

# [Review – : once teeth bones coral : by Kimberly Alidio](#)

written by Guest Contributor | January 7, 2021



*: once teeth bones coral :* by Kimberly Alidio

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138 pages – poetry

Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse*, writes that the utterance *I-love-you* is “extralexical,” that it is a “linguistic feint... too phatic to be a sentence.” Vibrant with a wanton, affective charge, *I-love-you* does not represent or mean anything –rather, it is a gust of eros that bursts forth, messy but warm and sensual. More than an illocutionary act, Barthes sees *I-love-you* as what he calls a *proffering*, through which desire is neither repressed nor recognized, but simply “released, as an orgasm.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Every word in *: once teeth bones coral :*, Kimberly Alidio's new book of poetry from Belladonna\*, is saturated with this extralexical intensity, calling attention to language's sonic and somatic resonance when it becomes estranged from familiar linguistic contexts. In this collection, words spread out across the page, *released* from the strictures of grammar and syntax. Further, each poem's title is bracketed by a pair of colons, as if locked in a lover's embrace, lending physical shape to the sense of proffering that underlies the book. Here, punctuation and language are too phatic to cohere into sentences; rather, they ask to be read aloud, to be physically felt. Before it coagulates into semantic meaning, after all, an utterance is first and foremost produced in the body, in the vibrations of the throat.

In “: pours pore :”, Alidio writes,

propelling

diaphragm

depth

hear

bodies

vibration

chest

Minimal and spare, the formal arrangement of Alidio's poetry not only flattens language into pockets of individual words and phrases, it topples presumed hierarchies between the written word and blank space, silence and noise, abstraction and affect, and reorganizes them into what she calls "proprioceptive / gradients." As the wordplay in the title of this poem suggests, Alidio sees language not as static but dynamic, continually in flux, and anchored to the body: where "pour" conjures up the calming thrum of a rainy day, "pore" brings to mind the sensitivity of our skin against another's touch. Propelled from the chest and into the physical world, language is thus intimately bound to and endlessly evocative of the body.

Couched in Alidio's poetry, then, is an insistence on the interconnectedness between body and word. To that end, Alidio's approach to language is consonant with Barthes' rumination on *I-love-you*, a connection the poet explicitly acknowledges,

whisper

first

time

phrase

Barthes

truly

phatic

Like Barthes, Alidio is interested in language that is "truly / phatic," language that need not be organized into sentences for it to be fraught with signification. For Alidio, however, this affective immediacy is not limited to choice phrases, such as the lustful whisper of *I-love-you*. Instead, she pulls language apart and throws it in disarray, reaching for an amorous core and bringing it to the surface, amplifying it.

Despite the scope of such a project, Alidio's focus remains pointedly precise, fixed to forms of togetherness, kinship, and belonging occluded from master narratives. The figure of the "oriental woman," for instance, crops up only twice—once in the second poem, ": nightstand rubberplant :", and once in the fifth poem, ": wave reverse :"—yet her presence bookends the collection and highlights the polysemic density of Alidio's textual patterning,

oriental

woman

machine

distinguish

one

man

(": nightstand rubberplant :")

orientalwoman

isnomore

thanmachine

makesno

distinguishbetween

oneman&another

(": wave reverse :")

Where the first instance is marked by the spaciousness of its form, the second closes this distance and introduces new words into the mix, rendering the passage more immediately legible while still skewing conventional modes of syntax and grammar. In the notes that she appends to the end of the book, Alidio describes the collection as "an attempt to undo in language the normative relations of self to lover, landscape, and loss." In this light, then, the reappearance of the "oriental woman" reflects an impulse to break down and rebuild language from its smallest unit—a word, a phoneme—in a way that more closely rhymes with a nonnormative, diasporic subjectivity.

Alidio's dispersive poetics allies itself with the poet's decolonial politics. As Trinh T. Mihn-ha teaches us, "*Clear* expression, often equated with *correct* expression, has long been the criterion set forth in treatises on *rhetoric*, whose aim was to order discourse so as to *persuade*."<sup>[2]</sup> But Alidio refuses to be persuaded. If clear expression is a colonial instrument to codify its own hegemony, it follows that the voices of the subaltern hide in its lacunae—those utterances that are "truly / phatic," such as a sigh, a

stutter, a scream. This political intent is most forcefully articulated in the penultimate poem, poignantly titled “: continent reverence :”,

nativetoyou

inhabitantofyou

soastobeentitledtomaintenance

soastobechargeableuponyou

deservedbyyou

pertaintoyou

inthepowerofyou

atyourdisposal

yourconcern

yourproperbusiness

residentofproperplace

The direct address here evokes an accusation or a plea, tonally registering the hazardous conditions of survival when one is at the disposal of this unnamed “you”—which could be the reader, an uncaring lover, the titular “continent,” or an oppressive state—that does not recognize one as their “properbusiness.” The interplay between the expanse of empty space on the page and the tautness of the words pressed together further intensifies this sense of precarity, as if the speaker is anxious that she cannot get all the words out before she is cut off. In turn austere and vulnerable, the poem proffers itself, demanding restitution and asking to be loved.

Alidio contravenes clear expression’s tendency to reify violence by emphasizing poetry’s radical alterity and its allegiance with the sonic and the somatic. In the final poem of the collection, “: hand axiom :,” she writes,

desire

saysfuckyou

deliberate

throw

energy

fling

practice

force

presence

overthrow

distract

internalized

limit

If “desire / saysfuckyou,” so does Alidio’s poetry. Pregnant with momentum and projective energy, it throws itself against the “internalized / limit” imposed by grammatical rules with abandon. And, like desire, it is also full of tenderness—for “fling” suggests not only a bodily movement forward but also a romantic affair. To reinvent the relation between body, language, and land is to struggle, but it is always a labor of love. In the end, a decolonial project is a utopic one, too.

“: hand axiom :” continues,

low

murmur

purr

echo

noncontent

utopia

literal

Murmurs, purrs, and echoes are the noncontent of clear expression; they convey affect instead of semantic meaning, attuned to what Alidio describes elsewhere as “emotional prosody.”[\[3\]](#) They are also what makes utopia literal: both on the page and beyond. This noncontent signals not an absence, but

instead a fecund opening, where alternative ways of conversing, being, and belonging are palpably within reach.

It is no surprise, then, that Alidio concludes her collection with a sense of evocative, composite wholeness: “phatic intimacy / sentence.” First dislodged from syntactical conventions, language—in the form of phatic utterances—is here regathered into a new kind of sentence, one that reverberates with possibilities of otherness and recalls the very first lines with which the book begins: “everytiny / living / material.” As with every tiny living material, language is here fleshed out. It comes to life, susceptible to injury, decay, but also change and growth—with : *once teeth bones coral* :, we feel it, too.

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[1] Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 149.

[2] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) 16.

[3] Kimberly Alidio, “My Native Language is Noise” *Poetry Foundation*, September 15, 2020.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2020/09/my-native-language-is-noise>



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