

Relating Otherwise: Erotic Power, Indigenous Relationality, and More-Than-Human Entanglements in Natalia Diaz’s “The First Water is the Body”

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Abstract

This essay analyzes human and more-than-human entanglements in Natalia Diaz’s poem “The First Water is the Body,” seeing the poem as a space where such relations proliferate, and drawing attention to the poet’s explicit refusal to label them as metaphorical. It provides a close reading of erotic embodiment in Diaz’s poem through the

combined lenses of Indigenous relationality, ecocriticism, and new materialism, using Audre Lorde’s ideas of erotic power as well as Lorena Cabal’s articulation of the “body-land territory” to argue that Diaz’s poetics presents body and river as a territory in itself.

In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” poet Audre Lorde describes the erotic as a resource that lies “in a deeply female and spiritual space” (1984, 49), and which poses a revolutionary threat to different systems of bodily oppression. Relegated to the inferior realm of femininity within Western cultures, the suppression of the erotic results from a particular form of male power that promotes rational thinking while simultaneously teaching women to “distrust that power which rises from [their] deepest and nonrational knowledge” (1984, 49). Likewise, in “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Lorde lauds another relegated resource, the power of poetry, which she explains can “help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (2020, 4). In Lorde’s words, poetry forms “the quality of the light” within which human experience—hopes, dreams—moves from the realm of language into ideas, and then finally into “more tangible actions” (2020, 3). Lorde’s erotic can thus be described as a capacity for change that arises from a deep knowledge of and engagement with our somatosensory experience of the world, and consequently, of each other. In other words, the erotic is a form of power/knowledge. In this context, poetry is the “revelatory distillation of experience” (2020, 3), a space where this form of power/knowledge can be actualized.

This is what we find in Natalie Diaz’s “The First Body is the Water,” a poem in which both powers converge and emerge as a revolutionary force. This long prose poem from *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) juxtaposes the bodies of the Colorado River and that of the speaker, a Mojave woman and a version of Diaz herself, in a relationship where the boundaries of both are blurred. Diaz, a Mojave/Latinx poet, articulates an ontological relationship between her body—human, queer, female—and the body of the Colorado River, which in Mojave cosmology is a sacred being. The first two stanzas read:

The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the
 United States—also, it is a part of my body. / I carry a river.
 It is who I am: ‘Aha Makav. *This is not a metaphor.*
 (Diaz, my emphasis, 46)

Besides the ontological relationship between the body and the river as articulated above, the poem unfolds a poetic space where Mojave beliefs of embodiment and corporeality, which transgress Western notions of human/nature divides and Cartesian dualism, refuse to be reduced to simply metaphorical language. Although Diaz's words resonate with theoretical discourses—deconstruction, postcolonial thought and post-humanist ideas, to name a few—which likewise critique these dualistic notions, her poetic work goes even further. Diaz's poem is a space where relationships beyond the human/non-human divide proliferate: her refusal of metaphor is a call to the materiality of *all* beings, a bold articulation that forms the core argument of this essay. In this vein, this essay provides a close reading of erotic embodiment in Diaz's poem through the combined lenses of Indigenous relationality, ecocriticism, and new materialism. It argues that Diaz's poetics present the connection of body and land as a territory in itself, beyond the limitations of Western ontologies that uphold human/non-human divides.¹ In this sense, Diaz's refusal of the metaphor is part of an eco-erotic poetics of the body that follows Lorde's call to action, and which makes space for what race scholar Roderick A. Ferguson calls "a critical activation of sensual matters" (300). This erotic activation of sensual matters, to follow Ferguson's phrasing, implies an awareness of the different somatosensorial experiences that surround us—a grounding in the sensorial experience of the body. Such sensibility creates a space where the erotic and poetic power enable new possibilities of existing and relating with and along non-human entities in non-hierarchical and non-possessive engagements. In order to show these relationships, this essay first briefly outlines Lorde's theories on erotic and poetic power and connects them with theories of sensorial and phenomenological materiality of embodiment as put forth by race scholars Sechi Sekimoto, Christopher Brown, and Wanda S. Pillow, in order to understand how sensorial experience can become the epistemological core from whence we learn to be in

¹ In this essay, land and territory are not understood as in Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, that is, as oppositional concepts. Rather, I am using these terms as described by communitarian feminists in Latin America, particularly Lorena Gabnal, who describes both the land's physical space (*tierra*) as well as the body (*cuerpo*) as two inseparable forms of territory. See Cabnal, *Feminismos Diversos* (2010).

ethical relations with non-human others. It then describes the importance of the sensorial/erotic in facilitating these relations by looking at the ideas of Indigenous relationality and caretaking relations put forth by Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear. With these ideas in mind, I provide a reading of Diaz's poem as a poetic space where the blurring of borders between human, non-human, and other bodies enables forms of relating differently.

The theoretical underpinnings that inform the argument in this essay transit and engage heavily with ideas of new material feminism, posthuman theories, and ecocriticism, offering an alternative to Cartesian dualism and its body/mind split. Instead, I propose corporeality and sensual experience as an extension—a weaving together—of the corporeal experience of human and more-than-human elements alike. This latter form of existing in relation to our surroundings is what Maya Xinka communitarian feminist Lorena Cabnal calls “el territorio cuerpo-tierra,” or the *body-land territory* (2010, 22, my translation), a key concept in understanding Diaz's relationship to the Colorado River which I discuss later in this essay. In this sense, my argument interweaves itself with the threads that many Indigenous thinkers across the Americas have put forth, both academically as well as in terms of their long-repressed and dismissed cosmovisions, which understand human existence as tethered and relating to other beings and territories around it. Although a thorough review of them lies beyond the scope of this essay, the close reading I provide of Diaz's poem lies at the intersection of these academic discourses.²

Lorde's call to action in “The Power of the Erotic” is to ignore the distrust of nonrational knowledge, that ‘gut feeling’ that is hard to verbalize, yet inhabits the spaces where our skin touches that of others. In this context, Lorde's call for an emphasis on the potential of the erotic as power is, to quote Ferguson, a call to “a rehabilitation of the senses for the purposes of revolutionary change” (295), and locates her discourse as part of a progressive vision where “the seriousness of intellectual work

² In a longer version of this work, I provide a thorough review of these theories alongside ideas of embodiment and land reclamation in the face of colonial dispossession proposed by Indigenous activists, thinkers, and scholars from the Americas.

lies in the critical activation of sensual matters” (300). He adds that for Lorde “poetry was a way to enact an intimate scrutiny needed for personal and social transformation, a way to critically engage the self to set the stage for new interventions and articulations” (295). In these two essays, Lorde presents us with a phenomenological theory of knowledge that shifts our attention to the body and its somatosensory experience, a space where “knowledge births (precedes) understanding” (1984, 35). With this in mind, I build on Lorde’s understanding of somatosensory experience as a crucial form of knowing, extending it beyond the human body. In this way, I argue that Lorde’s erotic opens up a sensibility where the body informs, transforms, and transgresses anthropocentric forms of relating to other beings around us, human and non-human.

Lorde’s proposition resonates with what race scholars Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown call a “politicization of sensory experience,” and with the notion that current political systems reduce the rich sensory scope of the human into a “one sided orientation to the object” where bodies “exist insofar as they are directly possessed, used, and consumed” (13). Similarly, feminist scholar Wanda S. Pillow refers to Lorde’s erotic power as an “ethics of being” and “of being-with” (“Erotic Power Futures,” 45-46), a form of relationality that springs from sharing deeply any pursuit with the other as well as from feeling an “open and fearless underlining of [the] capacity for joy” (Lorde, 1984, 56). Pillow understands the erotic as an ethics of being as well as a liberation from the antierotic confinement society has given it:

Antierotic tactics equate any physical sensation with the pornographic and thus something to be silenced, hidden, and surveilled. These tactics, formed through the needs of hegemonic colonialism, contain and perpetuate highly sexualized discourses. [...] Erotic power, then, is a challenge to colonial hegemonies and reclaiming erotic power will evoke change. (Pillow, 45)

Pillow also underscores the way in which oppressive institutions have buried this power under a sexualized excess, alienating the

individual from their own capacity for sensual power, joy, and from the necessity to extend oneself into the other. Under oppressive institutions, relationships are mediated only in terms of possession—like private property—where affect springs forth as an owning: of people, of land, of beings. What results from this is nothing but the dispossession of others and of ourselves. Conversely, Pillow suggests, erotic power

addresses the affects of dispossession—resignation, despair, depression, self-denial—and repossesses suppressed power. Erotic power creates *affects of awareness*, affective possessions ethically practiced, and once we feel this awareness we have both a responsibility and a demand to see and act differently. (my emphasis, 45)

By bringing into the conversation of erotic power the concept of dispossession and its affects, Pillow opens a path between the material and affective dispossession of the sentient body and a larger and more encompassing form of colonial dispossession, which incorporates the settler colonial practices of land dispossession and cultural genocide.

Relating to others ethically against dominant possessive forms demands a certain sensitivity—a proclivity of the senses that extends its awareness beyond the self and unto others. Such a concept attests to what Indigenous scholar Kim TallBear understands as Indigenous relationality: a way to understand our relationships with others in terms of care and ethics and which extends Lorde's erotic to include the more-than-human. The term *relationality* borrows from what TallBear describes as a rejection of “the binaries of *life versus not life* and *humans versus nature*, as well as other more graduated Eurocentric hierarchies of life” (25). TallBear foregrounds Dakota understandings of existence and *being in good-relations*: a relational web that requires us to pay attention to our relations and obligations here and now. For TallBear, this relational web becomes

an explicitly spatial narrative of *caretaking relations*—both human and other-than-human—as an alternative to the tem-

porally progressive settler-colonial *American Dreaming* that is ever co-constituted with deadly hierarchies of life. [...] It is a narrative that can help us resist those dreams of progress toward a never-arriving future of tolerance and good that paradoxically requires ongoing genocidal and anti-Black violence, as well as violence toward many de-animated bodies. The path toward the supposed democratic promised land of settler mythology is in everyday life a nightmare for many around the globe. (25)

What these scholars see as the power of the erotic is the possibility to understand our material existence not in a hierarchical, possessive relation to those around us, but rather to extend ourselves onto others and co-exist ethically. It presents an alternative to settler colonialism's ongoing land dispossession and cultural genocide, forms of violence rooted in the commodification and exploitation of Indigenous bodies. Land dispossession, cultural erasure, and bodily harm are three entangled forms of violence that necessitate hierarchical and possessive forms of relationality where the individual sees itself as completely separate from other bodies—human, non-human, and even territorial bodies. The possibility to relate *otherwise*—non-hierarchically, horizontally—emerges when we understand our experience of the world as an erotic one—that is, when we allow ourselves to experience the world and others, human and non-humans alike, bodies and territories, through our senses. The erotic is an epistemological space for knowing and relating otherwise, for as humans, we share with other beings the presumption that we know the world around us through our senses. Before we understand abstractly, through language, the joy of a cat zigzagging through our legs, we simply feel the pleasure of a cat's fur and its softness caressing our skin. The cat's touch sends electrical signals to our brains that trigger dopamine and serotonin receptors way before our language center dares put the feeling into words.³ This we share with our non-human companions and other

³ For a thorough review of the central neurochemistry of the hedonic effects of touch on the human brain, see Ellingsen, Dan-Mikael, et al.

living beings, albeit differently in terms of perception: whilst I perceive my cat's nose as a soft shade of pink, in her eyes my skin might be perceived as muted shades of gray, blue, and green (Clark and Clark, 1). However different our visual hardware might be, we understand each other and experience our relationship to each other through touch.

This example speaks to a form of experiencing the world and those around us that does not limit itself to the confines of abstract thought, and compels us to ground ourselves in our own body and surroundings. Moreover, by shifting our attention to knowing the world through our senses, we open ourselves to different affective sensitivities—that of purrs that trigger happiness or bodies being rivers—and more ethical ways of relating that do not imply ownership. In this sense, the erotic/sensorial recalls what Cabnal calls “the body-land territory” (22). For Cabnal, this territory proposes an understanding of our corporeality as a political territory that needs to be recovered from the enduring effects of a colonial reality that has worked in tandem with the patriarchy to exert violence and dispossession on said territory. However, this political territory not only holds our first, individual territory—that is, our physical body—but also our territory land, where the life of the body manifests (Cabnal, 22-23). A defense of this body-land territory, which weaves together human body, territorial environment, and ancestral memory, is for Cabnal an emancipatory response to the historic and ongoing violence of colonial extractivism exerted on all bodies. Cabnal defends her territory “not for the need to extract resources for herself or to leave to future generations” (23), but rather because the recovery of her body-land territory generates life, joy, vitality, and pleasures that construct new ways of knowing.

Cabnal's formulation opposes a Cartesian understanding of embodiment that frames experience as an abstract, intangible result, housed in the mind and separate from its material vehicle, the body. In other words, a focus on the erotic/sensorial negates long-standing ideas of the dualism of body and mind (or spirit) as separate entities, a core tenet of Enlightenment and humanist thought that, alongside rationalism and capitalism, drove the intellectual machinery behind European colonial and ‘civilizing’ enterprises, which fueled Indigenous dispossession.

A rejection of the sensorial and the erotic is a form of colonial oppression, an imposition of a single way to understand and relate to other bodies and territories. Conversely, the power of the erotic is above all a force to disrupt the perpetuation of the body's oppression.

This form of the erotic is what surfaces in Natalie Diaz's poem "The First Water is the Body." Diaz's call for the erotic encounter with the river reveals a complex form of desire that sees the erotic as a revolutionary force and illustrates Indigenous modes of being that exist in relation to others, human and non-human. It exemplifies sensitivities that extend relationality spatially towards the territories they inhabit. Diaz, a Mojave/Latinx poet, references this relation explicitly as the speaker asserts that the Colorado River is a part of her body, not metaphorically, but literally:

‘Aha Makav is the true name of the Mojave people given to them by their Creator, and that it loosely means “*the river runs through the middle of our body, the same way it runs through the middle of our land.*” (46)

Diaz distills here core beliefs of Mojave cosmovision, as she introduces the reader to an origin story where the Creator “loosed the river into the earth and built it into our living bodies,” which now runs through the middle of their body “the same way it runs through the middle of their land” (46). Further in the poem, we see the human body and the body of water that is the river further articulated as one and the same, as the former is described as an overflowing of sensorial energy “beyond six senses,” and as an “ecstatic state of energy, always on the verge of praying or entering any river of movement” (48). This potential of transformation is further underscored as she writes that “[e]nergy is a moving river moving my moving body” (48), a statement that illustrates another layer of relationality between body and river: the moving river is the energy that moves her “moving body,” energy which can be read simultaneously as the vital blood of the body, the water that hydrates it, or the kinetic energy of the river itself. If the river is the kinetic flow that propels the body, then the name ‘Aha Makav proposes an equivalence

of matter between Mojave land and Mojave body, both territories where the Colorado River runs. This complex ontology of body and water is then reinforced by the similarity between the words for land and for body, which are ultimately used interchangeably: “In Mojave thinking, body and land are the same. The words are separated only by the letters ‘ii and ‘a: ‘iimat for body, ‘amat for land” (48). The following verse offers a nod to the structural castling of land dispossession, resource extraction and cultural genocide, as the drying up of the Colorado River is equated, in question form, to the ongoing disappearance of Mojave people, as Diaz asks: “If I say, *My river is disappearing*, do I also mean, *My people are disappearing?*” (48).

Diaz’s description of Mojave ontology continually underscores the fact that river and body are one, not just as a juxtaposition or side by side, but rather “they are the same—body, energy, prayer, current, motion, medicine” (49). Diaz exposes the difficulties of translating onto-epistemological difference within a hierarchical system where only Western knowledge is valid, wondering what is lost in the act of translation, as she writes that “[t]his is a poor translation, like all translations” (46), and even quotes Jacques Derrida’s claim that “[e]very text remains in mourning until it is translated” (47). In this loss, the reader also sees a form of epistemic violence that leads the speaker to anxiously wonder “[h]ow can I translate—not in words but in belief—that a river is a body, as alive as you or I, that there can be no life without it?” (48). This anxiety over translation is evidence of the wound that settler colonialism’s ongoing violence exerts through the loss of Mojave language, culture and worldview—that is, through cultural genocide.

Diaz’s insistence on the inadequacy of English to hold Mojave cosmivision leads her to a John Berger quote: “true translation demands a return to the preverbal” (qtd. in Diaz, 49). She follows Berger’s idea by describing a new ontology of being that presents Mojave cosmivision as emerging sensually, as an erotic movement inwards where river and body are one:

We must go to the place before those two points—we must go to the third place that is the river. [...] We must go until we smell the black root-wet anchoring the river's mud banks. We must go beyond beyond to a place where we have never been the center, where there is no center—beyond, toward what does not need us yet makes us. (49)

The speaker here alludes to the reader's senses as she attempts to explain the original fusing of body and river, a fusing that evokes the eroticism of touch, of rubbing against and submerging the skin in the clay and of the warmth of red waters, the "emerald silk" that wraps the body in a powerful movement (49). We see this turn to the pre-verbal in this entanglement of body, land, and river, as Diaz's writing attempts to immerse the reader (Mojave or not) in a poetic territory where the possibility of understanding lies in the somatosensory experience of the world through the body. In other words, it is possible to not completely understand something and yet be affected by it. The call to the pre-verbal is therefore a disavowal of not only the English language, but also of Western philosophical tradition, for their frameworks cannot contain such corporeal relations.

Within this inscribing of the body and the river as one, the historical and material violence of settler colonialism braids the grief of the body and of the territory *river* together through the Mojave words for tears. The speaker explains the words *river* and *tears* are conflated in Mojave, "as if our river were flowing from our eyes," translating it as a "*great weeping*" or a "*river of grief*" (47). Diaz also blurs the line between these two territories, as Cabnal would call it, as she assigns anthropomorphic features to the river: "A river is a body of water. It has a foot, an elbow, a mouth. It runs. It lies in a bed. It can make you good, It has a head. It remembers everything" (50). Furthermore, she underscores this idea in the following stanzas, as the speaker not only relates the Colorado River to her own body, but also to the other beings that live in it, thus mingling together human and non-human bodies as one:

If I was created to hold the Colorado River, to carry its rushing inside me, if the very shape of my throat, of my thighs is for wetness, how can I say who I am if the river is gone? What does ‘Aha Makav mean if the river is emptied of the skeleton of this fish and the miniature sand dunes of its dry silten beds? If the river is a ghost, am I? (50)

Later in the poem, the speaker also critiques the notion that, as humans, “our bodies are all we are,” as such thinking “helps us disrespect water, air, land, one another,” thus hinting at the connection between Cartesian embodiment and capitalist extraction and exploitation (51). However, the poem does not let us forget throughout its stanzas that these are not Diaz’s poetic language or metaphors, but rather the voicing of Mojave ideas of corporeality, embodiment, and connection to place.

By looking at ideas of the erotic and tracing the threads that connect it to Indigenous relationality, Diaz’s poem is a space where relationships beyond the human/non-human divide proliferate and where the connection of body and land as a territory in itself is articulated. The rejection of metaphor, reiterated constantly, highlights the difficulty of translating particular Indigenous ways of relating to others for non-Indigenous audiences. Diaz’s poem may present an untranslatable message for audiences outside Mojave cosmovision, yet its untranslatability does not prevent it from becoming legible. The power of the erotic within the poetic space of the poem can unmoor the reader through the sensorial, allowing for new understandings of our relations with others—human or not. In this sense, Diaz’s refusal of the metaphor is part of an eco-erotic poetics of the body that makes space for “a critical activation of sensual matters” (Ferguson, 300), not only as a revolutionary act of individual liberation, but as a decolonial practice that can unearth new ways of feeling, understanding, and relating with those around us—human and non-human alike.

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Biography

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