

## Chapter Five

# PLAY: RACIAL RECOGNITION, UNSETTLING POETICS, AND THE REINVENTION OF OLD ENGLISH AND MIDDLE ENGLISH FORMS

THERE'S A COMMON EXPRESSION in literary studies that “poetry is what gets lost in translation.” Indeed, translating poetry is one of the most difficult things a writer can do. Can you capture the nuances of a text’s language—including wordplay, irony, humor, or cultural references—for a new audience? How can a translator respect a poem’s artistic form and its original social context while also creating a work that is meaningful to a new audience?

One persistent idea underlying the academic field of Western translation studies is the so-called “invisibility” of the translator.<sup>1</sup> When translators do their job properly, so the thinking goes, the audience isn’t even aware that a translator exists—it’s only when a text exhibits an awkward or stilted “translationese” or introduces confusing or unfamiliar words that an audience knows something has gone awry. Philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah argues for the value of “thick translation” and making acts of translation recognizable to the audience through annotations, glosses, and commentary; since translations can never enact word for word correspondences, a thick translation “seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context.”<sup>2</sup> Translator, author, and cultural theorist Tejaswini Niranjana has argued that “translators can intervene to inscribe heterogeneity, to warn against myths of purity” and to offer “a more densely textured understanding of who ‘we’ are.”<sup>3</sup> Poets of color often find themselves writing against Eurocentric traditions that assume the white (male) subject as the “default” (or universal “we”), and when poets of color translate or adapt European texts, they confront the choice of whether to make their racial positionings and sociopolitical stances explicit—or to conform to dutiful white norms of self-effacement. The “double bind” that translators and poets of color face is not only the obligation to convey the “rich cultural and linguistic context” of a work to a new audience, but also the question of when, or how, to make their (our) racial identities “visible,” or recognizable, to a reading audience.

This chapter considers how poets of color adapt (or adopt) themes and structures of Old English and Middle English literature to address the illusory dimensions of translation and race, when the labor—and racial identity—of a poetic translator flickers in and out of view (to use an optical metaphor). Enacting my own “thick translations” of each

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1 Kiaer, Guest, and Li, *Between Visibility and Invisibility*, “Introduction,” 1–2.

2 Appiah, “Thick Translation,” 427.

3 Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, 186.

work, I put each poet of color in dialogue with relevant European medieval works and literary traditions, while also providing a fuller context for each poet's cultural and racial positioning and sociopolitical objectives. Along the lines of Appiah and Niranjana, I cultivate a thick and textured understanding of each poet's work. Rather than sustaining the fiction of the white "universal" subject valuing self-effacement in translation, poets of color challenge readers to rethink whiteness as the "invisible" default or unmarked category of difference.

As poetry scholar Jahan Ramazani has observed, "race not only exists" as a "cultural category that constructs social difference," but also as "one of the most significant aspects of our lived experience," and as such race "shapes, styles, even gives rise to various forms of aesthetic enunciation, including poetry."<sup>4</sup> This chapter explores some of the advantages of making one's distinct cultural and racial positioning recognizable in a poetic translation, as well as the complex interpretive consequences of constructing a poetic speaker that disrupts or evades clear forms of racial categorization.

The first section of this chapter examines how contemporary poets of color reinvent Old English poetry. The second and third sections examine works by contemporary Native and multiracial poets, addressing adaptations of the abecedarian (alphabetic poem) and reinventions of medieval European vernacular lyric traditions. As suggested in the introduction to this book, I approach artistic works by poets of color as performing what José Esteban Muñoz calls strategic acts of "disidentification" with a longstanding cultural tradition that is coded as white and European.<sup>5</sup> Each poet offers a thickly contextualized reworking of medieval literary traditions and challenges the audience's preconceptions of what "counts" as a proper translation or adaptation of a medieval text, as well as questioning who traditionally claims the authority or expertise to craft such interpretations. Just as importantly, my focus on reinventions of foundational anglophone literary traditions (including works originally composed in Old English and Middle English) foregrounds the racial, cultural, and geographical heterogeneity of global anglophone communities today.

### **Riddles of Identity: Old English Poetry Reinvented**

I begin, fittingly enough, with Old English poetry. Alliterative verse composed in Old English (the earliest historical form of the West Germanic language we now call English) is the earliest form of English literature. The phrase "Anglo-Saxon," problematically used inside and outside academia interchangeably with the term Old English, has deep historical associations with idealized notions of racial purity and discourses of white superiority throughout global anglophone contexts. As Mary Rambaran-Olm, Adam Miyashiro, and Matthew X. Vernon have demonstrated, the term "Anglo-Saxon" is profoundly aligned with white supremacy in anglophone societies, from Thomas Jefferson's valorization of a so-called "Anglo-Saxon" (i.e., white anglophone American) identity and his role in displacing Native people in favor of those of "Anglo-Saxon descent," to

<sup>4</sup> Ramazani, "Poetry and Race," vii.

<sup>5</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; see also this book's introduction.

ongoing systems of white anglophone colonization and imperial expansion around the globe.<sup>6</sup> Rambaran-Olm names a longstanding erasure of Black scholars in Old English literary studies,<sup>7</sup> and Dorothy Kim observes that J. R. R. Tolkien's foundational scholarship on the anonymous Old English poem *Beowulf* "solidif[ies] white Englishness and English identity," establishing Old English or "Anglo-Saxon" literature as white property for generations of scholars—to the exclusion of Black intellectuals and writers.<sup>8</sup> In this section of the chapter, I consider how three poets of color (of Native, Black, and Asian ancestry respectively) question the longstanding alignment between Old English poetic traditions and racialized "Anglo-Saxon" identity. I trace how each poet uses Old English poetic traditions to challenge hegemonic whiteness and to dismantle ideologies of racial purity.<sup>9</sup>

The first poet-translator I discuss is Carter Revard, a renowned Native American author and storyteller as well as an accomplished scholar of medieval literature. Revard, who is of Osage and European American descent, was born on the Osage Indian Reservation in Pawhuska, OK, and his many literary and scholarly awards include the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas as well as a Rhodes Scholarship to pursue graduate work at Oxford University. Revard's "double life" as both a Native author and as a scholar of medieval European literature finds vivid expression through his creative reinventions of Old English riddle poems.<sup>10</sup>

The most famous Old English riddle poems survive in the tenth-century manuscript known as the Exeter Book (also known as the *Codex Exoniensis* or Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501). Composed anonymously in alliterative verse, these texts usually feature a first-person poetic speaker who describes the physical world or familiar everyday objects in oblique terms and concludes with a call to "say what I am called," inviting the audience to guess the "answer" to the riddle (there isn't always one clear or correct answer). In an essay entitled "Some Riddles in Old English Alliterative Verse" (2001), Revard compares "the Old English Riddles" to "glass-bottomed boats that let us see ... below us [into] the depths of everyday things and common beings," and the poet-translator seeks to "revive the riddle-form by looking at the mysterious inwardness of ordinary things here and now," in "our own world" of "North America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" and what is, for him and his audience, a shared "present time" and place.<sup>11</sup>

**6** Rambaran-Olm, "Misnaming the Medieval"; Adam Miyashiro, "Decolonizing Anglo-Saxon Studies"; Miyashiro, "Our Deeper Past," 5–6; Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 3–5.

**7** Rambaran-Olm, "Erasing Black Scholars."

**8** Kim, "Question of Race in *Beowulf*." On white property, see this book's introduction.

**9** On "new" Old English poetry, see Chris Jones, *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and *Anglo-Saxon and Linguistic Nativism in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). All of the poets discussed are white.

**10** On the Exeter Riddles as enigmatic "life writing" and the "third space" of Revard's literary positionings, see Lundquist, "Revard as Autoethnographer," 45–57.

**11** Revard, "Riddles in Old English Verse," 1.

Revard translates one Old English poem (which does not have any title in the Exeter Book) as “The Swan’s Song,” and the poet-translator maintains the alliterative verse form:

Garbed in silence I go on earth,  
Dwell among men or move on the waters,  
Yet far over halls of heroes in time  
My robes and the high air may raise  
And bear me up in heaven’s power  
Over all nations. My ornaments then  
Are singing glories and I go in song  
Bright as a star unstaying above  
The world’s wide waters, a wayfaring soul.<sup>12</sup>

In his rendition of this poem, Revard marks the pause in each line (called a caesura, indicated by a blank space in each line of verse) and each line has a pair of words that alliterate (repeat a shared stressed consonant sound): Garbed/go, among/move, halls/heroes, robes/raise, etc. Revard observes that “this creature” (the swan) “telling its life-story lives in silence among human beings or on the water,” then “takes to the air” and “rises far above human habitations,” with the closing lines of the poem symbolically transforming the swan into an “emblem of the immortal soul”—or a figure in flight as “a pilgrim soul.”<sup>13</sup> Revard carefully guides the reader through his translations of Old English poetry, offering a “thick translation” through his text-and-gloss commentary. He not only discloses to the reader his own strategies of literary translation but he also provides a rich interpretive context for the work (its original Old English cultural context, as well as its meanings for us today).

Revard’s thick translations are especially fruitful when he demonstrates how Old English alliterative verse can be adapted to address cultural and spiritual practices of living Native communities. One of Revard’s “new” Old English poems (not based on any existing poem in any medieval manuscript) is entitled “What the Eagle Fan Says,” and its first-person speaker is an eagle-feather fan that plays a key role in a ceremonial dance:

I strung dazzling thrones of thunder beings  
On a spiraling thread of spinning flight  
[...]  
lightly I move now in a man’s left hand,  
above dancing feet follow the sun  
around old songs soaring toward heaven  
on human breath, and I help them rise.<sup>14</sup>

Revard’s new “eagle fan” poem adapts to Native practices and expresses the importance of dance as a living spiritual practice. In this poem, the first-person poetic speaker is not the human dancer but the eagle itself (whose feathers create the fan). “Here, the eagle describes how it circles heaven” in the same way as “the beads are sewn around and

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**12** Ibid., 4.

**13** Ibid.

**14** Ibid., 5.

around the handle of an eagle-feather fan,” in addition to how “dancers, carrying such fans, circle around the drum.”<sup>15</sup> In the closing lines, the “feathers remain alive in the fans, whose motion sends up the dancers’ and singers’ prayers.”<sup>16</sup> The reinvented Old English riddle form now expresses the inextricable ties between human and nonhuman life—with the eagle, feathers, drum, and human dancers each playing a role in a living song and dance tradition.

Revard’s clearest use of the alliterative riddle-form to inhabit Native worldviews and confront ideologies of racial purity is his “new” Old English poem entitled “Birch Canoe.” When he introduces readers to this poem, Revard lets “a Birch Canoe [tell] its story” but it is also “my story,” a “bringing into being of a mixed self, afloat between cultures” that reflects his dual European American and Osage ancestry.<sup>17</sup>

Red men embraced    my body’s whiteness  
Cutting into me    carved it free,  
Sewed it tight    with sinews taken  
From lightfoot deer    who leaped this stream—  
Now in my ghost-skin    they glide over clouds  
At home in the fish’s    fallen heaven.<sup>18</sup>

The opening lines acknowledge a coexistence of Native (red) and European (white) identities in one body and prepare the reader to consider histories of race and environmental violence. The poem names the violence enacted upon a birch tree and the deer who gave their lives to create the “body” and “ghost-skin” of this canoe. The closing phrase “fallen heaven” evokes the image of clouds in the sky reflected on the surface of the water (where fish find their home), but the phrase also obliquely suggests the displacement of Native peoples from their homelands. Revard’s poem simultaneously acknowledges “my body’s whiteness” and his Native identity, and the fact of his own body’s whiteness does not make him any less authentically Native. This canoe, or this “American Indian ‘space ship,’”<sup>19</sup> moves between “red” and “white” identities and disassociates the Old English riddle-form from monolithic notions of racial belonging.

Another modern poet of color who uses his writing to address race and violence is the Pulitzer Prize winning Yusef Komunyakaa, most widely known for his autobiographical work in witness to African American soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War as well as works that address Black resistance to white supremacy in the American South. One of his most intriguing poems describing a landscape and environmental destruction is his translation of an Old English poem known as “The Ruin” (which survives, incompletely, in the Exeter Book); this poem depicts a landscape of broken and decayed buildings, perhaps the faded glory of some ruined Roman city whose mere traces survive in early medieval Britain. Komunyakaa’s “The Ruin” appears in a cluster of “Poems About Dying”

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**15** Ibid.

**16** Ibid.

**17** Ibid., 6.

**18** Ibid.

**19** Ibid.

in an anthology of works by contemporary poets entitled *The Word Exchange: Anglo-Saxon Poems in Translation* (2011), and Komunyakaa has the conspicuous position of being a Black poet in what is otherwise an overwhelmingly white “Anglo-Saxon” (Old English) poetry collection.

Komunyakaa’s “The Ruin” presents clear stylistic contrasts with Revard’s practices of Old English literary translation. Rather than seeking to preserve the Old English form of the original (e.g., alliteration and caesura in each line), Komunyakaa composes in free verse:

Look at the elaborate crests chiseled into this stone wall  
shattered by fate, the crumbled city squares,  
and the hue and cry of giants rotted away.<sup>20</sup>

The opening lines of the original Old English poem are printed in *The Word Exchange* as “Wrætlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebræcon; / burgstede burston, broснаð enta geweorc,”<sup>21</sup> which means “Wondrous is this wall-stone; the fates have broken it and shattered the city; the work of giants is crumbling” [awkward translation my own]. Komunyakaa makes crucial changes to the Old English poem’s narrative voice, crafting a vivid sense of the poem’s implied environment. His opening phrase “Look at...” (not in the original Old English) transforms the entire poem into a direct address to an audience who is physically present at the location along with the speaker, an impression reinforced by the phrase “this stone wall” (recalling the opening phrase of the original). Komunyakaa invites the audience to inhabit the environmental space of this poem, forging a relationship between the audience and poetic speaker.

Komunyakaa’s rewritten “Ruin” poem subtly shifts the cultural context for the work, obscuring its origins as an early meditation on remnants of a Roman presence in Britain and making the poem accessible and meaningful to present-day audiences who may or may not be aware of the Old English poem itself. His rendition of the text evokes strikingly modern imagery of environmental destruction and urban violence: “This wall, mapped and veined by lichen, / stained with red [...] lofty and broad, it has fallen.”<sup>22</sup> Black poet Toi Derricotte discerns a vivid assertion of humanity for a wide range of people throughout Komunyakaa’s poetry: “whether it embodies the specific experiences of a black man, a soldier in Vietnam, or a child in Bogalusa, Louisiana,” his poetic voice “shows us in ever deeper ways what it is to be human.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Komunyakaa’s rendition of “The Ruin” emphasizes “deeper” lived human experience of a space as much as the physical place itself, animating the city with motifs of blood and life (“veined by lichen” and “stained with red” refer to the inanimate stone wall surfaces but also evoke a living body). The poem centers the experiences of the city’s inhabitants, and after the location becomes a “tomb” for soldiers, the “city rotted away,”<sup>24</sup> as if by an organic process or by neglect.

**20** Komunyakaa, “The Ruin,” in *Word Exchange*, ed. Delaney and Matto, 298–302, at 299.

**21** *Ibid.*, 298.

**22** *Ibid.*, 299.

**23** Komunyakaa, *Neon Vernacular*, back cover.

**24** Komunyakaa, “The Ruin,” in *Word Exchange*, ed. Delaney and Matto, 301.

Although there is a universalizing aspect to Komunyakaa's "The Ruin" (which would make it accessible to "everyone"), a fuller appreciation for the poet's broader *oeuvre* brings this translation of an Old English text in line with Komunyakaa's abiding interests in race, place, and memories of violence. Komunyakaa's most famous and much-anthologized poem, "Facing It," takes place at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, and this work offers a deep meditation on race, violence, and memory. It begins:

My black face fades,  
hiding inside the black granite.  
I said I wouldn't,  
dammit: No tears.  
I'm stone. I'm flesh.<sup>25</sup>

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a politically resonant site of memory in a public park, designed by an Asian American architect (Maya Lin) and commemorating a war in which Black Americans were disproportionately drafted with a rate of combat death higher than their white peers.<sup>26</sup> The poem's opening two lines announce the poetic speaker's own blackness as well as his deeply personal emotional experience at this site of reflection. The physical site is a wall of "black granite" upon which the names of dead and missing veterans are inscribed, and the audience is put in the perspective of the first-person "I" whose "black face" is reflected—and obscured—by the names inscribed on the stone wall. The poet-speaker tries not to weep, becoming "stone" in the process.<sup>27</sup> The speaker "touch[es] the name Andrew Johnson" (who could possibly be Black, like the speaker himself) and he relives the trauma of witnessing Johnson's death ("I see the booby trap's white flash").<sup>28</sup> The poet's reflections at this site of memory are highly individualized, yet the poem also "stands in" for the experiences of innumerable war veterans, survivors, and witnesses.

In this broader context of the poet's deep meditations on place, race, and war—which so often foreground the experiences of Black soldiers and Black resistance to violence—the vivid locodescriptive dimensions of Komunyakaa's rendition of "The Ruin" take on a new sociopolitical resonance. Readers of this anthology of translated "Anglo-Saxon" poetry in which "The Ruin" appears might consider how the poet's own blackness informs a translation of an Old English poem that might not, on the surface, appear to be "about" race at all.

This discussion of Old English poetic translations ends on a lighter note, addressing how one poet of color uses humor to dismantle preconceived notions of white "Anglo-Saxon" identity. In the poetry collection *100 Chinese Silences* (2016), Asian American literature professor and poet Timothy Yu composes a series of satirical poems that mock Western stereotypes about Asians and people of Asian ancestry. Many of these poems take the form of homophonic translations, or renditions of a text that adhere to

**25** Komunyakaa, "Facing It," *Neon Vernacular*, 159.

**26** Rothman, "Vietnam and the Black Soldier."

**27** Komunyakaa, "Facing It," *Neon Vernacular*, 159.

**28** Ibid.

the sounds of a previous work but with no desire to maintain the literal meaning of the original text. Homophonic translations can result in humorous nonsense or ironic juxtapositions of meanings that are clear only to people who understand the language of both the source text and its adaptation.

Yu's "Chinese Silence No. 85" grapples directly with questions of race, inclusion, and the genre of the multiauthored poetic anthology.<sup>29</sup> The poem is preceded by a quotation from a published review by a (white) academic of an anthology of poetry by Asian Australians; the reviewer deems it "puzzling" that the collection includes some "male poets with Anglo-Saxon names" who do not specify that they "actually have Asian ancestry" in their "biographical notes," and the "discomforting question" that arises in the mind of the reviewer is whether "mateship" is what "garner[s] a place in [the] collection."<sup>30</sup> The opening of Yu's poem mocks the sentiments of the reviewer, and its verse takes the form of a homophonic translation of the opening lines of the anonymous "Anglo-Saxon" (Old English) poem *Beowulf*.

Hwaet! Of Asians living among us  
we have heard hushed stories and breathless buzz  
of anthologies they have assembled.<sup>31</sup>

The opening lines preserve the alliterative form of Old English verse, including the caesura and alliterative patterns: Asian/among, heard/hushed, breathless/buzz, anthologies/assembled. If you happen to know the opening lines of *Beowulf*, you will recognize how closely the sound patterns of this modern English poem evoke the Old English, and the opening word "Hwaet!" remains untranslated. By invoking "Asians ... among us," Yu mocks perceptions that people of Asian ancestry living in predominantly white anglophone societies are secretive perpetual "aliens," and the next few lines address stereotypical representations of Asian immigrant labor:

Oft some silence signaled their prowess  
at making machines or mending dresses,  
awaiting our word.<sup>32</sup>

By conjoining the literary context of the academic book review (of an Asian Australian poetic anthology) and a broader history of Asian stereotyping, Yu exposes the folly of equating "Anglo-Saxon names" with a presumed white identity: "But since they have snuck / under our noses with Anglo-Saxon names / we are taken by terror [by] these 'discomforting' questions [...] of who is Asian [...] That was a bad thing!"<sup>33</sup> Yu's playful verse is "faithful" to the sound and form of Old English verse while radically transforming its meaning. Through this parody of "Anglo-Saxon" poetry, Yu makes the point

<sup>29</sup> Yu, *100 Chinese Silences*, 116.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. See also Lesley Syngé, "Book Review: *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* edited by Adam Aitken, Kim Cheng Boey and Michelle Cahill," *Transnational Literature* 6, no. 1 (November 2013): 1–4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

that a person of Asian ancestry who has an “Anglo-Saxon” name is no less authentically Asian than someone with an identifiably non-anglophone name. Self-identified Asian poets—regardless of how their names might “signify”—should not have to prove to any reviewers that they are somehow “Asian enough” to belong within an Asian anthology. The title of Yu’s poetry collection and the content of his poems make clear his own Asian American (and specifically Chinese American) racial positioning, and acknowledging the sociopolitical and academic context for this poem is crucial. Each of the poet-translators I have discussed, in their own way, use Old English forms to bring visibility to their racialized positions rather than effacing them. These “new” Old English poets of color collectively urge their audiences to face a long history of aligning “Anglo-Saxon” language and literature with white supremacy and false ideologies of racial purity.

### Alphabetic Forms and Systemic Violence

In this section, I consider how poets of color repurpose the abecedarian form—a poetic structure whereby the first letter of each line or stanza follows sequentially through the alphabet. In particular, I trace how each poet uses the literary form itself to address long histories of racial violence. The oldest examples of abecedarian works in English include an Old English rune poem which does not employ Roman letters but rather the letters of the runic alphabet (the name of each runic letter describing its shape); in this poem, each runic letter has its own poetic stanza.<sup>34</sup> Throughout the later Middle Ages, the abecedarian poem adopted a form based on the Roman alphabet and the genre came to be associated with childlike innocence and devotion. Geoffrey Chaucer’s Middle English alphabetic poem commonly known as *An ABC* (translated from a French source) offers a prayer to the Virgin Mary with each stanza beginning with a letter of the alphabet in sequential order, and there is a long historical tradition of associating alphabetic poems with children and learning.<sup>35</sup> Medieval scenes of childhood education and prayerful devotion have a sinister legacy, however; Marian miracle tales and antisemitic violence were often intertwined in medieval English texts.<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Prioress’s Tale,” for instance, features a “litel clergeon” (schoolboy) who performs an intense devotion to the Virgin Mary while he is learning to read in school, and he is murdered by villainized Jews (who in turn suffer gruesome executions en masse at the end of the story).<sup>37</sup> In this discussion, I consider how Native poets grapple with the sinister history of the abecedarian, connecting this seemingly childlike and “innocent” poetic form with systemic racial violence past and present.

Natalie Diaz, a queer poet who is Latina and Mojave and was born and raised in the Fort Mojave Indian Village (Needles, CA), uses the alphabetic poem structure to make a scathing critique of white settler colonialism and missionary intrusions into Native envi-

<sup>34</sup> Delaney and Matto, eds., *Word Exchange*, “The Rune Poem” (trans. James Harpur), 207–15.

<sup>35</sup> Brogan and Colón, “Abecedarius” (abecedarian),” 1.

<sup>36</sup> Heng, *England and Jews*, 80–84; Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, “Prioress’s Tale,” lines 489–508.

ronments. Entitled “Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation” with key words deliberately “misspelled,” its opening lines evoke the social environment of the reservation and the external threats that its inhabitants face. “Angels” (as the poem reveals) are associated with white missionaries (i.e., the “Anglikan Seraphym”), and nonhuman creatures such as bats, coyotes, and owls first appear in the poem as omens of death:

Angels don't come to the reservation.  
Bats, maybe, or owls, boxy mottled things.  
Coyotes, too. They all mean the same thing—  
death.<sup>38</sup>

The critique of “angels” (white missionaries) becomes clear by the midpoint of the poem, which illustrates ongoing efforts to erase and replace Native cultures:

Like I said, no Indian I've ever heard of has ever been or seen an angel.  
Maybe in a Christmas pageant or something—  
Nazarene church holds one every December,  
organized by Pastor John's wife. It's no wonder  
Pastor John's son is the angel—everyone knows angels are white.<sup>39</sup>

This poem's reference to “a Christmas pageant” and the pastor's child playing an angel may generate fond and nostalgic memories for white Christians, but Diaz frames this entire performance long associated with medieval Nativity plays as a recurring demonstration of white supremacy—an annual tradition that ideologically aligns whiteness itself with virtue. Diaz's sinisterly disenchanting representation of a Christmas pageant reveals how, in the words of Maria Sachiko Cecire, “[m]edievalist fantasy and mainstream representations of Christmas magic” enact an “obsession with a form of innocence” that idealizes whiteness and effaces “the political and cultural conditions from which [cultural] norms arise, and the groups of people that their spaces of wonder tend to exclude.”<sup>40</sup> In the context of Native exclusion from Christmastime “spaces of wonder,” it is “no wonder” that the pastor's wife casts her own son as an angel.

The closing lines of Diaz's poem most clearly announce the role that white missionaries play in the displacement of Native peoples and ongoing processes of settler colonialism:

You better hope you never see angels on the rez. If you do, they'll be marching you off to  
Zion or Oklahoma, or some other hell they've mapped out for us.<sup>41</sup>

These final lines reveal how white missionaries may present themselves as “angels” or “saviors” but their ideas and actions are ultimately anything but innocent. Even the child portraying an angel at the Christmas pageant is part of a social system and a power structure that seeks to eradicate Native cultures and relocate Native communities from

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**38** Diaz, “Abecedarian.”

**39** Ibid.

**40** Cecire, *Re-Enchanted*, 132.

**41** Diaz, “Abecedarian.”

ancestral homelands to a “hell they’ve mapped out for us.” The poet’s reference to “Oklahoma” alludes to the notorious Trail of Tears, the forced relocation of Native communities from the southeastern United States in the mid-nineteenth century to what the federal government had designated as “Indian Territory.” For Diaz, the abecedarian—a poetic form long associated with childlike innocence—becomes a mechanism to expose systemic violence and to name the destructive forces of white supremacy and settler colonialism.

Writing from a different region of the North American continent, Karenne Wood (member of the Monacan Indian Nation in Virginia) writes a poem “Abracadabra, an Abecedarian” which makes invisibility its key theme. “Abacadabra”—the nonsense word that magicians utter before making things disappear—is a fitting title for Wood’s urgent commentary on the lack of visibility and justice for missing and murdered (i.e., “disappeared”) Native women throughout North America. The poem opens by describing (white) feminist efforts to advocate for (all) women: “All this time I’ve been looking for words for certain difficult women / because they aren’t able to speak for themselves,” but recently the “Clinton Foundation has come up with a brilliant campaign—they / decided, for International Women’s Day” to use “digital magic to / erase women on the cover of *Condé Nast*” glamor and fashion magazines.<sup>42</sup> Using “digital magic” (photoshop or other manipulation) to remove women from a photograph creates an “empty space” that metaphorically shows how “women have not yet achieved / gender equity.”<sup>43</sup>

Although the first-person speaker agrees that gender equity has not yet been achieved, the poem shifts from a symbolic visual erasure of women on a magazine cover to the real-life disappearance of Native women every day:

I wasn’t thinking about how women are not-there-yet, metaphorically, I  
just thought about women who are really not there, women and girls who  
keep disappearing (not from magazines, who don’t make news in Manhattan)  
like they’ve evaporated, like illusions, hundreds in Juárez, twelve hundred  
missing and murdered Native women across Canada. The hands of men.<sup>44</sup>

This poem’s abrupt turn enacts a “magic trick” of its own, suddenly deflecting the reader’s attention from white feminist publications for an affluent readership to the blunt realities of murdered or missing Native women. Due to the poem’s lengthy lines, its frequent use of enjambment, and its infrequent use of capital letters at the start of the lines, the alphabetic structure of this abecedarian might not be immediately apparent to all readers. Diaz forces the audience to confront the systemic silence and inaction that accompanies the disappearance of Native women throughout the continent (i.e., United States, Mexico, and Canada)—and all the while the alphabetic form of the poem itself threatens to vanish.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Wood, “Abracadabra.”

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> My quotations replicate the layout in Wood’s book. In other iterations of the poem, the alphabetic structure is not clearly legible; compare Erdrich, ed., *New Poets of Native Nations*, 234.

## Crafting Communities Through Medieval Lyric

The final section of this chapter explores how medieval lyric poetry can create new forms of cross-racial solidarity and community. Cedar Sigo, a queer Native poet raised on the Suquamish Reservation near Seattle, WA, crafts an enigmatic poem that evokes living Native ceremonial practices and indirect references to European medieval history. Entitled “Thrones,” Sigo’s poem addresses a range of literary figures beginning with two African American women writers:

*For Phillis Wheatley:* A book of verse uncovered in cornerstones of a Moorish castle, purple and gold depicting souls in various stages of release, the pitch, anger and arc of the poems an unrhymed mirror to the long Atlantic.

*For Jayne Cortez:* An intertribal grand entry of poets in cedar bark jackets split skirts and whalebones pinning them closed, a voice in praise and suspension of the drum.<sup>46</sup>

The quality of oral performance structuring “Thrones” recalls the social setting of the potlatch, which Native writer and activist Julian Brave NoiseCat (member of the Canim Lake Band Tsq’escen and descendant of the Lil’Wat Nation of Mount Currie) describes as a “traditional Indigenous ceremony here in the Pacific Northwest” that is “rooted in massive giveaways of art, goods and foodstuffs” and a generous reception of guests by the host community.<sup>47</sup> The first two addressees in Sigo’s “Thrones” are Black women writers, and Sigo incorporates European medieval imagery into each ceremonial gift that the poetic speaker offers. The “book of verse” bound in “purple and gold” rediscovered on the site of a “Moorish castle” imaginatively recalls medieval Iberia. A procession of poets arrayed in “cedar bark jackets” with “whalebones pinning them closed” obliquely suggests an object such as the Franks Casket, a famous early medieval whalebone chest that could have been intended to enclose a psalter—such a holy book being a precious object that one of the riddles in the Exeter Book vividly attests would have been bound, or clothed, by wooden boards.<sup>48</sup> “Thrones” offers allusions to gift-giving as a vital ceremonial practice across medieval European cultures and also in living Native communities.

In addressing Black women writers and artists, Sigo affirms their visibility and importance in a capacious multiracial anglophone literary tradition. Wheatley is the first African American woman to publish a book of poetry in English, and Cortez is a performance artist and activist foundational in the Black Arts Movement. Sigo has observed that “Thrones” adopts a “form [that] has you presenting gifts on bended knee in a way and it forms this sort of totem, a twitching altar with an almost invisible frame.”<sup>49</sup> Sigo is

<sup>46</sup> Erdrich, ed., *New Poets of Native Nations*, 216.

<sup>47</sup> NoiseCat, “Water Resources.” See also U’mista Cultural Society, “Potlatch.”

<sup>48</sup> Delaney and Matto, eds., *Word Exchange*, “Some Enemy Took My Life” (trans. Jane Hirshfield), 164–67.

<sup>49</sup> Mishler, “Cedar Sigo on Playfulness and Poetry.” Sigo observes that “Thrones” was inspired by a recording of Philip Lamantia reading his poem *The Time Traveler’s Potlatch*. Lamantia spent much of his life with Native communities but was not Native himself.

“interested in honoring (communicating with) certain essential African American artists through a (still living) coast Salish ceremony,” but rather than “a flowing list of decadent gifts,” the “form itself can also be seen as a gift to all poets.”<sup>50</sup> “Thrones” enacts solidarity between the Native poet and Black artists, creating a sense of cross-racial artistic community through an ethos of gift-giving and celebration—and Sigo presents the poem itself as a gift through its very form.

Julian Talamantez Brolaski, who identifies as a “two-spirit and transgender poet and musician of mixed Mescalero and Lipan Apache, Latin@, and European heritages,” offers a divergent model for how a poet of Native ancestry can create cross-racial affinities.<sup>51</sup> The title of Brolaski’s poetry collection *Of Mongrelitude* (2017) makes a playful reference to the *Négritude* movement associated with intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire and other postcolonial francophone African diaspora thinkers who cultivated Black pride and resistance to assimilation into white Western cultural systems.<sup>52</sup> Brolaski’s *Of Mongrelitude* (with its cover title typeset in a font resembling blackletter Gothic script) uses pervasive Middle English neologisms and vocabulary drawn from Indigenous and European languages to explore queer and racially hybrid identities.<sup>53</sup>

Brolaski describes the book as “a colloquy on the mongrel body, textual and actual, sexual, special, and racial”—the term “special” in this instance refers to species difference—and its “hybrid style ... makes the argument that everything can and does come into ‘englyssh,’ including neologisms, archaisms, vocables, Apache, Spanish, French, other romance and germanic tongues, tongues not yet named.”<sup>54</sup> Finalist for the 2018 Lambda Literary Award for Transgender Poetry, Brolaski has characterized *Of Mongrelitude* as a “trans-literal, transmogrified body, the body of the poems figured as the body of the poet,” an “ambiguous body” that is “cowboy and indian, male and female and a third and fourth thing.”<sup>55</sup> The poet’s discourse of a “trans-literal, transmogrified body” is intricately tied to what I elsewhere call a medieval “translingual” poetic practice—a capacity to “think and write across more than one language concurrently.”<sup>56</sup> Brolaski’s translingual poetics, drawing upon medieval forms of expression, creates a vivid idiom for a transgender and two-spirit voice.

The influence of medieval poetics throughout *Of Mongrelitude* is pervasive. Brolaski creates Middle English neologisms such as “gringitude,”<sup>57</sup> a word that conjoins “attitude” (English), *négritude* (French), and *gringo* (a term used by Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Latin Americans to refer to foreigners, especially white anglophone Americans and Europeans). Elsewhere, Brolaski claims a style of “englyssh [...] so filled [with]

50 Ibid.

51 “Brolaski: 2019 Fellow-In-Residence.” *The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage*.

52 Diagne, “Négritude.”

53 Brolaski, *Of Mongrelitude*. Note also Poetry Center Digital Archive, “Caples and Brolaski.”

54 “Author Notes: Julian Talamantez Brolaski,” in *New Poets of Native Nations*, ed. Erdrich, 273.

55 Ibid.

56 Hsy, *Trading Tongues*, 6; see also Hsy, “Linguistic Entrapment.”

57 Brolaski, *Of Mongrelitude*, 35.

periphrasis”<sup>58</sup> that cites lines from the Middle English poem “The Land of Cokaygne,”<sup>59</sup> and the poet crafts a work entitled “fowles in tha frith” after the opening words of the Middle English lyric that forms its template.<sup>60</sup> The book’s titular poem “of mongrelitude” foregrounds a two-spirit and transgender identity, with Brolaski conveying the experience of living “across” gender binaries through puns on the meanings of the Middle English word “privy” (meaning toilet): “I am privy to these contradictory situations where I am told first the one and then the other bathroom is the wrong one.”<sup>61</sup> Middle English neologisms and translingual literary strategies allow Brolaski to express a racialized and gendered position that evades monolithic or binary categories.

Brolaski’s poetry also addresses how racism and misogyny inform medieval literary studies itself (including the translation, interpretation, and editing of medieval texts). In the final poem in *Of Mongrelitude*, the poet incorporates allusions to a *pastourelle* by the twelfth-century troubadour Marcabru who wrote in the Occitan vernacular. In the *pastourelle* genre, the poet-narrator, usually a knight, attempts to seduce (or prey upon) a vulnerable shepherdess who resists his advances. As Brolaski states: “marca-bru uses the word ‘mestissa’ to describe the shepherdess his dickish narrator is poorly courting.”<sup>62</sup> Building upon intersectional Black feminist approaches to cultural analysis, literary historian Carissa M. Harris has shown how the medieval European genre of the *pastourelle* exposes complex dynamics of social class and gendered power by depicting “well-off men targeting women who are young, poor, single, and alone” and “leveraging the women’s multiple disadvantages to coerce them,” but such poems can in certain instances model clear strategies of female resistance to sexual violence.<sup>63</sup>

Brolaski foregrounds the racial and gendered dimensions of the words that white male translators and editors have used in reference to the woman in Marcabru’s poem. The Occitan term “mestissa” (which in its own day could signal Jewish ancestry) is translated by derogatory and racialized terms by William D. Paden, Ezra Pound, and W. D. Snodgrass respectively: “paden translates ‘half-breed’ and pound ‘low-born’ and snodgrass ‘lassie.’”<sup>64</sup> Brolaski’s narrator does not identify with the knight as the protagonist and poetic speaker of this *pastourelle*; instead, the modern poet discerns a resistant role for the shepherdess as a “mongrel, mestiza, mixedbreed.”<sup>65</sup> Critiquing both the racism and misogyny evident in medievalist acts of linguistic translation and textual editing, Brolaski forges a seemingly unlikely cross-temporal identification with the medieval “mongrel” woman along the lines of Latinx (“mestiza”) and Native (“mixedbreed”) cultural frameworks. The poet rejects the collective mindset of modern white male inter-

58 Ibid., 16.

59 Ibid., 8–9.

60 Ibid., 78–79.

61 Ibid., 25.

62 Ibid., 91.

63 Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 103–49, at 108; see also Harris, “Pastourelle Fictionalities,” 248.

64 Brolaski, *Of Mongrelitude*, 91.

65 Ibid.

preters of the medieval poem and enacts what Muñoz might call a queer disidentification with the medieval “mestissa” across time, gender, culture, race, and place.<sup>66</sup>

The book’s closing poem “as the owl augurs” announces solidarity with vulnerable communities of color in the wake of homophobic and racist violence: “I want namore of it [...] the killings of our families queer and black and brown and ndn / slaughter at orlando symbol of our hermitude.”<sup>67</sup> The term “ndn” (or NDN = “Indian”) is a colloquialism that Native people can use to refer to themselves. Presenting yet another play on the neologism “mongrelitude,” Brolaski’s “hermitude” suggests how vulnerable queer, Black, brown, and Indigenous communities set themselves apart from mainstream society (as if they are hermits) in order to create alternate “families” or safe spaces of gathering and mutual support.

The “slaughter at orlando” alludes to the violation of the safe space of Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, FL, where fifty predominantly queer Latinx people and their allies were murdered by a gunman on June 12, 2016. A mournful litany of place names follows: “bear river sand creek tulsa rosewood” [spacing as in the original].<sup>68</sup> These locations are all sites of massacres of Native and Black communities deeply harmed by longstanding histories of violent settler colonialism, as Dakota/Lakota writer Ruth Hopkins has noted.<sup>69</sup> *Of Mongrelitude* uses Middle English and translingual poetics to craft a new idiom for a racially hybrid voice evading binary notions of gender difference, while also addressing the harms of racism, misogyny, and violence against queer and transgender communities. The poet expresses solidarity for vulnerable groups (across differences in race, gender, and language), creating visibility for the resistant “mongrel” body.<sup>70</sup>

## Poetics of Racial Recognition

In my exploration of heterogeneous writings by contemporary anglophone poets of color, I have suggested some of the multifaceted directions that medievalism can take. These poets all repurpose medieval European languages, cultural practices, and literary forms to toy with audience expectations regarding the legibility of race and identity and they create new configurations of cross-racial solidarity and community in the process. Revard, Komunyakaa, and Yu challenge readers to discern a racialized minority subject and voice even (or especially) in poetry derived from Old English literary forms that might in other circumstances be implicitly coded as white. Diaz and Wood repurpose the European form of the abecedarian to attest to histories of colonialism and violence against—and erasure of—Native peoples, and Native women specifically. Sigo and Brolaski evoke medieval European lyric conventions to suggest new forms of solidarity among Native communities and across vulnerable marginalized communities. Playfully

<sup>66</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; see also this book’s introduction.

<sup>67</sup> Brolaski, *Of Mongrelitude*, 90.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Hopkins, “America’s Legacy of Anti-Indigenous Violence.”

<sup>70</sup> On activist Latinx poetry see also Noel, “Queer Migrant Poemings of #Latinx Instagram.”

subverting literary traditions and reshaping what Old English and Middle English poetics mean for anglophone readers in the present, poets of color bring vital forms of racial recognition to the combined forces of artistic craft, intellectual labor, and sociopolitical critique.