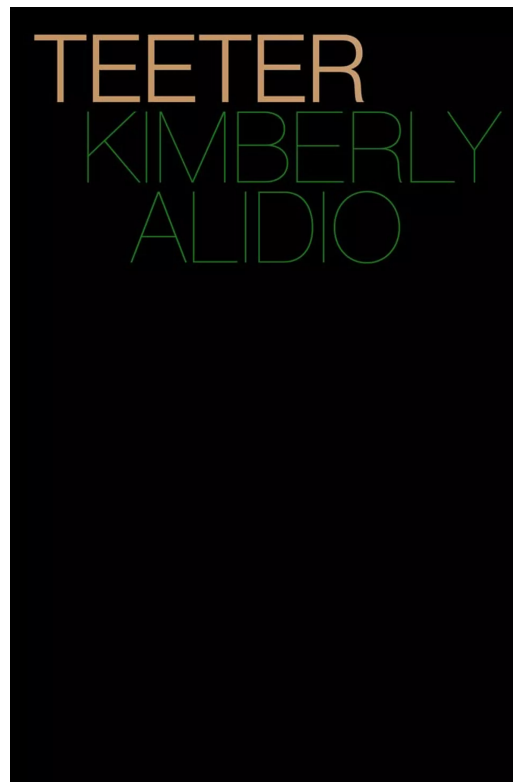




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# Above a Noise Floor: On Kimberly Alidio's "Teeter"

By Rebecca Teich • November 21, 2023



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*Teeter* by Kimberly Alidio

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TWO SPRINGS AGO in a reading group, participants insisted we read aloud Kimberly Alidio's (she/they) poem "dearest I'm writing from

inside this place to you who are in a totally different place” from her recent collection *why letter ellipses*. After the last word of the poem, there was a collective flush exhale: it felt as if their lines laid bare the very texture and contours of our entangled condition, so what more was there to say, and yet that articulation enabled new realms of what was possible to say.

Alidio's oeuvre confronts enmeshments, yearnings, and mediations of intimacy, relationality, and structures of power. With devotion to experimental language, Alidio's past works—including *after projects the resound* (Black Radish Books, 2016), *: once teeth bones coral :* (Belladonna\* Collaborative, 2020), and *why letter ellipses* (selva oscura press, 2020)—meld together rich archival research on 20th-century Filipinx diaspora with scenes of queer postcolonial domesticity and desire. *Teeter* (2023) extends these rich poetic inquiries, this time with sound at the heart of her exploration.

The smallest units of sound, called phonemes, are both the building blocks of Alidio's inquiry and the objects of interrogation. The many complex and at times contradictory significations and effects of phonemes, represented in writing as graphemes, interact and enmesh. These sonic layers of language reverberate throughout the book's three sections (“Hearing,” “Ambient Mom,” and “Histories”), as Alidio works through discourses of musicology, physics, psychoanalysis, coloniality, political economy, aesthetics, and beyond. Rather than reinscribe disciplinary boundaries, she weaves discourses together within the poetic line: “A language lost is returned to / quantum/ universe / The womb / realm / + everywhere / in dictionaries / on youtube / in the / ear that / longs.”

Alidio, born in the United States to Filipinx immigrants, often prefaces this collection as arising from her attempt to learn her mother's language, Pangasinan, which the maternal side of her family spoke yet in which she herself never acquired traditional fluency. Learning is no simplistic task for Alidio. They are wary of forms of pedagogy and knowledge that discipline the learner and commodify what is learned, well aware of colonialism's chokehold on language acquisition. They are uninterested in domesticating sounds, frequencies, and phonemes into legible categories of institutional knowledge and cataloging. Instead, Alidio yearns for acquiring intimacy with language that does not reproduce domination in either methods or content, as she writes:

The point of what you do is absolutely bound up with the person  
who rigorously  
& beautifully confounds the disciplinary foundations of the  
imperial university & who is a key contribution to ending that  
violence, transmitted to the edge of a former bed, by the angled  
narrow  
beam of sun & suspended dust, above a noise floor.

What are the multifaceted and multivalent routes through which we emit or receive utterance? What does it *really* mean to acquire or lack language? What are the unconventional ways we acquire knowledge through sound and noise? Alidio's quest to learn becomes less a narrative arc than a question that is also an offering to the reader.

The absence of conventional fluency, lost in diasporic translation-inheritance, becomes a cacophonous space from which underground knowledge propagates. In the third and final section of the book,

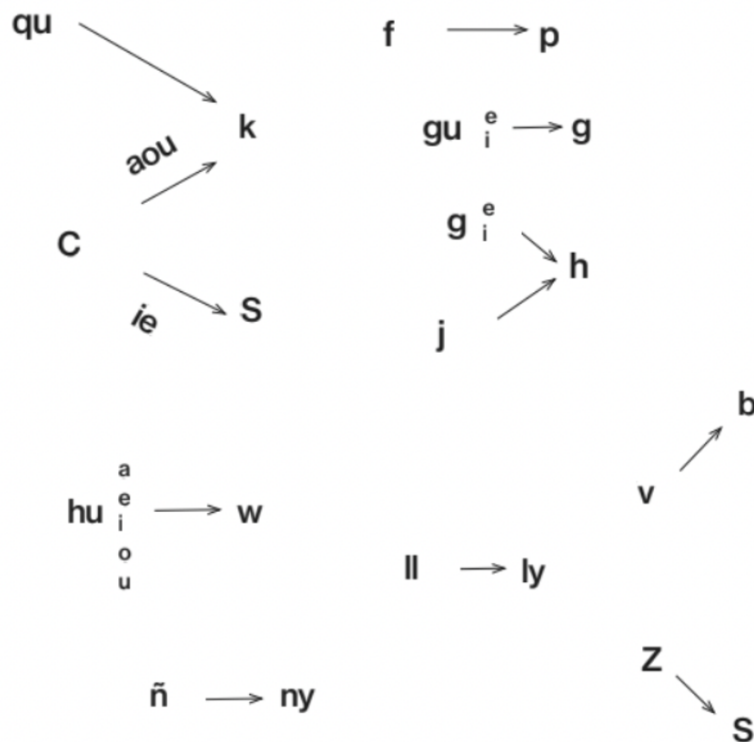
“Histories,” in one of the several poems titled “Autohistoriography of Arrival at a River,” Alidio writes: “A maternal language, because I don’t know it, is a landscape of land & sea, kinship, kitchens, unorthodoxies, rebellions, dramas of mystic devotion, intergenerational polyamory with the Virgin Mary.”

Alidio sounds the anti-institutional, undisciplined noise of kinship, rebellion, land, and sea. Through sonic-sense memory and somatic-psychoanalytic transference, we are welcomed into a “full-on underworld / in the subconscious real.” Both ambient subconsciousness and the physics of sound return us to the palpable and material. The oscillations of sonic frequencies become a way to understand movement through space and time; in fact, sound *is* movement through space, which *is* time, which *is* autohistoriography. The poet insists on the made-ness of sound; to “make noise” might be a metaphorical turn of phrase, but Alidio is interested in the fact that sound waves quite literally shape, contort, and construct the environment.

Diasporic sound waves also live under the uncertain threat of being disciplined into coherence or having forms of incoherence dismissed as silence. In a poem toward the beginning of the book, “A name intends where there is noise that soothes,” Alidio writes: “Limbed shadows get a bit uncertain / because layers are mostly dissonant. Cohering for a / moment & then not & overheard chatter begins again.” The poet inaugurates a practice of listening that refuses to reduce shadow, chatter, and dissonance to background noise. Noise and dissonance live at the surface of her syntax, where other poets might rely on harmony, clarity, and conventional naming.

The poems in *Teeter* cohere into legible words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs for a moment before presenting the reader with words that don't cohere into full sentences ("spittle / airplane sounds / blubber"), syllables that don't cohere into dictionary-recognized words ("Orge struct tici tizen ditches fant!"), letters that don't cohere into pronounceable sound ("you + mkr"). Alidio encourages us to "read" everything—words, letters, images, sounds, noise, chatter, and shadow.

By listening to what might at first sound like noise, reading what might at first look like non-words, readers enter into a playful space of practicing experimental meaning-making and literacies alongside Alidio. This might inaugurate a kind of listening akin to Alidio's own experience of regularly hearing the mother tongues their parents spoke but that they did not. Author and reader become co-conspirators in anti-authoritative reading practices beyond adherence to conventional lexicality.



/a/ /i/ /e/ /o/

/n/ /d/ /g/ /h/ /k/ /l/  
 /n/ /ñg/ /p/ /r/ /s/  
 /t/ /w/ /y/

Alidio's pages are noisy—often dense with blocks of language, diagrammatic visual poems, or lines that span the entire page vertically and horizontally. Alidio tunes into seemingly incomprehensible graphemes and phonemes, revealing how this noise is material that fills our world. To produce noise as foreground rather than background requires modalities of experiment.

Alidio sifts through the histories of avant-garde poetry in search of potential methods. *Teeter* performs a disidentificatory engagement with

what Alidio uncovers from 20th-century experimental poetic movements to activate an oppositional poetics (to borrow a term from “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics,” Erica Hunt’s [crucial essay](#) on innovative Black writing and feminist aesthetics), revealing and unseating the racialized, gendered, and sexual norms that constitute what is classified as sound and what as noise. Through poetry, rather than criticism or theory, *Teeter* presents a rich lesson on avant-garde poetic history, and, in doing so, offers a profound practice in animating minoritarian languages.

In the process of writing *Teeter*, Alidio [published an essay](#) titled “Language Poetry Soothes Me,” where she describes how she probes Language poetry for generative techniques, recycling and rethinking them without absolving the poetic movement’s pitfalls. The leftist avant-garde poetic movement, predominantly based in California and New York, originated in the 1970s and was invested in disarticulating normative structures of syntax and grammar and displacing the singular authority of the author by including the reader as a co-meaning-making agent. Language poetry asks: What are the ideological underpinnings that structure language and meaning-making? What grammar and syntax might resist, rather than reproduce, capitalist ideology? How is language an effect of the material world *and* an agent affecting it? Alidio asserts that Language poetry “may offer a set of practices relevant to our present catastrophe: a space beyond recognition, legibility, surveillance, conditioning, incentivization, and expectation.” They press forth to redirect and translate the movement’s ideology and provocations towards a queer postcolonial diasporic lens.

Alidio sifts through the Language poetry of Lyn Hejinian, the sound poetry of Tracie Morris, and the concrete poetry of N. H. Pritchard and

Johanna Drucker, treating phonemes, sound, and noise as material interactions that shape the world. It isn't only that the physics of sound waves reveal sound's material effects. Linguistic utterance is a dense archive that contains historical traces; Alidio peels back the layers to show how these histories and their structuring logics are sounded into a complex present. By teasing out how language can be a foot soldier that materializes ideology, Alidio illuminates the often insidious and contradictory workings of the academy and the populations it disciplines:

what is archived by a language is not  
 its working as it sort of lays down an empty track, a substratum  
 upon which focusing smearing finding in an improvisatory ear  
 brings us back to what is written, overheard registers channels  
 wordways branch headlong double-consciousness  
 of lineage + facture say

What hides behind a phoneme or grapheme? How do they circulate over and across time? What are the disorderly, radical, insidious, extractive, sensual effects of a word beyond, in spite of, or even counter to its definitional meaning?

*Teeter* tracks how language is contorted by structures of oppression, how a term's meaning might move and multiply across time, torqued by institutional grip on the ordering of meaning. The phonemes and graphemes precariously teeter back and forth, from institutional capture to queer, anti-colonial happenings that "exceed the structural violence." If capitalism thrives on the absorption of contradiction, Alidio reveals that such contradictions extend to the definitions and effects of words and phrases. Rather than absorb contradictions into illusory stability, the



book magnifies the teetering. Each utterance variously “reproduces, voices, becomes, uncovers, is revelatory, is unveiling” in an unsteady tango between capture and agency, order and disorder, love and grievance.

*Teeter* trains poetic ears to hear what queer, feminist, and critical race theorist Sara Ahmed theorizes as “nonperformative” language or “institutional speech acts” that “‘work’ precisely by not bringing about the effects that they name.” Alidio indexes lexical terms that have become nonperformatives through their use by academic, arts, and nonprofit institutions and therefore “no longer do it for” her, such as the terms “mutual aid,” “world building,” “representation matters,” and “imagining otherwise.” She is not arguing against, say, mutual aid itself, but is cautioning us about the term’s uptake (and defanging and resignifying) by institutions whose main aim is often to reproduce the institution. Ahmed uses the term “nonperformative” particularly to discuss higher educational and arts institutions’ dismissal and manipulation of complaints of institutional racism through institutional speech acts that claim to promote diversity/equity/inclusion while they actually retain the status quo, which she elaborates on in her 2021 book *Complaint!* Perhaps “complaint” by another name might be “making noise.” *Teeter* insists on staying with that noise. The title itself is noisy.

Many of Alidio’s poems, especially in the “Histories” section, revel in the perverse humor of the workplace that claims to stand against the structural violences it relies on: “Sardonic humor marks / the bind of naming a violation of some sort, probably work related, now named / *microaggression*.” Alidio wants to sound a language that can imagine and produce queer anti-colonial worlds of interstitial autonomy and ample

“femme plaid” while revealing that words sometimes do the opposite of what they seem to do.

*Teeter*'s capacious brilliance brings to light a poetics of friction that teaches us that language is also a site of struggle, noncompliance, humor, and beauty. The stakes are high and infused with a kind of phonemic magic. Language is material and transforms materiality. To believe in language as material and action is to believe it can enable access through unconventional routes just as much as it can blockade. Together, writer and reader are “floating in vibrosphere in / non-lexical togetherness,” a floating-space in which Alidio's speaker “tr[ies] to leave some / noise. Of opening toward mutual autonomy from / exchange value. A property relation between speaker & / word softens.”

Alidio produces work with the same commitment they bring to their world: listening to the sound, the noise, and what we might be trained to hear as silence. As she puts it, “Every utterance, to a certain ear, unmade & remade a world, was a portal to an existing world that remained hidden, fringe.” *Teeter* torques utterance into a revolution, a turning, a disordering of value on every conceivable level—semantic, syntactic, sonic. Alidio awakens us to how forms of colonial, cisheteronormative, and capitalistic valuation seep into the semantic value of sonic transmission. Between breath and speech, between phoneme and grammar, between lovers and haters, Alidio plots out the frequencies that are able to value and sustain an “art dyke / genderqueer life.” Their portaling poetics unmake and remake a world through the collaborative activity of language.

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