

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by Deborah A. Miranda, 2020

Speaker: Deborah A. Miranda

Date of recording: July 18, 2020

Location: Rockbridge Baths, Virginia, log cabin on the Maury River

Length: 16 minutes, 42 seconds

START OF RECORDING

[Salutation in Esselen]

[Deborah A. Miranda reads "Indigenous Physics: The Element Colonizatum"]

Deborah A. Miranda: Thinking about "Indigenous Physics," I am a little surprised, because it's not the kind of poem I usually write. I usually write something that is very lyrical, or has a narrative of some kind. I like storytelling. I like to be able to feel the microcosms of emotions. Thinking about how to, in many ways, retell a story. I spent much of my life living in a world that tried to erase me from it. And it was storytelling, it was writing, that pulled me out of it. So I've always followed that thread, that has been a thread that has continued to give me a great deal of strength in this world.

So I think one of the things that happened with this poem was that I had just finished reading Dian Million's book, *Therapeutic Nations*, and that book had a tremendous impact on how I saw healing from a kind of historical trauma. It was really interesting to me that Dian Million took this idea of historical trauma—which has been very empowering for many Native people—and she wrote a book that is all at once a scathing indictment of western psychological treatment of Indigenous trauma, and a powerful assertion of Indigenous ways of healing and knowing. Somehow in this book, Dian Million manages to master the kind of English that the academy requires, while at the same time infusing that language with Indigenous passion and empathy and anger. I felt like a part of my heart had been unlocked.

So, in this poem, the tone, the voice, is very didactic, it's like an insecure professor's lecture to undergrads—maybe deceptively so—or maybe it's a kind of futuristic report from an Indigenous scientist who seems to be trying to talk the talk of Western science, give that

Western jargon to his audience, or her audience, around this newly discovered element of the periodic tables—"Colonizantium."

I've always been a lover of people of color futurism, especially what Grace Dillon calls "Indigenous Futurisms." Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, Daniel Heath Justice's *Kynship Chronicles*, the film *Blood Quantum*, Joanne Barker's art—it makes me happy to read about or see Indians in the future. It seems like medicine, after generations of seeing Indians represented across every medium as dead or dying or living in such pain that we wish we were dead, right? So Indigenous futurism is about survivance, hope, sovereignty.

Imagining the future of this world from an Indigenous perspective and experience results in massively different tools and outcomes. Science, for example, has long been this Western, white, Euro-American-centric field—and so, a very limited slice of what the future of a diversely populated world might look like is what we see when we read mainstream futurism. The possibilities that Indigenous experience brings to a future are astounding. And, of course, writers like Linda Hogan (Chickasaw) and Robin Kimmerer (Potawatami) have created poems and essays that express exactly that—the epistemologies, the Indigenous ways of knowing, ancient and powerful connections between what the natural world gives us, and the medicines we need to heal ourselves, heal the earth—what the non-Indigenous Western world has always called science.

So I'm interested in that kind of border-crossing. But even more than that, an understanding that we already have everything we need to heal from trauma, and to heal our world from trauma. There is no miracle needed, no scientific discovery—instead, we need to re-learn what we already have in our hands, re-learn how to use the tools we've already been given that will take us into the future.

So, Indigenous Physics. I wanted to write my way into a new way of seeing historical trauma, and of seeing a way through it. My family on my dad's side came through the California missions: Mission Carmel, Mission Soledad, and Mission Santa Ynez. These missions were part of a systemic colonization of California by the Spanish and later Mexican governments and they lasted from 1769 to about 1835. In that short amount of time, maybe 70 years, the Indigenous peoples from Sonoma to San Diego suffered horribly. The deaths, alone—unimaginable—over 90 percent of the population perished from a combination of what that enslavement brought with it: European diseases, physical beatings and torture, psychological warfare, malnutrition and starvation, and of course, a kind of deep despair. It was genocide, though that word hadn't yet been invented. Following the end of the mission era, the few survivors were subject to out-and-out extermination, to use the governor of California's own word; between Mexican

ranches and American land-grabs both before and after statehood, California's Indians were left with multiple generations of trauma imbedded in our psyches. It affected every aspect of our lives: our mental health, our economic health, our ability to form healthy relationships with spouses and children and family members. Friends. My grandfather Tom Miranda was one of about 20,000 California Indians out of one million who survived missionization and/or colonization. And it's not as if the trauma suddenly stopped when he was born in 1903; it just continued to transform itself into new kinds of violence: racism in education, employment, medical care, housing. And of course, we internalized all that, and turned it against ourselves and against each other.

All of this thinking came together in this poem. I wanted to trace back in time not just the sources of our trauma, but the sources of our healing. I wanted to take what Dian Million says in her book and make it real: "We are not our trauma," she says, "We can work at healing without being victims. We can be damaged and still be sovereign." I love that quote. And I wanted the poem to say, here is our future: the tools of story, of dance, of song, and of dreaming, these are the seeds of the future. They will lead us where we need to be. They do the work that will help us transform the toxins of colonization into the strength necessary to bloom, to become nurturers, and to thrive. As I said, for me, writing has always been that thread of survivance—storytelling, whether it's in fiction, prose, poetry or sometimes a mix of them all—it's allowed me to rewrite myself into the world, it has given me roots that anchor me, it has helped me create community and be a better mother, a better daughter, a better wife, a better grandmother. That's why the poem's final lines are, "Start with story. Work your way home." If you own your own story, that's a beginning, and survival is all about beginnings.

[Salutation in Esselen]

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