

Kimberly Alidio's : once teeth bones coral : (Belladonna*, 2020)

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Unthinkable Potentials: The Filipinx Avant-garde Tradition in Kimberly Alidio's : once teeth bones coral :

by MT Vallarta

From José Garcia Villa to Eileen Tabios, avant-garde poetry has been a radical tradition in the Filipinx diaspora, providing irrevocable figurative experiences that push readers to rebel against and question social norms and conventions. Kimberly Alidio's 2020 poetry collection : *once teeth bones coral* : continues this tradition. In this collection, language is stripped to the bone, to its barest and most provocative form. The interlocking of words and the careful placement of fragments and spaces push readers to pay attention to what is abundant and what is scarce; how poems could be plentiful yet still withhold. This dynamic urges us to read on, to trace the contours of each and every coupling of terms, to examine the transformative potentiality of words in their simplest yet most radical

configurations. Alidio creates new socialities and relationalities—multiple dimensions of sound, syntax, and thought that push us beyond the boundaries of what we thought was possible, that language in its rawest state can produce what was once unthinkable.

The poem “: wave reverse :” illustrates the magic to be found in everyday items and how to suture rhetoric with objects. The speaker evokes the patron saint of lost things as they are “home / opening every pair of scissors for / St. Anthony” (64). The image of “opening every pair of scissors” enables readers to pay attention to the empty space between the blades and wonder what worlds could possibly exist between the openings of multiple scissors. Furthermore, the speaker ends up “spend[ing] the / hottest part of the day on the / overpass blocky triangular / code laces rectangles” (65). The combination of “overpass” with “blocky triangular” shows the wonder and multidimensionality of a road beyond its architectural



facade, while “code laces rectangles” allows us to ponder the connections between shapes and the codes or scripts that make, constitute, and construct them. The term “laces” alludes to the delicacy and eloquence of these objects, how the words defining such figures can be abbreviated and unraveled for our pleasure. Although it may be difficult to extract meaning from the poem, Alidio empowers us to enjoy this whimsical wordplay as language is simultaneously disassembled and renewed in “: wave reverse :.”

In addition, queerness flourishes not only as a motif, but as the very method Alidio uses to establish her aesthetic. In her book *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Asian American Poetry*, Dorothy Wang argues that “all writing is situated in both aesthetic and social realms” (xii). This is evident in the poem “: pours pore :.” which unmakes and reveals the performativity of gender:

try violent grammar protect
kin open up interiors
refuse ceding them remove
stimuli expose nerve ends
parade masculine surplus value
flirt repository gravities
faraway absorption pixelate
care stripping concise
unfeminine sibilant (27).

The phrases “try violent grammar” and “parade masculine surplus value” allude to the regulatory and ultimately violent enforcement of gender roles and norms. Judith Butler has prolifically argued that gender, as a series of performative acts, shapes us, that our existence is regulated by the heteronormative grammar enforced upon us. “Try violent grammar” recognizes this socialization, while “parade masculine surplus value” functions as critique of hypermasculinity and demonstrates how this gender role is nothing but a fiction. This is implied by the term “parade,” which is not only associating masculinity with unnecessary excess, but also conveys it as only a performance, not biologically determinant. This critique is visibilized even more with the preceding lines: “remove / stimuli expose nerve ends.” Although many rove for proof that gender is encoded and the natural course for our genetically-wired bodies, this ideology is challenged by the “parade” that exposes the pretense of masculinity.

This stanza from “: pours pore :.” also plays with language through the situating and pairing of unlikely words, such as “faraway absorption” and “unfeminine sibilant.” While these couplings may appear to be mashups of unlike things, they flow in a seamless and graceful manner, demonstrating the beauty and affinity that can be found in incommensurability. This juxtaposing aesthetic is representative of the astonishing possibilities we can find in queerness, where relationships with same-sex, genderqueer, or multiple partners beautifully brush against the grain of our heteronormative world order. The phrase “unfeminine

sibilant” also continues to demonstrate the fiction of gender. This unlikely pairing reflects how satisfying unraveling and annihilating gender norms could be, just like the recitation of sibilant sounds (such as “sh” in *pleasure*) that feel seamless in our mouths. There is fun in being “unfeminine,” as Alidio reveals in her astoundingly savvy diction.

“: pours pore :” also contains the following phrase: “protect / kin.” While this may appear to be a simple statement, “protect / kin” illustrates the potentiality of chosen families, that new affinities are possible outside of biological structures. Additional poems reflect the importance of non-biological kinship, such as the line “formless intimacies” in “: continent reverence :.” This poem implies that the intimacy, the closeness we feel for someone, should be “formless,” so unbound and infinite that it cannot be restricted. This pairing in “: continent reverence :” is an embrace of queer socialities, of the multidimensional ways we can love and be with each other beyond the family we are born with. In our current political climate under the COVID-19 pandemic and routine police violence against Black lives, rethinking kinship and community are not only methods of survival during crisis, but are essential strategies we must consider in order to radically transform society. Alidio asks us to think of other ways our world can be configured, the changes we can make to ensure we can truly live freely and care for each other without the threat of structural violence.

: *once teeth bones coral* : demonstrates the transformative potentiality of experimental poetry, how the aesthetic and the social can mesh, antagonize, and even sustain each other through the most unlikely language configurations. What was once unthinkable becomes possible; what was once undistinguishable is vivid. Alidio is a trailblazer in avant-garde Filipinx poetry, illustrating how words in their most scarce and most metaphorical states can embody radical social formations.

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