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PUBLICATIONS > THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER  
> #265 — SUMMER 2021

# Kimberly Alidio in Conversation with Vi Khi Nao

Friday, October 2, 2020

- About
- Events
- Learning
- Publications
- The Poetry Project Newsletter
- The Recluse
- The Brannan Prize
- House Party

Vi Khi Nao: How was your Zoom meeting? Are you hungry?

Kimberly Alidio: It was fine. I met with Farid Matuk for an independent study on poetry translation. I just ate avocado toast with sardines on top. Did you eat?

VKN: I have—rice with tofu and sauteed tomatoes. Speaking of rice, can you talk a little about jasmine rice? The aroma of it? If not?

KA: It is the best smell in the world!

Kimberly Alidio



Kimberly Alidio (she/they) is the author of *Teeter* (Nightboat Books), *why letter ellipses* (selva oscura press), *: once teeth bon...*

Vi Khi Nao

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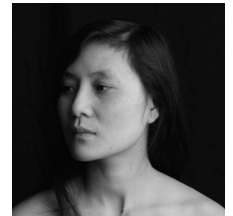
VKN: Isn't it? Why is that, do you think? In one of your interviews you mentioned jasmine rice and I recall feeling so at home to hear you just mention it.

KA: How do I transcribe how I'm laughing gleefully right now? All I know is the brilliant genius of fragrant rice. It goes so well with all kinds of other things. What comes to my mind is wet.

VKN: Is your *: once teeth bones coral :* fragrance-able like rice? Does it even have the possibility of wetness?

KA: The space on the page might be able to carry all kinds of sensory engagements. Your question makes me think of rice fields. But I hesitate here to say that there's that kind of landscape in the book. The landscape is actually a place, a region that's the Southwest. Central Texas is wet, for sure, especially relative to Southern Arizona.

VKN: When you mentioned rice fields I immediately think of wet history or wet diaspora and then I think it can be a very sapphic thing to associate or say, as indicated by "*: wave reverse :*," the fifth poem in your poetry collection. It's in this poem that we see the first departure from a space without conjunctions, pronouns, and into language that could be colonizable whereas the four other poems before it occupy a different



Vi Khi Nao is the author of seven poetry collections & of the short stories collection, *A Brief Alphabet of Torture* (winner of the 2016 F...

space. How do you feel about that shift? From Language Poetry to Land Poetry where sounds and words have relations now as opposed to being solitary figures with little history to their relationship to time.

KA: If there are shifts in my book, they happen without my deliberation. The book does move more than I could have imagined, given its structure. “ : wave reverse : ” includes an engagement with Maya Deren’s *At Land*. If I remember correctly, there is a reversed wave in it. Thinking of film, I’m reminded of your *Sheep Machine*, which tracks minute action, sound and land. Is there an Asian-Pacific migratory force in our transposition of “wet diaspora” and “wet history” onto an arid landscape?

VKN: Tucson, Arizona is fairly dry like the desert here in Vegas, yes,? May I ask how you maintain a sense of wetness in such dryness—not just aquatically, but poetically and sapphically?

KA: You’re in the Mojave, I think?

VKN: I am.


KA: I imagined deserts most of my teenage years. I grew up on the East Coast.

VKN: Baltimore, yes? What was Baltimore like? You were born there? Will Maryland

ever have the final say on how you exist on the liminal pages of your poems after you are no longer there?

KA: As a way to mark where I am and my loyalties to place, I'm plugged into the mournful, enraged watching of climate change and drought in the Sonoran Desert. There were supposed to be monsoons that haven't appeared in force since I got here in 2018. It's bone dry. Baltimore, on the Chesapeake Bay, is humid and wet. Salt and crabs. My mother's province in the Philippines has been translated as "place of salt."

VKN: One of my favorite passages from your book occurs on page 65. I would excerpt it, but your spacing seems very important here. There is salt in this rock-shaped bubble created by my pen and of course the way you introduce the soundlessness of torso in relationship to night before taking us to the bottom half of such salt only to slice us later with pelvis and grapefruit.

 A photo of a page from why letter ellipses with a passage in the center circled where the words spread out across the page.

I feel some of your salt-Baltimore sensibility here. Despite the solitary and singularity of each word, you have managed to offer so much time and

torso and tenderness and salt to something that we normally would not associate with grapefruit. I am moved to ask how you edit any of your poems but particularly your “ : wave reverse : .” Is it an organic process for you?

KA: I believe so much in the open-endedness of poetry and in the difficult magic of conversation. It’s incredible for me to be hearing your experience with the book.

My father told me the story of the mythical creature, the manananggal, whose upper half separates from the rest of their body at dusk to prey on sleeping women—much like the police do now but in a many-bodied corps—and returns to their lower half at dawn. Someone figured out that if you sprinkle salt on the lower half, the manananggal can’t come back together as a body.

VKN: What would you sprinkle salt on in our existing COVID life? So that something doesn’t come back as a body? Again.

KA: Filipina feminist diasporic literature has featured this creature and myths in general. I think what I’m doing in this passage is performing the thinking and feeling processes of working with everyday monsters. Maybe my poem is the salt. It might also be a camouflage. A

straightforward re-telling in a “colonizable language,” as you say, feels less powerful and dangerous than it could be.

For you, is there an ethnic/ national/ cultural archive that feels somehow at odds with your poetry and writing? Or unbothered by it? Is there any sense of Vietnamese “heritage” that floats and flies around your own writing?

VKN: The sprinkle salt question. I edit like someone who has been in a house guarded by the communists, and I have only seconds to extract what I need the most to survive. Everything else has to go. Is diaspora a type of forced minimalism? I often think about this regarding your amount of space that is available in your work. In your poetic work. Particularly in : *once teeth bones coral* : .

KA: My view of diaspora is maximalism, actually. Hoarding. Compensating.

VKN: I have been told by numerous women that maximalism is their way to combat. They also mentioned compensating. And, I, who have a non-hoarder complex, see all impulses of diaspora as minimal. They have to leave so much behind by force. Compensating makes sense.

KA: Your impulses? I love the “minimalist” formalism in your writing. It feels to me

that the choices to empty out or to accept the emptiness of diaspora are necessary.

VKN: Is editing maximally related? I wish I could jasmine rice everything.

KA: Me too, actually. There are semi-maximalist texts that I wrote and then exploded to make : *once teeth bones coral* : . I've been saying in readings lately that the book is a cross between New Narrative and Language Poetry. There were a lot of prose pieces, emails, journal entries, lists, tarot readings, etc.

VKN: Why did you expatriate them out of the book? Are they homeless now?

KA: You can see some of the iterations of the text published online. I tried many, many forms. I was very frustrated by syntax. What were words doing without being ordered and arranged by she, I, they, under, in ...? My arrangement in the book is according to some sort of function: what's a noun, what's a verb, adjective? What refers to the body, to "nature," to "concept." And all the functions have their own columns. I'm incredibly happy that the last resort made something that felt more meaningful to me than any other attempt.

VKN: Is this how you keep the rice field wet in Tucson? Do you have a favorite noun or verb or adjective that you can't

resist? And, what about syntax frustrates you? Can words in titles express our inadvertent furtive favoritism?

KA: Maybe words are carved-out hollows with their own sounds and meanings. The irrigation, as it were, was a one-time thing. I ordinarily have no problem with syntax at all. All the texts I made and worked related to changes and transformations that had no discernible beginning and end. In those cases, prepositions were trying to say what came before what and what was underneath what. I stopped believing them. I didn't have a lot of ambitions for this manuscript, for the book. I kind of wanted to process it, get it over with, and move on. It's funny—and amazing—that it seems now more generative than final.

VKN: Funny? As in reverse?

KA: Writing seems to commemorate or document in a way that the thing of it is left behind and what we read is the husk. Yes, it's a reversal.

VKN: If what you finalize isn't husk and social distancing is forcing all brief encounters to wear a mask, what vessel should the metaphor of your mind occupy in order to give the other unhusked parts of your soul to want to emerge into existence? We create all sorts of



products for our imagination, some of which are more process than product, if process is a type of product, how will the soul find ambition to continue in a space that values dividends over statements of existence?

KA: I love this difficult question.  
(thinking...)

VKN: Thinking with you, Kimberly.

KA: I've gone to a few mediums, astrologers, and tarot readers in my life. A recurring recommendation for me has been to work with a person who does soul retrieval. Haven't done it, although I'm in Jungian therapy right now. Only recently have I accepted that I might have a soul, period. It's been very convenient to tap into postmodern theories and vipassana Buddhist philosophies that there is no soul. It seemed even ethical to not have one. But lately I think I do have one. It's experienced psychological deaths several times. I'm not necessarily interested in resurrection or reincarnation, but I have to do a lot of mourning and anger work. What does poetry have to do with that? Some people would say: Everything.

VKN: What is your definition of psychological death? Did you experience it while creating : *once teeth bones coral*

: ? If not, which book of yours did you experience this with?


KA: Survival in the diaspora involves a shutting down of parts that is a real death. For me, it was in childhood. Writing *: once teeth bones coral :* had little to do with feeling, experiencing, or having any psychological death. It was perhaps writing from those spaces that I can have a healthy alienation from language, history, progress, healing. I also dislike the easy connection between poetry and healing, but that is another topic I won't try to TED Talk my way through.

VKN: Why do you think you have a soul? What do mourning and anger entail? Is this your way of writing authoritatively?

KA: I think I've come to understand that I existed as a child, so it's easier to feel that I have a soul. Like other vulnerable folks, some emotions have led to dangerous situations. So it's work to have them. Often, the emotions involve grief and anger. I'm amazed by how many ways I have to deflect them or to perform them. I think an authority is gained, for sure, with a kind of gnostic sense, a knowledge that is sensed before thought. That probably is related to accepting my soul-ness. And there's the connection to writing, yes.

VKN: When I think of healing, I think of your crystals. Can you talk about them? Would you ever match each crystal to each page of this poetry collection? Would you give them concrete absence? Concrete sound? Concrete sedimentary soliloquy?

KA: A rock for each page would be intense! The entire book, though, is apatite.

 A close-up of a wooden bowl full of apatite, a blue mineral

The anchoring quotation by Lorine Niedecker, “Your teeth and bones were once coral,” seems to refer to apatite, which does have some chemical properties found in bones and coral. It’s used energetically to dissolve alienation and as an interface between matter and consciousness. I’ve thought about the book as various shades of blue. Belladonna\* press materials keep reminding me that “coral” is a color.

VKN: That is so gorgeous!! Would you use something that is used in the manufacturing of fertilizer? Did you want your poem to grow a tree? A grapefruit tree? Some earrings that look like jasmine rice? Is coral a color, Kimberly?

KA: The fertility of the book? All of those growing things would be a dream. I’m not sure how gendered I want to get here,

but millennial coral pink seems to be the way to go with this book. It's blue—so it may be wet.

VKN: All of your poems from : *once teeth bones coral* : seem to embody the emotional and spatial impulses seen in the title from Julie Tolentino's *Echo Valley*, the art you used for the cover of this collection. How did you decide on this cover? When I first saw the cover, I thought: All of these threads look like hair—are these all the hair of all Kimberly's lovers since the birth of her existence?

KA: Vi!!! I'm a bit obsessed with the thickness and deep color of Filipinx hair. My first book has the photographer Gina Osterloh's work as the cover. And since it is a figure with black hair covering her face, I've been asked whether it's me posing on the cover. So there must be some draw there to Julie Tolentino's *Echo Valley*. Yongho Kim photographed Julie's *Raised by Wolves*, an installation piece which includes *Echo Valley*. It takes place in Commonwealth and Council, a Koreatown, LA gallery which fosters community and care among artists who are predominantly Black, of color, and queer. Along those lines, Julie Tolentino is incredibly generous as an artist and a person. Her transformative cover art is a blessing to the book. I enjoy working with artists to pair my work with theirs. My third book, *why letter ellipses*, features a

piece by Jenifer K. Wofford, *doubledurian*,  
*stage 2*.

VKN: I am so glad your work is in conversation with these great artists.

KA: Minimalist + maximalist!

VKN: Speaking of collaboration—do you pursue collaborative work with your partner, Stacy? Is her body symmetrical? Does the left side of her body in mirrored conversation with her right side? It is easier to notice our lover's symmetrical composition when we have more time to spend with them. With COVID, how is your symmetry and her symmetry?

KA: The queer middle-aged body is definitely assymetrical. No, that's an exaggeration. But it's wonderful to be a queer artist in middle age, when there's very little normativity and a lot of flux. Stacy's sixth book, *Famous Hermits*, and my *why letter ellipses* (my third book) speak to one another pretty explicitly. I'm going to put it out there that it would be a fun project for anyone to read them together. I have to say that I steal more from her than she does from me, but we appear in each other's books almost symmetrically. Quarantine has been a good incubator.

VKN: Is Quarantine love difficult? Or just what you need the most? How do you

cut the apple pie of each other's time?  
Who should take the first bite? And, who  
leaves the crumbs for the mice?

KA: The love isn't difficult. Most  
everything else is. We have enough  
apartment space, thanks to the relative  
affordability of Tucson. Perhaps the way  
we eat is symmetrical, too. Our writing  
spaces are at the opposite ends of the  
apartment, which helps.

VKN: Jasmine rice is so symmetrical,  
Kimberly.

KA: Yes, it is, Vi. So much. The other day,  
I found a dried jasmine rice kernel on  
Stacy's collar and thought: Now this is an  
Asian household.

VKN: How endearing and romantic! She  
must be saving it for breakfast?

KA: Hoarder!

VKN: Clearly! If you could guide the  
reader to tackle your book, which poem  
or page would you suggest they dive in?  
And, is there a word or a line or a  
passage in your book that is like finding a  
dried jasmine rice kernel on the collar of  
your poem?

KA: The go-to poem in the book is “ :  
continent reverence : .” But “ : wave  
reverse : ” has been the most  
pleasurable to read so far. The line that

is most like a dried-out jasmine rice  
kernel is: “flashV/ greenyblue.”

VKN: I have seen quite a few videos of you reading. You read with such exquisite good pace. Not too rushed. Not too slow. You seem to understand your page’s and line’s cadence. Do you practice frequently or do your words memorize your tongue and the roof of your mouth before everything else gets cleared and settled?

KA: It might be what I can enjoy after so much time working with the language.

VKN: If your “ : wave reverse : ” were a person, would you wave that person towards you or away from you?

KA: I’d like it to be a socially distanced encounter. We’d bring our bodies into the conversation, gesticulating to compensate for our masked faces, knowing we’re ever connected across our respective pods.

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#265 — Summer 2021

(1/2) Next

Director’s Letter    Poet, Publisher,    “in tune with    BRANNAN PRIZE

Kyle Dacuyan

Mensch: earth”

Michael Chang

A

In Memoriam  
for Gary

Remembrance

learned by  
Greg Masters

of

Robert

Hershon

by Joanna  
Fuhrman

Poems  
from  
Radii

Tessa Bolsover

Two  
Poems

tash nikol

Kimberly  
Alidio in  
Conversation  
with Vi  
Khi Nao

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Passion

A conversation  
between poet  
Allison Cobb  
and performer  
Alex Tatarsky

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Jean  
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Late  
Human  
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Contagion

Brenda Iijima  
Interviews  
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Mallika  
Singh  
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(1/2) [Next](#)

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