



POETRY FOUNDATION

ESSAY

What Home Is Isn't That

In *The Diaspora Sonnets*, Oliver de la Paz explores immigration in personal and linguistically patterned lyrics.

BY KIMBERLY ALIDIO

In early June, as I prepared to write this essay, several texts related to diasporic art crossed my social media feed. Among them was Aruna D'Souza's review of *Black Noodles*, the artist Rina Banerjee's show at Perrotin New York. D'Souza noted that during the late spring of 2023, four artists who gained attention in the 1990s for "assemblage and collage that crossed borders and histories" had concurrent exhibitions in New York City: Wangechi Mutu at the New Museum, Sarah Sze at the Guggenheim, Shahzia Sikander at Madison Square Park, and Rina Banerjee. These women are "diasporic bricoleurs whose art is not about cultural origins or destinations so much as the idea of movement itself," D'Souza wrote.

The term *diaspora* relates to, but is distinct from, other words describing the circulation of people around the world: *refugee*, *exile*, *immigrant*, *transnational*, *cosmopolitan*, *global*, *minoritarian*, and *post-colonial*. This list of related terms generates a range of moods and modes: exilic

suffering, immigrant nostalgia, migrant laboring, and what the scholar Stuart Hall has called “always-postponed ‘arrival.’” Translated as “scattering,” *diaspora* invites us, more so than the concepts of exile, immigration, and globalization, to make something of objects, ideas, and feelings that are scattered. The “bricolage” of art such as Banerjee’s, for example, takes on new sculptural forms that reflect diaspora’s more-chaotic crosscurrents. Ariel Resnikoff and Divya Victor, two poets who recently published a conversation in *The Brooklyn Rail*, “Interdiasporic Frequencies,” deploy a poetic language “in translation of ourselves & others, splicing & dicing in the doubling of writing & speech.” The thick referentiality and capacious inclusivity of diasporic art give a particular depth and breadth to the experience of inhabiting any one time and place: the past and the future converge in the present, as do places of origin and migration.

Oliver de la Paz’s sixth collection, *The Diaspora Sonnets* (Liveright, 2023), is a fascinating contribution to diasporic aesthetics. Compared to the accretive, organic quality of Wangechi Mutu’s collages, for example, *The Diaspora Sonnets* is a poetry machine running through a selection of small, sensory-rich moments in a family’s migration experience.

References to large-scale global structures of colonialism and economic imperialism—characteristic of the diasporic art discussed so far and also relevant to de la Paz’s family history—are muted, or, more precisely, transmuted into a personal lyric of family and place. Born in Manila and raised in the remote high deserts of eastern Oregon, de la Paz emigrated

to the United States as a child in the 1970s. His family moved for a time along Pacific Northwest migratory labor routes. Immigration is a linear story of departure and arrival, but *The Diaspora Sonnets* does not tell it straight, so to speak: moments of familial upheaval before and after emigration arise and return as recurring primal scenes. The very title of de la Paz's collection indicates the layered intricacies of his family history and his poetic craft.

As suggested in a poem titled "Diaspora Sonnet Imagining My Father at Camp Crame Again, in a Line Stretched for a Mile," de la Paz's poetic form takes hold of the recursive haunting of a primal scene of loss: Camp Crame was a facility for detaining and torturing political dissidents during Ferdinand Marcos's military dictatorship in the Philippines (1972–1986). The sonnet returns to the dictator's prison to find a poignant, surreal moment when the speaker's father is waiting in line. There is "small talk" in the orderly queue of detainees and other notes on the banality of militarism. Anger and anguish are carefully measured out in ironic, sensitive details of memory: "And the dust / had its own voice which made the wait all the more // beautiful and sepia." De la Paz's sonnet on a family's key pre-migration scene of politically repressive violence is lyrical but dispassionate.

During Marcos's regime and beyond, Philippine government policies—namely ongoing, violent, sociopolitical repression and a labor migration program—structured the Filipina/x/o diaspora (in this essay, I will use Filipina/x/o and Filipino interchangeably). According to the CIA and the

United Nations, the Philippines is one of the world's largest sources of emigrant labor: for many years, the country's Overseas Filipino Worker program has exported Filipinos to more than 200 countries, mainly in the Middle East and Asia. And, as portrayed by Dolly de Leon in the 2022 dramedy *The Triangle of Sadness*, many *do* work on luxury ships. A good deal of writing and art referencing the Filipina/x/o diaspora conveys a racial, postcolonial melancholia borne of the forces of repressive regimes, catastrophes, and violence.

The cover art of de la Paz's book ties his collection to Filipino art engaged with protesting such conditions. The figures on the cover make up the central panel of a mural-sized triptych that the Filipino artist Antipas Delotavo painted in 2007. First exhibited at Manila's SM Megamall, the oil painting features a larger-than-life sea of people moving en masse. In 2008, Manila-based poet Marne Kilates wrote an ekphrastic response to Delotavo's mural: "Between them and us, a widening / Gulf, no matter how we cling to memories / Like flotsam. For we do not know, / Or refuse to know who, between them and us, / Are the survivors of a wreck." In this farewell poem, Kilates's speaker is a rooted observer of diasporic dispersion. Another viewer, another poet, might feel pulled along by the moving crowd. Imagining the spaces, time zones, geographies, and temporalities of *diaspora* is a matter of position and orientation. How can one represent a condition made by comings and goings, by border-crossings and morphing languages, by shifting perspectives and recombinations?

By way of response, de la Paz arranges diasporic movements and memories into poetic patterning. Although *diaspora*, with its connotations of constant dispersal, tends to convey a heuristic method of figuring out the world as one goes, *The Diaspora Sonnets* engages poetry's fixed forms and its rule-based procedures to organize confusing elements of migration into a functional design for the speaker to imagine scenes before his birth, re-create a child's sensory experience of place, and pose questions to and about a non-communicative father.

Despite the book's title, *The Diaspora Sonnets* is not restricted to the sonnet form. There are three pantoums and three poems titled "Chain Migration," an innovative form of seven to eight quatrains with an ABAB rhyme scheme. The sonnets themselves are composed in seven couplets. De la Paz orders the three poem forms into three sections further ordered sequentially: an opening "chain migration" poem, a sequence of between 22 and 29 sonnets, and a closing pantoum. The presence of other poetic forms disrupts what otherwise would have been a sonnet cycle. Because the final line of one sonnet does not become the opening line of the next, readers don't grapple with a crown of sonnets in each section. As in functional design, each poem form performs a specific task in opening, closing, and setting patterns of rhyme and repetition.

Where any one of de la Paz's expressly named pantoums and sonnets engages loosely (or "brokenly") in formal sonic and rhythmic structure, his overall sequencing of recurrent words and images creates a system of nested, interlocking containers. In a 2018 interview for *The Kenyon*

Review, de la Paz speaks of “pattern-making found in many of these traditional forms” and “utilizing those remnant traits in a mode that’s efficient and artful for their idiomatic expression in the present moment.” The “remnant traits” of the pantoum’s alternating lines shape the collection as a whole. It’s significant here to note that the Malay-language *pantun* circulated for five centuries across maritime Southeast Asia, including in the southern Philippines, and migrated to 19th-century France, where it became the *pantoum*.

The Diaspora Sonnets portrays both a lulling stasis (silence, absence, and unreadable landscapes) and an activating impulse to remember through the senses. In the opening poem, “Chain Migration I: Airport Coin-Op Food,” the child is silently at odds with the father, whose motivations to move the family out of the Philippines remain opaque:

The airport noise:
my sense of Father’s schemes—

a dense commotion. Gleaming walks
where heels click-clacked—endless
to my childish sense of things.

A lack of family intimacy is compounded by the way the airport overwhelms the child who can no longer remember his hometown, a city some 14 miles from the Manila airport:

Back

where home was, a blankness.

The streets of Marikina crammed
behind my eye somewhere,
or lost in pockets stuffed with crumbs
of airplane crackers.

The airport's chaotic din and "endless" maze of terminals index the father's immigration "schemes," and the concrete paraphernalia of leaving—pockets and luggage—replace the newly abstract concept of home.

Upon arrival in a new town, the speaker's father does his fatherly thing of attempting to fix up a rundown apartment into a setting for familial survival and bonding. This attempt is expressed in linguistic terms: "My father's words, shaky foundations: / shelter was a noun in sentences racing // past my ears. The verb was family—/ the object, swept and scrubbed, leaving no trace." The sonnet refuses to romanticize or skip over the alienated moments of migrant domesticity. The "shaky foundations" of the father's syntax are steadied by formal couplets.

Whether in the isolation of the high desert camp in Oregon or in the confused silence and script of the overseas phone call "[b]ack / where home was," the speaker's family strives to read the changing landscapes and design daily procedures for living in them. "I am bewildered by miles of nothing, / germinating landscape gifted to me," says the speaker of "Diaspora Sonnet in the Great Sage Desert with Thistle, Pyrite, and

Nothing Else.” According to psychology, *algorithms* exist in everyday life in the form of morning routines and recipes. “Chain Migration II: On Negations and Substitutions” represents the brokenness and repair of diasporic domestic life:

Not the tamarind. But instead/ lemon

...

Not nipa mats on floors for beds / but rather frames

...

Sometimes/ what home is ... isn't that.

The process of substitution reveals both creative potential and loss in making a life out of constant movement. This dynamic tension is sustained by poetic repetition. Across the book's three sections, de la Paz returns again and again to place and landscape: Camp Crame; Marikina, Metro Manila; Eastern Oregon; Malheur County; Fruitland, Idaho; the Snake River; I-84; the Columbia River Gorge.

Highlighting language's functions of negation and affirmation, the poems' speaker continually draws readers' attention to the relatively reduced, minimalist landscapes of the diasporic condition. Oregon's high desert stands in contrast to the sensory engulfment of metro Manila. “Diaspora Sonnet as a Prayer in Spite of Migration and Absence” inhabits the litany: “In absence of blackbirds”; “In absence of heat”; “In absence of home / let there be a skein of geese arrowing / past.” The poems' patterned withholding is curiously relentless. Perhaps *The Diaspora Sonnets* joins

other Asian American diasporic art in insisting on absence and silence to, as scholar Vivian L. Huang proposes in *Surface Relations* (2022), “protect a creative space and time in which minoritized lifeworlds may exist for their own audience.”

The speaker discourages, or at least delays, readers' desire to make meaning of sensory experience and instead emphasizes what's opaque or beyond easy understanding. De la Paz begins his poem titles with one of three phrases—“Chain Migration,” “Diaspora Sonnet,” or “Pantom Beginning and Ending”—and adds lengthy modifying phrases. A few poem titles declare a similar theme: “and Nothing Else,” “and Nothing Special,” “Because There's No Place to Go,” “with No Place to Be,” and, finally, “with Nothing to Do.” With this titling style, the poet seizes the power of negation to point out what is *not* worthy of attention.

The limits of knowledge and speech open the “sage desert” into allegorical space. In “Diaspora Sonnet Unwinding into the Horizon,” a life before migrating beckons in the transitioning cycle of dusk, when sight blurs into sound.

Just there above the horizon line, out

into the beyond, unwinding into ordered
hues, gradations of memory where one

belonged. More than a lifetime ago, there
in the ardor of dusk, it's there, higher

than your reach. It is the soft pad in the ear,
walking among the grasses, beyond here.

These lines recall sound artist Pauline Oliveros's instruction: "Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears." Here, an elsewhere-life is beyond the bounds of diasporic location but also immediate in the vibrations earthbound bodies feel. Echoic memory, or the short-term recall of what one has just heard, is a key for representing a global soundscape.

From the archipelago a sound. It roars
with the heat of planes lifting off

...

There is only before and after
the plane in the animal minds of birds

hurrying away from what must be
the voice of god. I'm afraid to confess

a nostalgia for the moment of their departure—

...

only this scar of sound
and a firmament moving on without us

De la Paz engages sound on multiple levels and in the migratory bodies of humans and birds. "Without the noise of home I learn / to hear my body's own sound," says the speaker of "Diaspora Sonnet in the Sage Desert When Grandmother Tries to Sleep."

At dusk, Eastern Oregon's high desert hosts a flashback to the streets of Marikina City, in greater metropolitan Manila. Both places become, for a moment, less distant from each other, as do the *past* and the *present*. From "Diaspora Sonnet as a Flashback to Marikina, Reflected in Irrigation Ditches": "an air extinct with opacity. Extinct / in the moment of straightening up // to see the horizon." From "Diaspora Sonnet as a Flashback to Marikina While Setting Sprinkler Heads," a variation: "While a single thought—to stand straight and see // the horizon beyond the razored green. / To see yourself in the mirroring streams." The horizon can be seen only when a person changes bodily positions from stooped, perhaps from doing farm work, to erect. The visual plane works closely with the aural, as memory is a blink-in-the-eye in Walter Benjamin's dictum: "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again." Prominently recurring in de la Paz's poem titles, couplets, and quatrains, the word *horizon* signals an *elsewhere* knowing or knowledge of other places and other times beyond the logics of mapped itinerary and linear chronology.

De la Paz creates loops of words, actions, and images within the patterned design of poetic form, rhyme scheme, anaphoric titling, and poem ordering. At the risk of raising the specter of artificial intelligence and machine learning, the idea of an algorithm helps me think about the interplay of structure and sociospatial indeterminacy in *The Diasporic Sonnets*. Poetry's linguistic material after all functions in a writing system

of signs and syntax. The book's repeating motifs, the pantoum's repeating lines, the chain migration poem's rhyme scheme, and the sonnet's metrical rhythms work on literary traditions to mediate readers' relationships to diasporic dislocation and trauma. The serial repetitions with which the poems treat difficult migration memories create a surface texture unlike the more maximalist expressions of melancholia and hybridity.

In this algorithmic way of knowing and sensing, readers aren't seeking freedom-via-constraint—what my friend Rainer Diana Hamilton in conversation called the “S&M dynamic” of contemporary poets writing in forms such as the sonnet—but a poetic procedure for calculating a particular answer to a particular set of problems. On a long-distance phone call to family in Manila, the speaker is “voided” by the scripted requests for money and news. “Too many / unsayable residences,” says the speaker of “Diaspora Sonnet as Notecards with New Words and Nothing Else.” Overall, this book does not take part in the noisome discourse of diasporic aesthetics and politics. De la Paz's collection directs attention to smallness and silence, to the unremarkable, the absent, and the minoritarian.

One could say, as I have, that the multiple languages crossing oceans and national borders activate the ear's possibilities for sounding a poetic voice. Nevertheless, I recognize *The Diaspora Sonnets* as its own *sensoria*, to borrow the title of a recent book by McKenzie Wark. The poems' readers, along with their speakers, are embedded inside a world (or worlds) that

they collectively try to understand. Readers can begin with the things they see and hear, which allows them to mix synesthetically and leads to memories and futures along the “edges of ways of knowing,” to quote Wark. Can readers know something of the diaspora without making one kind of knowing sovereign over others? Can this kind of non-hierarchical knowing allow more people to share whatever knowledge of the present world of diaspora is at hand? Whether at a distance from or from within *The Diaspora Sonnets's* design, readers might see and sound their own iconoclastic ways toward the horizon.

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