Nevertheless, the wildflowers' seeds are awakened by the cleansing flood in the arroyo, which has been triggered by an ancestral memory and sentiment urging the speaker to have ambition to fight against the oppression and pain that they face. The geological symbolism continues here as well, as the seeds are compared to geodes, the sand being feldspar, and the current being copper.

In the spirit of budding hope for love and harmony amongst colonial violence, the following lines circle back to the lover. Specifically, the queer desire between the speaker and their lover, as Diaz writes that "Where your hands have been are diamonds / on my shoulders, down my back, thighs—" (1). The reader may see this as a callback to the paralleling violence between the colonizer and the speaker, and the speaker and their lover, however the fact that the stone is a diamond renders a different analysis. The diamond is the symbol for love, commitment, and strength, the impression of the diamond does not leave the bruised marks that the previous stones once did. Instead, they leave behind a glimmering memory of desire. There is another callback in the following lines, as the speaker tells their lover that "I am your culebra. / I am in the dirt for you" (Diaz 1). One might read this line as intersecting with the first line in the poem, however the reader calling themselves a snake here has an entirely different meaning than themselves calling the colonizer a snake. On the one hand, the colonizer is a snake because they bite, penetrate, and inflict scarring violence on others, while on the other hand, the speaker is a snake because they will travel through the dirt and the mud for their lover— they will do anything for them.

Continuing on the developing theme of hope among violence, the speaker claims that the lover's "hips are quartz-light and dangerous, / two rose-horned rams ascending a soft desert wash

/ before the November sky untethers a hundred-year flood— / the desert returned suddenly to its ancient sea" (Diaz 1). These lines offer up hope, but also see the speaker guarding and protecting themselves against potential violence. While the lover's hips are light and symbolic of healing and protection, they are also dangerous. This idea continues on in the next line, as the hips are then referred to as two rams, which symbolize hardship. Nevertheless, the very horns that give the ram the ability to inflict pain are covered by roses: the soft petals of love. While the speaker may be protecting themselves here, they are also allowing themselves to see love as light. Although the November desert may be cold and harsh, they are able to witness its final transformative glow before the night takes hold.

The final lines in the poem continue to offer both hope in love and hopelessness in inaction. The speaker exclaims: "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. / The rain will eventually come, or not. / Until then, we touch our bodies like wounds— / the war never ended and somehow begins again" (Diaz 1-2). Here, the speaker is illuminating heliotrope, scorpion weed, and blue phacelia, which symbolize endless love, determination, and beauty, respectively. These symbols of love and strength are then immediately followed by an image of violence, as the flowers are said to hold their pigment just as well as a throat can hold a bruise. The violence, Diaz writes, is still around, and will never be washed away unless decolonizing efforts and actions are successful. Until this day comes, and until *the* war is won, colonialism will forever subversively impact love in a never-ending cycle of thrown stones.

The further the reader dives down into Diaz's collection, the more apparent, the more stark the ambiguities and dichotomies become: specifically, love and violence… light and dark.

The poems within *Postcolonial Love Poem*, as is the case with the second poem of the collection, “Blood-Light”, are indeed love poems, but they exist in the postcolonial aftermath of violence and erasure. Indeed, they are living oppositions of love and violence, dark and light, creation and destruction, all showing how it is to live and love on a battlefield.

These juxtapositions already begin to form in the poem's title, “Blood-Light.” That is, meshing something inky and obscure with something airy and bright. The theme of generational violence is made known in the first lines, as the speaker writes that, “My brother has a knife in his hand. / He has decided to stab my father.” (Diaz 5). Here, violence is imposed twofold, both in the violence stirring within the brother and the presupposed act of violence onto the father. In the following lines, the dichotomy between the dark and the light — the violence and the love — is made the focal point of the poem. Next, the speaker asserts that “This could be a story from the Bible, / if it wasn’t already a story about stars”, letting the reader know this poem is about light that makes itself brightly known in front of a backdrop of darkness (Diaz 5).

This light, though, comes in a peculiar form. In the following lines, the speaker laments, "I weep alacranes — the scorpions clatter / to the floor like yellow metallic scissors.” (Diaz 5). Here, the speaker is crying bright, venomous scorpions, which hit the ground loudly and conspicuously. Upon hitting the ground, the speaker notes that the scorpions “writhe and flip” before attacking the ankles of her barefoot brother (Diaz 5). After doing so, the speaker claims that “In them is what stings in me — / it brings my brother to the ground” (Diaz 5). The significance of the scorpion here is both elusive and double-edged. First, the scorpion acts as a beacon and token of light, love, and empathy that the speaker feels for her brother. As the speaker weeps for her knife-wielding brother, she is simultaneously sending these scorpions to his ankles, hoping that her love for him will whip him out of the spell and loop of generational

trauma. On the other side of the coin, though, the venom inside the scorpion that hurts both her and her brother, the reader can infer, is the internal and unavoidable effects of colonialism. That is, the inescapable rule of violence and pain that has etched its way into all areas of their lives.

Despite all of this suffering and internal affliction, the brother persists, still wielding the object of violence, that which drives their father to run out of their house— crying — searching for any spec or source of light "like a lamplighter" (Diaz 5). However, this search for light among the dark— hope among the pain and ruins — is unsuccessful, as " … nobody turned their lights on. It is dark" (Diaz 5).

Nevertheless, the search for light is not completely hopeless. In the following lines, the speaker claims, "The only light left is in the scorpions — / there is a small light left in the knife too" (Diaz 5). The light here symbolizes the hope of love among violence and pain. The wept scorpions, containing the venom of generational trauma and violence, have much light in them. This light is granted and set ablaze by the love the speaker has for her brother. Likewise, the knife, a symbol of the violence inflicted on their family and ancestors, has a little light in it for the hope of the chance that the brother breaks the curse and cycle of the transference of violence.

In the following moments, the brother wants and tries to give the knife to the speaker, either denoting a continuation of the transference of generational violence or indicating the passing of the "little light" (Diaz 5). In other words, it is as if the brother is saying, 'I am resisting this knife and its tendencies; you are better off fanning the flame than I am.' In this case, I believe both ring true simultaneously, and that the light and the dark, alongside the love and the violence, all coexist. This is made even more apparent in the following lines, where the speaker relays her brother's notion of, "*Don't you want a little light in your belly"* (Diaz 5).

The speaker utilizes simile in the following lines to further enhance this juxtaposition, stating that they are “Like the way Orion and Scorpius — / across all that black night — pass the sun” (Diaz 5). Here, the speaker is likening her brother and her to the starry constellations Orion and Scorpius, who, among darkness, pass around light. Further, the speaker sees, inside her brother's mouth, “ … throbbing red Antares”, a big red star within the Scorpius constellation (Diaz 5). By seeing this in her brother’s mouth, the speaker is supposedly nodding to the blood and violence coexisting with light.

In the final lines, this coexisting juxtaposition is further resolved, as the speaker concludes that “One way to open a body to the stars, with a knife. / One way to love a sister, help her bleed light” (Diaz 5). These final lines both affirm and mystify what has been made known throughout the rest of the poem. On one hand, the speaker states that one way to open oneself up to light and hope is through corporeal excavation (metaphorically… of course?): a violent and vulnerable fracturing of oneself for the chance of hope and light. On the other hand, though, the speaker says that one can also show love by guiding and showing those we love how to “Bleed Light”. Indeed, the final two words of the poem mimic the first two of the title, throwing the speaker back into the cycle of violence, perhaps hinting to the fact that a postcolonial world, presently, is still a colonial world, that which has not been solved and is still ruled by both dark and light (where, ultimately, light cannot burn on its own). However, is this a resolution? It most certainly is not— and that is the point.

One mode of reclaiming agency of previously colonized language, knowledge, and experience, as Diaz portrays in her poetry, is by showing the ability to persist despite it all. Specifically, the capability of the displaced to love and desire wholeheartedly and fruitfully. Diaz’s poem “Ode to the Beloved’s Hips” finds the speaker praising their lover’s physicality

while highlighting the queer love and desire that they are experiencing. The addition of this poem in Diaz's collection works as the sun does through the clouds: penetrating and breaking through barriers of concealment to spread light (and love).

When conveying the desire for their lover in "Ode to the Beloved's Hips", the speaker refers to religious associations, illuminating the divinity of their attraction and its untouchable nature. Specifically, in the poem's first stanza, desire and sensuality are likened to religious or spiritual elements. The poem begins with the lines "Bells are they — shaped on the 8th day, silvered / percussion in the morning — *are* the morning" (Diaz 37). Assuming that the "8th day" here is the resurrection of Christ, these lines seem to signal the bringing in of a day marked by something new — a fresh start ushered in by the chime of the bells. However, the speaker then says they wish to "Hold the day away a little / longer, a little slower, a little *easy*" (Diaz 37). These lines present the notion that the speaker is trying to resist the coming of this new day or perhaps is trying to stop the quickness of time. The end of the first stanza finds a noteworthy fusion of the bodily and the religious, as the speaker states, "Communion of Pelvis, Sacrum, Femur. / My mouth— terrible angel, ever-lasting novena, / ecstatic devourer" (Diaz 37). The first line here claims that the body is something "sacred" to be consumed. Subsequently, the next lines denote that the speaker ingests this holy, bodily communion willingly and happily, perhaps out of a craving or ravenous desire for the body.

The following stanza continues on this theme of ravenous desire as the speaker recounts moments of intense intimacy with their lover. To this point, there is first the line, "O, the places I have laid them, knelt and scooped / the amber—fast honey— from their openness" (Diaz 37). Here, there is an impassioned account of intimacy between two lovers, which is definitive of vulnerability and appreciation of the lover's body. Additionally, the line "licked / smooth the

sticky of her hip" (Diaz 37) recounts a sexual interaction between the two lovers. The famished desire noted earlier is also present here, as the speaker says that they are "Lambent slave to ilium and ischium — I never tire / to shake this wild hive, split with thumb the sweet- / dripped comb– hot hexagonal hole…" (Diaz 37). Not only is the speaker desiring her lover, but she is grateful and willing to beckon to the calls of her body. The abundant "honey" imagery here is noteworthy for two reasons: Honey is the marker of sweet intimacy and sexuality, and honey is something that provides sustenance. The end of this stanza even further highlights the speaker's almost uncontrollable desire for their lover's body, as they write, "for her hips, / I am – strummed-song and succubus" (Diaz 37). This stanza further ignites the fire of intimacy between these two lovers, as the speaker would do anything for the taste of their lover's hips.

The next three stanzas illustrate imagery of the hips as something "divine." Particularly, there are the lines, "Transubstantiation bone — hips of bread, / wine-whet thighs. *Say the word and healed I shall be:*" (Diaz 37). These images refer to the previous comparisons of the lover's body to communion while claiming that the body symbolizes divinity that the speaker wants and needs to be restored. These references strengthen the connection of desire between the two lovers into something non-negotiable. Later, the speaker conveys that their desire is so strong that it is sinful and that they wish to be delivered from it. Specifically, the speaker states, "Imparadise me. Because, God, / I am guilty. I am sin-frenzied and full of teeth" (Diaz 38). Here, the speaker is claiming that their desire for their lover is so strong that it feels as though they are giving into a devilish temptation, something they cannot have but they must. Their desire for their lover seems so strong that it must be *evil*, something in need of resistance. However, as described previously, the speaker cannot resist their lover. It is quite interesting that the lover's body is described as

both communion and something devilishly tempting for the speaker. This, perhaps, is a nod to the many dichotomies existing in Diaz's world, specifically that of love and violence.

In the following stanzas, the speaker continues praising their lover's hips in a transcendental way. First, the lover's hips "Are a city. They are a Kingdom…Beloved, your hips are the war" (Diaz 38). Here, the hips are described as powerful and expansive things in their prowess. Additionally, comparing hips to war at the end perhaps signifies a quarrel between the two lovers, that their passions are too strong and that conflict is created. These lines also connect with the themes of love and violence, specifically, the aforementioned subconscious violence embedded within these romantic relationships. Here, the speaker has difficulty detaching the intense passion they feel for their lover with the violence they have faced. A violence that, despite efforts to detach, has left an imprint on the heart of the affected.

In the next stanza, the speaker wants to indulge in their lover. The speaker states, "your legs, love, are boulevards / leading me beggared and hungry to your candy / house" (Diaz 38). The speaker is saying here that their lover's legs lead them ravished and longing for more. This idea of irresistibility and indulgence carries on in the next lines as the speaker claims, "Even when I am late / and the tables have been cleared, / in the kitchen of your hips, let me eat cake" (Diaz 38). Once again, the speaker longs for their lover's richness, something they cannot resist and want to "eat." The idea of the lover's body as something transcending the physical hits a climax in the next stanza, as the speaker states, "O constellation of pelvic glide — every curve, a luster, a star. More infinite still, your hips / are kosmic, are universe— galactic carousel of burning / comets and Big Bangs" (Diaz 38). Likening the lover's body to these celestial bodies hints at a hierarchy of the body as something powerful and all-consuming that no other being can compare to. Additionally, the lines "O, hot planet, let me / circumambulate. O, spiral galaxy, I am

coming / for your dark matter" (Diaz 38) suggest that the speaker wants to explore their lover's body further. Specifically, in the infinite universe, which is the lover's body, the speaker wants to explore and know it all.

In the final stanza of "Ode To The Beloved's Hips," the lover's body becomes a complex voyage for the speaker. The stanza begins with a journey, "Along las calles de tus muslos, I wander, / follow the parade of pulse like a drum line—" (Diaz 38). Here, the speaker is traveling down the roads of the lover's thighs, something that beckons and calls the speaker to follow it. This journey leads the speaker to "descend into your Plaza del Toros– / hands throbbing Miuru bulls, dark Isleros" (Diaz 38). The introduction of Bullfighting here is significant in that it adds to the conflict of the complex passion between the two lovers. This conflict, ultimately, is deeply rooted in violence, one that has proved inescapable for the duration of the poem and the ode that defines it. Additionally, the fact that the speaker's hands are bulls signifies that their yearning for their lover is causing this uproar in conflict. This idea continues further with the description of "Your arched hips— ay, mi torera" (Diaz 38). Here, the speaker is writing that their lover's hips are the bullfighter, signaling that they are meant to fight off or keep the lover's hungered hands at bay. This journey into and throughout the lover continues "Down the long corridor, your wet walls / lead me like a traje de luces— all glittered, glowed" (Diaz 38). In this line, the speaker is continuing the journey within their lover, being guided by the sparkling bullfighter suit: something that tempts and allures. The following lines continue to illustrate the rich desire between the two lovers, as the speaker claims they are "the animal born to rush your rich red / muletas— each breath, each sigh, each groan— / a hooked horn of want…" (Diaz 38-39). The use of Bullfighting as the image of irresistible desire is brilliant. In this bullfight, the speaker is the bull that cannot resist the bewitching desire of the bullfighter— the body. The speaker claims

that they were created for this desire, that their purpose is to seek it out no matter what. The poem then ends at a climax, as the speaker says, “Here I must enter you, *mi pobre* / *Manolete*— press and part you like a wound— / make the crowd pounding in the grandstand / of your iliac crest rise up in you and cheer” (Diaz 39). Here, the speaker gives into the temptation of their desire for their lover, something that results in a celebration from a “crowd.”

Ultimately, the presentation of passionate, deep desire here has two distinct faces. The first is the ability to desire with every fiber of one’s being, likening the lover to incomparable heavenly bodies and unattainable levels of sensuality. As mentioned, the capability to desire in this way and in this capacity proves vital for the argument of the future. However, this analysis has also proved a different reality: the inescapable force of violence in even the most lovely aspects of their lives, forced by the hand of the colonizer into the perceptions of the colonized. This embedded violence, apparent both here and in “Postcolonial Love Poem” , are indicative of the presence of fractured relationships caused by colonialism.

Section II: Erasure

Erasure does not exist in a vacuum— is not singular. Rather, the eradication of one thing, past the point of its most basic form, leads to the decay of all things that come before it and are intertwined within it, and to the overall doubt of all things that come after it. In Diaz’s collection, erasure seemingly takes many different forms: erasure of bodies, of people, of land, of voices. Underneath the guise of distinction, though, lies the reality that there really is no distinction at all. In Diaz’s collection, the body is the land is the person is the voice, and what happens to one, happens to all. This unified harmony and integration has its drawbacks and its strengths. To the former, worry arises that the whole harmonious system will collapse when one facet is under attack. That, the destruction of one will lead to the crumbling of another, and that eventually

there will be nothing left to build upon. The strengths, though, outweigh the anxieties, in that the support granted by this harmony is the best form of combat against erasure and eradication. Erasure and harmony are ever present in Diaz's prose-poem "The First Water Is The Body," an ode toward the Colorado River which follows its destruction and the consequent erasure of the Native body. As signaled in the title, the water and the body are more than just similar, but they are the same being, same entity. This sameness, as previously hinted at, lends itself to both concern and hope for all "bodies" involved.

The first lines of the piece get right to the point, not leaving any room for misinterpretation. Diaz writes 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." (46). Here, Diaz is making it clear to the reader that the connection she is making between the water and the body is not some metaphorical or figurative similarity that she is employing. Rather, the water is in the body, *is* the body; and the endangerment of one leads to the direct and immediate endangerment of the other. To that end, Diaz continues by relaying that "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*. So far, I have said the word *river* in every stanza. I don't want to waste water. I must preserve the river in my body. In future stanzas, I will try to be more conservative" (46). The river is not just a part of the Native body, but it *is* the body. And, the water is dwindling. An integral and vital part of the speaker's body is forcibly running dry– is being removed.

The harmonious link between nature and the (human) body is not something that was recently created or sprang into existence, but has existed since the inception of the two. Diaz writes that "'Aha Makav is the true name of our people, given to us by our Creator who loosed

the river from the earth and built it into our living bodies. Translated into English, '*Aha Makav* means *the river runs through the middle of our body, the same way it runs through the middle of our land*" (46). Water, the co-creator and vital substance of all beings, supports the land body as much as it supports the human body, flowing right through the middle of both as to signal its degree of importance and the way it holds the two together. The rivering of the water throughout both bodies acts as a connection for Native peoples to both their ancestry and their Earth— the flow of nature and life. Nevertheless, though, "This is a poor translation, like all translations. In American imaginations, the logic of this image will lend itself to surrealism and magical realism—" (Diaz 46-47). More than just words are lost in translation; but, entire histories, origins of meaning, and peoples are lost as well. This loss is a dire point to make, and is one that profoundly distinguishes between Native and settler interpretations of the connection between these bodies. Diaz sees "Americans" reading this image of the water inside of the body animatedly: a stark blue river jutting through and interrupting bright-red muscles and vital organs, making itself known for its intrudance in a place where it does not belong yet already exists. Similarly, "Americans prefer a magical red Indian, or a shaman, or a fake Indian in a red dress, over a real Native. Even a real Native carrying the dangerous and heavy blues of a river in her body. What threatens white people is often dismissed as myth. I have never been true in America. America is my myth" (Diaz 47). Indeed, the settlers prefer to deal with and imagine realities as non-tangibles or fantasies: things they can manipulate, change, erase. This point is where the erasure is born, as what they feel disrupts their status or histories *they know as real* is dismissed as unreal, a fiction.

Translation, ultimately, is a form of erasure in and of itself. Hidden under the mask of a universal understanding and the accessibility of cultural phenomena is the reality of altercation.

When a text becomes translated it is, more often than not, resituated to fit the needs and methods of understanding of the recipient culture. Continuing on the politics of translation, Diaz references Derrida, writing that "*Every text remains in mourning until it is translated*" (47). Indeed, it is said that the moment a text is written, that it is dead and grieved until it is translated and brought back to life again. On this, Diaz offers another translation, namely that "When Mojaves say the word for *tears*, we return to our word for *river*…A *great weeping* is how you might translate it. Or a *river of grief*" (47). This translation returns to, and further illuminates, the interconnectedness of nature and the human body, and that grief is felt throughout both simultaneously. It is a fine translation, really, but it is what is lost and erased in the translation that is indescribable. Nonetheless, Diaz does not offer this translation to further the knowledge of the unknowledgeable reader, but uses it to turn Derrida's notion on its head. Specifically, she questions the translation's recipient, asking "who is this translation for and will they come to my language's four night funeral to grieve what has been lost in my efforts at translation? When they have drunk dry my river will they join the mourning procession across our bleached desert?" (Diaz 47). When translating something, there is always a loss of meaning and sentiment. What is the point then, Diaz asks, of translating native language into English, furthering the erasure of their culture by harming the meaning of their language? Further, and returning to the river, Diaz adds that she knows that translation-recipients will not work to protect what they have erased, and will not fill the river back up after emptying it. While words may not be translatable, *feelings* are, in that their sentiment is not dependent on the words that describe them but the sensations they elicit. Diaz writes that, "The word for *drought* is different across many languages and lands. The ache of thirst, though, translates to all bodies along the same paths … No matter what language you speak, no matter the color of your skin" (47). Drought— a drying, a loss of what is

life-sustaining— means something different to different people inhabiting different lands. Pain, and the feeling of deep yearning for what one needs to survive, is universal. Translations that occur beyond words— beyond meaning— are ultimately less prone to erasure and manipulation.

The river(s) flowing through Native lands and through their bodies are not stagnant— is not still water. Rather, these waters are alive, flowing, bustling. When Diaz references these ever-present rivers, she means "*river* as a verb. A happening. It is moving within me right now" (48). The everflowing circulation of vitality and life throughout the bodies that the river(s) inhabit is a signal of hope, of a continuing push against erasure and toward life. Further, the similar vitality within the two bodies "is not juxtaposition. Body and water are not *two unlike things*… They are same—body, being, energy, prayer, current, motion, medicine" (Diaz 48). What Diaz is trying to communicate here is the ultimate enemy of erasure: harmony. That is, the continuous circulation of reciprocity, and the interconnectedness of all living and energetic beings, makes it to where one thing can never really be erased. It may be dimmed, but its light is still there: in a heartbeat, in a grain of sand.

Further, Diaz resumes to strengthen the connection between body and land, while making it known that unless the reader is a Native person, that they will never *truly* understand the breadth of this connection. Diaz continues by relaying how "In Mojave thinking, body and land are the same. The words are separated only by the letters 'ii and 'a…Unless you know the context of a conversation, you might not know if we are speaking about our body or our land…which has been injured, which is remembering…You might not know we mean both" (48). The interchangeability of body and land in Mojave language and thought directly reflect how the two are affected by erasure, in that what happens to one, happens and is poignantly felt in the other. The land feels the pang of hurt when the body is injured, just how the body feels the

current of electricity when the land is alive and thriving. As previously explained, these dually felt occurrences have their strengths and drawbacks, which Diaz continues to reflect upon. Of these, one of the most profound are that, "If I say, *My river is disappearing*, do I also mean, *My people are disappearing?*" (Diaz 48). The point being considered here by Diaz seems to be a culminating moment of the piece. Here, she is asking the reader if the deep identity loss associated with the destruction of the river is the ultimate form of erasure. If their spirits are linked and tied with the river, what will happen if it continues to be eroded?

Diaz carries on by returning to conceptual conversations regarding translations, citing that "John Berger wrote, *True translation is not a binary affair between two languages but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written. True translation demands a return to the pre-verbal*" (48-49). This is a significant idea to consider within this conversation of meaning, translation, and erasure, as it offers that the meaning of words— what they evoke, their contextual purpose— is often what is lost in translation. Diaz agrees, as she writes that, when translating, "We must go to the place before those two points— we must go to the third place that is the river" (49). This "third place", the essence of the "thing", exists long before words. This natural point that Diaz conveys we must return to is the point of the river: the origin, the primary and earliest energy source. Diaz continues to urge that "We must go to the point of the lance entering the earth, and the river becoming the first body bursting from earth's clay body into my sudden body…We must go beyond to a place where we have never been the center, where there is no center— beyond, toward what does not need us yet makes us" (49). The proposal Diaz is offering to the reader exists pre-meaning, really. Diaz knows that in order for the translation to ever be fruitful and genuine, that we must go back to the inception of the first living breath— the river's first ever

surge of water, that of which flowed immediately and suddenly into the first body, creating it as it goes.

Diaz sees the Colorado River as this third point in the triangle, the point pre-meaning where everything begins and exists (49). This "pre-verbal" point, the time before and beyond words, was when "the body was more than body. Before it could name itself *body* and be limited, bordered by the space *body* indicated" (Diaz 49). Indeed, it is known that giving something a name, and in effect putting it into a defining category, rather than just letting it exist puts it into a limiting box. When something is put into a box, it rarely exists beyond the characterizations set upon that box. A body must be strictly corporeal, where the only thing flowing within it are streams of blood. Before this, though, "the body was more than a body and possible. One of its possibilities was to hold a river within it" (Diaz 49). Before the words, "Body" or "River", the two could not only exist as synonyms but could exist as one singular entity and energy source. Their post-meaning— their naming— erases and rings them in the same way translation does.

Diaz then returns to the dual-erasure of the river and the body, asking "If I was created to hold the Colorado River, to carry its rushing inside me, if the very shape of my throat, of my thighs is for wetness, how can I say who I am if the river is gone…If the river is a ghost, am I?" (50). Remember, erasure is not singular. If the Colorado river is dried down to the dirt of the bed it rests in, how is she not to feel that same drought in her bones? Do they not wither away and turn to dust if her body suffers a similar deficiency?

The narrative of the piece then recenters itself into the present, as Diaz explains how the reciprocity and harmony between the land and the body acted as a powerful resistor against the harm of DAPL during the Standing Rock protests, citing the infamous phrase, "*Water is the first medicine*" (50). Further, Diaz writes that "Where I come from we cleanse ourselves in the river. I

mean: *The water makes us strong*…We cannot live good, we cannot live at all, without water" (50). By joining forces within and through the water, they become more themselves, more powerful, more pure. Nevertheless, the water is not only a source of power and strength, but of life and vitality; they could not continue to exist and live without the simultaneous existence and flow of the water. This is why "If we poison and use up our water, how will we clean our wounds and our wrongs? How will we wash away what we must leave behind us? How will we make ourselves new" (Diaz 50). The poisoning of Native water is the ultimate form of erasure and identity theft, robbing them of their life and energy source. If the water is erased, what is left? An absence of water not only means death of the body, but also death of motive, as "To thirst and to drink is how one knows they are alive and grateful. To thirst and not drink is…" (Diaz 50). Diaz leaves the answer to that statement up to the reader, but one can only interpret it to mean the uninterpretable, then untranslatable, dissatisfaction of an unrequited thirst. That is, that living is not only to desire, but is also the *ability* to go forth toward and meet this desire. Contrarily, to yearn for what one cannot— can no longer— have, is…

Diaz then returns to the hypocrisy of "American" thought as it relates yet attempts to oppose and contradict native thought, asking "If your builder could place a small red bird in your chest to beat as your heart, is it so hard for you to picture the blue river hurtling inside the slow muscled curves of my long body…If I would convince you, would our brown bodies and our blue rivers be more loved and less ruined?" (51). Here, Diaz is attempting to disrupt notions of a static, disconnected body, offering up the idea that *every* culture has their own version of land-body harmony, and that instead of willing ignorance—that of which directly leads to erasure—that attempts to relate could be the hope of prosperity. In an attempt to further illuminate the hypocrisy and mindlessness of American attitudes toward water, Diaz points to

some examples of different nations' positions on bodies of water, citing how "The Whanganui River in New Zealand now has the same legal rights of a human being. In India, the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers now have the same legal status of a human being…While in the United States, we are teargassing…Natives trying to protect their water from pollution and contamination…" (51). The sheer amount of violence and greed brought unto Native peoples in the United States as they attempt to protect that which they love and brings them life is senseless, perplexing, and horrific. Diaz, ultimately, finds no hope in any current "American" system, as she thinks that both sides of the political spectrum have and will destroy their land for, and with, what they think is right (Diaz 51).

Diaz argues that those who destroy and inflict violence on lands and consequently the people that care for it are okay with doing so because they are unable to understand the seamless land-body connection. To this, she points out that "We think our bodies are being all that we are. *I am my body*. This thinking helps us disrespect water, air, land, one another. But water is not external from our body, our self" (Diaz 51). Saying that one's body is all that they are responsible for is a selfish and inhumane endeavour. In order to live, in order to sustain that which sustains human life, one must aid in the nurturing of nature: the ultimate life source.

"The First Water is the Body" draws to a close by reiterating its central theme of the necessary harmony between the body and nature, and how "the water we drink, like the air we breathe, is not a part of our body but is our body" (Diaz 52). Diaz hopes that the repetition of this point will lend itself to the protection of the Colorado River. If a person is a river, and consequently the river is a person, will that help save it? On this, Diaz cites Toni Morrison, and that she "writes, *All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was*" (52). The river(s) will remember who has loved it, who has cared for it, who has hurt it, and

who has tried to erase it down to its bones and even further still. The river is intelligent, and with its intelligence it yearns to go back to the place of ultimate pre-erasure, that is, back to pre-meaning and pre-verbal, where only those who know of it are simultaneously created by and within it. In effect, will the people who are born from the water be able to remember as well as the river does, and if so, will they be as likely to remember to return to pre-meaning, and will they want to (Diaz 52)? The speaker asks: "Do you think the water will forget what we have done, what we continue to do" (Diaz 52)? Will the water be merciful to us, will it continue to heal and nurture human-kind who has destroyed and erased it? Will it know who has loved it? These questions seem to haunt Diaz at the piece's close, as she seems truly fearful that the water will not forget: that it will run dry, that it will remain erased.

Within "The First Water is the Body", the harmony between nature and the body not only work as binary oppositions, but as direct antagonists. Diaz knows that this harmony is perhaps the only thing that could fight against and put a stop to the erasure. The insistence of the river's erasure alongside the explanation of its harmony is dire for the exposure of continuing acts of colonization against Native people, driving the point that decolonization efforts are still necessary and vital for Native Survivance.

Section III: Grief

Grief is the tolerance of an unresolved past: the deep, throbbing, and permeating waves of loss that, when left untreated, feel as fresh as the day one is first wounded. These wounds are characteristic of the experiences Diaz attempts to navigate throughout her love poetry. The poems explore postcolonial grief and an attempt to erase feelings of pain and loss that feel as permanent and embedded in the body as DNA does. Her love poetry, in effect, works toward decolonizing means, as Diaz figures that one truly effective way to combat grief and postcolonial

aftermath is to fight it— heal it — with love. Therefore, the evaluation of, and persistence through and beyond, grief in Diaz's collection, works to further her collection as a method of decolonization. Her poem "How the Milky Way Was Made" parallels the burden and grief caused by the destruction of the Colorado River with the lover's body, examining the (in)ability to be restricted by means of demolition and dismantling. Differently, the poem "Grief Work" uses love as a key to processing postcolonial grief through corporeal healing. In this poem, considering that the speaker holds the impacts of colonialism and grief in their body, they utilize the intimacy of the lover's body as a manner of healing and convalescence. Both of these poems, in tandem, explore a journey through postcolonial grief and the effects that love has on this grief— in healing, in providing — thereafter.

Remedying feelings of grief and heartache is easier said than done. Diaz makes sure to convey to the reader that these moments of love, grief, pain, destruction, and desire are critically and painstakingly complex; resolving these emotions feels like the search for a singular flower in a big field of nothing, vast, barren, hopeful. This vastness is explored poignantly in "How the Milky Way Was Made", a poem which follows the speaker grieving and mourning the division and destruction of the Colorado River. The speaker gets to this point immediately, as the first lines follow how, "My river was once unseparated. Was Colorado. Red / fast flood. Able to take / anything it could wet — in a wild rush — all the way to Mexico" (Diaz 61). There is, already in these opening lines, a host of tensions. Primarily, from the very first words, the reader knows that there is a tie between the speaker and the water— something that Diaz regularly employs throughout the collection— and that the speaker sees the body of the river as mirroring their own. Secondly, there is an immediate tension between the past and the present— what has been, and what remains now. Before even knowing the current state of the river, the reader knows it

has declined, is fractured. What was once a free-flowing river— unstoppable, influential, effectual, interminable— is now sectioned. The reader gains confirmation of this present state in the following lines, as it is written that, "Now it is shattered by fifteen dams / over one thousand four hundred and fifty miles, / pipes and pumps filling / swimming pools and sprinklers / in Los Angeles and Las Vegas" (Diaz 61). The reader's unfortunate prediction has come true, that now, the river has suffered a widespread and totalizing breaking. The river, once flowing freely and unburdened, is now partitioned and still. The river has been exploited and turned into a commodity, broken for the use of "pipes and pumps". What's more, is that by being put to use for the "swimming pools and sprinklers", the river is being destroyed to aid and power the luxuries of others. These ruins, undoubtedly, share figurative and literal ties with (post)colonialism. Figuratively, the river has been stripped of its natural flow and autonomy in order to benefit the rich— it has been robbed of its bodily agency the way colonialism did to the Native Americans. Literally, the land has been dismembered and taken advantage of, resembling the precise land-exploitation of settler-colonialism.

Now, Diaz doesn't always provide hope in these instances of grief and pain (as she is honest, in that harsh realities often don't offer us this luxury,) but when she does, one can truly believe it, feel it. The following lines are impactful in this way, as it is written that in the aftermath of this destruction, "To save our fish, we lifted them from our skeletoned river beds, / loosed them in our heavens, set them aster— / 'Achii 'ahan, Mojave salmon, / Colorado pike minnow. / Up there they glide gilled with stars." (Diaz 61). The site of destruction has not ruined all, as the speaker points out here that in an attempt to save their native fish from the stillness of the dams, as they have removed them from the bone dry river beds, offering them up to the cosmos. The speaker continues that, "You can see them now— / god-large, gold-green sides,

lunar white belly to breast— / making their great speeded way across the darkest hours, / rippling the sapphired sky-water into a galaxy road. / The blurred wake they drag as they make their path / through the night sky is called / ‘Achii ‘ahan nyuunye— / our words for *Milky Way*” (Diaz 61-62). Diaz introduces two additional tensions in these lines, firstly the tension between the cosmos above and the terrain below. The heavens, here, are the ultimate, supreme river: the most freeing “place”, where the fish act as unrestricted heavenly bodies swimming freely forever. With that, the second tension mentioned here is that of finite and infinite, or burdened and unburdened. Below, the fish were subject to the finite, divided river, a consequence resulting in stillness. In the cosmos, however, they are able to swim freely in an infinite river where the water never runs out— is never taken away. And, in this way, the fish are now likened to that of stars, grand in nature and acting as light among the darkness. The result of their illuminated journey, Diaz writes, is the Milky Way: blurred, bright, beautiful. It can be concluded then, that among the grief for the destroyed and overtaken river, the galaxy and the Milky Way acts as a shelter for the fish, as what has been broken on Earth remains up above. This, in turn, helps to preserve the life of the fish that the drying of the river almost takes away by giving them a new untouchable river to swim in forever.

On the other side of this hope, though, is the fact that this infinite cosmic parallel of the river is not favorable to all. On this, the following lines inform the reader that, “Coyote too is up there, locked in the moon / after his failed attempt to leap it, fishing net wet / and empty slung over his back — / a prisoner blue and dreaming / of unzipping the salmon’s silked skins with his teeth” (Diaz 62). A paradise to some, a prison for others: while the fish are provided infinite paradise in their sky-river, the coyote is jailed to live the rest of its eternity in an unnatural home. While the coyote is also in the cosmos, he isn’t free to float unabridgedly. The coyote is a

prisoner to the Moon, its circular cell ridding it of a joyous end after its fatal attempt in Earth's river. The use of the coyote here is significant, considering that the coyote is a prominent figure in Native myth, usually representing a trickster or a boundary figure. However, it is notable that in Southwest—where Diaz is situated—the coyote is said to have brought the humans down to earth. This explanation makes sense in the context of this poem, as perhaps the coyote, upon dying, returned to its original home in the sky. These are the consequences of susceptibility, the speaker claims, as they lament, "O, the weakness of any mouth / as it gives itself away to the universe / of a sweet-milk body" (Diaz 62). The implications here are dual-sided. The first reference is to the coyote, who lost its life trying to catch the salmon in the Colorado river, ultimately getting caught in an empty fishing net. The other reference speaks to general temptation, and how any living creature is left wholly vulnerable and weak in the pursuit of their temptations. In that regard, Diaz returns back to and ends the poem, as she often does, with love, desire, and the lover's body. The speaker turns the story on its head, concluding the poem by stating that "As my own mouth is dreamed to thirst / the long desire-ways, the hundred thousand light-year roads / of your wrist and thighs" (Diaz 62). Here, the speaker reveals that in the aftermath of all of the grief and all of the mourning for the river's destruction, they feel more like the coyote than the fish. In the pursuit of their desires and temptations, they relate to the burdened coyote, forever longing for the endless road of their lover's body. The speaker is not freed from the dams and restrictive dividers and is not granted a free-flowing eternity. Rather, they are like the coyote, victim to their tempestuous vulnerabilities and forever dreaming of the flesh. The speaker is not free, therefore they are still burdened by the grief of being "caught" — by the grief of their "failed attempt to leap it" (Diaz 62).

As the title of "Grief Work" might imply, the speaker is truly attempting to resolve, once and for all, the grief that they face head-on. The all-curing remedy for this grief, the speaker finds, is love and desire. The first line of the poem demonstrates the speaker's willingness to seek love wholeheartedly, as they ask, "Why not now go toward the things I love?" (Diaz 93). The poem begins here on bold, ambitious terms, as the speaker asks their audience (but, really, more so themselves), that if they have already felt pain and grief, what is there to lose in seeking out love? And, the reader does just this, as they have "walked slow in the garden / of her–: gazed the black flower / dilating her animal- / eye" (Diaz 93). In these lines, the speaker is holding true to their promise. That is, they are relishing in the wonder of their lover while appreciating all that makes their lover stir. The speaker then goes on to say that they, "give up my sorrows / the way a bull gives its horns—: astonished, / and wishing there is rest / in the body's softest parts" (Diaz 93). There is no doubt that relinquishing their sorrow and grief for the acceptance of love comes with some feelings of murkiness. While the speaker is ready and willing to let go of their grief, the action of doing so still comes with an adjustment, as the grief has been with them for so long. Nevertheless, once they have given up their horns, they readily await the resolution and catharsis that comes with it.

Of course, the lover's body is to thank for the speaker's processing of, and atonement with, their grief. The speaker reveals that, "Like Jacob's angel, I touched the garnet / of her hip, / and she knew my name, / and I knew hers—: / it was *Auxocromo*, it was *Cromóforo*, it was *Eliza*" (Diaz 93). The use of Jacob's angel here is quite illuminating. In the biblical story, Jacob's angel, who was stronger than Jacob, was wrestling and consequently overpowering him. Nevertheless, Jacob continued to wrestle with the angel in spite of this, ultimately proving his bravery and perseverance. Used in this instance, the speaker is declaring that the intimacy with

their lover is an everflowing back-and-forth. That, though the grief existing in the speaker might be overwhelming or even daunting for the lover, the lover persists in their romantic encounter, ultimately showing their love and loyalty. And, from this, the two lovers come to *truly* know each other's names— come to *truly* know each other in the most intimate and sacred of ways. The name of the speaker and their lover, respectively, are *Auxocromo* and *Cromóforo*. Meaning that, the speaker is the one who "takes color", while the lover is the one who "gives color". Here, the speaker is lamenting the helpfulness and generosity of their lover for breathing life into them, that of which the speaker's grief allegedly drains.

Truly, once touched with love, one is forever changed, and the effects are evermore. On the everlasting effects of love, the speaker writes that, "When the eyes and lips are brushed with honey / what is seen and said will never be the same, / so why not take the apple / in your mouth–: / in flames, in pieces, straight / from the knife's sharp edge?" (Diaz 93). That is to say, that once one is able to accept and feel the love being given to them, their perspective on everything around them changes forevermore. So then, like Eve did with the apple, why not give into temptation? When one has been through it all, what is there to lose in accepting love? And now, the speaker is longing to give in, as they plead, "Achilles chased Hektor around the walls / of Ilium three times—: how long must I circle / the high gate / between her hip and knee / to solve the red-gold geometry / of her thigh?" (Diaz 93-94). This is a story about hunger and inquisition just as much as it is a story about longing. Diaz is likening Achilles' relentless pursuit of Hektor in the Iliad to the speaker's pursuit of the lover's body— particularly, to *know* and *understand* the specificities and dimensions of her thigh. Despite all of this longing and pursuit, though, one knows— can *feel* — when the universe wants to pull them in the other direction. As such, the speaker claims that, "Again the gods put their large hands in me. / move me, break my

heart" (Diaz 94). Even when we are trying to fix ourselves, nature has other plans, continuing to stir something sinister inside and within. Just as grief feels eternally intrinsic, so do the spiders that weave the web of grief: When one is killed, another takes its place, redepositing a never ending loop.

The following moments in the poem feel like a great climax. The speaker asserts that their "melancholy is hoofed. / I, the terrible beautiful / Lampon, a shining devour-horse tethered / at the bronze manger of her collarbones." (Diaz 94). Here, the speaker is saying that their sorrow has bestial qualities, and as such they are a truly a dual-sided figure, one of horrific magnificence. The speaker is also likening themselves to Lampon, a dream interpreter, and a horse who eats their master, while claiming that they are tied to their lover's body. Here, there is a further emphasis on the dual and dichotomous nature of the speaker. And, as we have guessed, so has the speaker affirmed, as they assert that, "I do my grief work / with her body—: / labor to make the emerald tigers / in her throat leap, / lead them burning green to drink / from the deep-violet jetting her breast" (Diaz 94). The speaker is finally making it outwardly and explicitly known that their lover's body is their healing process. In tending to and focusing on their intimate relationship with their lover's body, the speaker is renouncing their grief—dropping their sorrow so that their hands can focus on the lover instead.

The final moments in the poem refocus on the innate, instinctive, and intrinsic nature that surrounds all of this grief and love. Diaz maintains that, "We go where there is love, / to the river, on our knees beneath the sweet / water. I pull her under four times, / until we are rivered. / We are rearranged. / I wash the silk and silt of her from my hands—: / now who I come to, / I come clean to, / I come good to." (94). Indeed, just as grief and pain are inevitable… so are our natural ties and inclinations toward love. The mutual surrender that is necessary for love is what

ties the two lovers together: when the speaker pulls their lover underwater with them, they come together in mutual breathlessness, and are thus morphed into one intimate and beautiful being. And, when they come to past the threshold of the epilimnion, the transference from grief to love is done— the grief-work is completed. Once in this illuminated state of understanding and processing, the speaker is able to address every encounter of love as a further opportunity to release grief: Love is to water as grief is to dirt. "Grief-Work", ultimately, acts as a nuanced decolonizing methodology by using love to combat postcolonial grief, to turn it on its head, and to push it out the door. This poem also goes to show how Diaz's alternative take on love poems— those of which include violence and grief, among other qualities— works so well as a decolonizing strategy, proving that love and connection can truly push past and prevail the most incessant of sorrows.

Viewing the two poems "How The Milky Way Was Made" and "Grief Work" side-by-side offers a compelling critical lens on postcolonial grief and love. "How the Milky Way Was Made", on the one hand, finds both the speaker and the reader fully enveloped in the site and subject of grief, where the speaker conclusively finds themself in the position of the coyote, still burdened by grief and imprisoned by their desires even though they are no longer on Earth. On the other hand, "Grief Work" offers love, desire, and the appreciation for the lover's body as a remedy for postcolonial grief. That, in engaging with and submitting oneself fully to their lover, they relinquish their grief and become whole again. The ordering of these poems within the collection, with "How The Milky Way Was Made" being in the middle of the collection and "Grief Work" being the last poem, as a whole is illuminating and exceptionally significant in terms of the journey of grief that the speaker goes through. The end of "How the Milky Way Was Made" is by no means a resolution. At most, it seems, the speaker is able to

begin processing their grief and evaluate their mourning. Nevertheless, by the end of the poem they view their desires as cause for their imprisonment and as exacerbating their sorrow up above. However, by positioning "Grief Work" later on, and, more specifically, as the last poem in the collection, Diaz changes her mind on the matter of love as it works against grief. Particularly, the thirst that was once viewed as encumberment in an eternity of grief is now flipped on its head and seen as the solution for grief. And, by these means, the speaker is freed from their circular prison, able to float freely along the waters of ʻAchii ʻahan nyuunye, simultaneously drinking the water of their lover, that of which they both envelop and partake in at the same time. This journey through and with love from grief-stricken to healed continues to demonstrate how Diaz's love poetry works as a most-effective decolonizing method, as the acceptance and embodiment of love and desire has allowed her speaker to retreat from and advance beyond the grief that has been placed onto them as a result of colonialism.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

With eyes and feet faced forward, it is time to walk the path that Diaz has created with her reinvention of the love poem. Diaz's inclusion of the aforementioned permeating binary oppositions throughout *Postcolonial Love Poem* has reinvigorated the love poem into an active, living presence of resistance. As such, Diaz has enhanced the "common" love poem and has given it a bite. This alternative form, that of which utilizes binary oppositions of violence, erasure, and grief to call attention to the ever-necessary decolonial efforts while simultaneously highlighting the Indigenous ability to love despite it all, transforms the love poem into a methodology that works into, through, and even beyond the political. As such, Diaz has created a blueprint from which the future is bright, restored, and decolonialized. Diaz's conceptions of the love poem as method of decolonization and tool of Native Survivance can work to enrich Native

studies by fostering love, connectivity, and harmony as instruments of resistance and mechanisms of strength and kinship. Diaz's collection ultimately proves that not only is love the solution, but it also acts as a shield of protection against postcolonial remnants. Remnants that, once obsolete, leave space for totalizing love and connection, the widespread nature of which has always and will always exist.

Works Cited

Bernard, Anna. “Decolonizing Comparative Literature.” *Comparative Critical Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2–3, Oct. 2023, pp. 151–173, https://doi.org/10.3366/ccs.2023.0478.

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

Naimon, David. “Between The Covers Natalie Diaz Interview.” *Tin House*, 26 July 2024, https://tinhouse.com/transcript/between-the-covers-natalie-diaz-interview/. Accessed 15 Dec. 2024.

Papa, Stephanie. “Translating the body-land union in Natalie Diaz’s poetry.” *Green Letters*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2 July 2020, pp. 237–251, https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2020.1844036.

Rangel, Nicole. “An examination of poetry for the people: A decolonizing holistic approach to arts education.” *Educational Studies*, vol. 52, no. 6, 13 Oct. 2016, pp. 536–551, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2016.1231680.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed, 2021.

Thomas, Héloïse. “‘All my loves / are reparations loves’: Decolonizing borders and reparative queerness in Natalie Diaz’s poetry.” *L’Ordinaire Des Amériques*, vol. 229, 2022, https://doi.org/10.4000/orda.8038.

Vizenor, Gerald Robert. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. University of Nebraska Press, 2023.