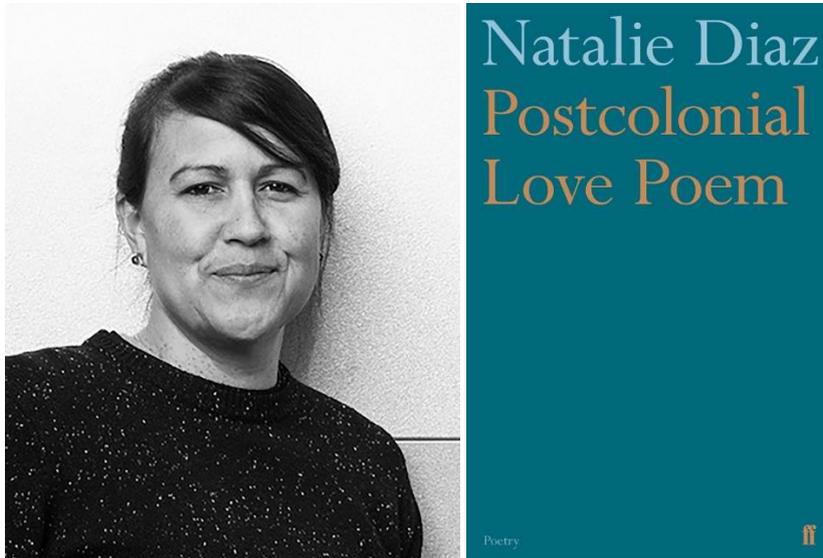


# ***Postcolonial Love Poem***

## **by Natalie Diaz**



Natalie Diaz was born in the Fort Mojave Indian Village in Needles, California. She is Mojave and an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian community. She earned a BA from Old Dominion University, where she received a full athletic scholarship. Diaz played professional basketball in Europe and Asia before returning to Old Dominion to earn an MFA. She is the author of the poetry collection *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012). Her honours and awards include the Nimrod/Hardman Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry, the Louis Untermeyer Scholarship in Poetry from Bread Loaf, the *Narrative Poetry Prize*, and a Lannan Literary Fellowship.

### **Reviews**

‘Reading Natalie Diaz’s Forward prize shortlisted collection, *Postcolonial Love Poem*, feels like a radical political act. It opens “The war ended / depending on which war you mean: those we started, / before those, millennia ago and onward, / those which started me, which I lost and won – / these ever-blooming wounds.” Wounds reappear throughout Diaz’s book as an image of unhealing trauma, where the public body of history – the genocide of America’s Native population – encounters the private spaces of desire and loss. An intimacy, an erotic interconnectedness, faces this difficult and violent history with love.’ (Sandeep Parmar, *The Guardian*)

‘Early in Natalie Diaz’s second book, the speaker has an epiphany that she’s “the only Native American / on the 8th floor of this hotel or any” in New York City’s smallest borough. The poem, “Manhattan Is a Lenape Word,” grieves the fact that “nobody asks, *Where have all / the Natives gone?*” even as it recognizes where the Natives are: “Not here.” Violence against Indigenous people is not just historical but ongoing, systemic and institutional, Diaz reminds us. “Native Americans make up less than / 1 percent of the population of America,” she writes in “American Arithmetic,” but “Police kill Native Americans more / than any other

race.” This knowledge, however fraught, emboldens Diaz to celebrate her survival as a queer Aha Makav woman living in the 21st century...

This book asks us to read the world carefully, knowing that not everything will be translated for us, knowing that it is made up of pluralities. “Let’s say it’s all text,” Diaz writes, “the animal, the dune, / the wind in the cottonwood, and the body.” Diaz’s collection is no doubt one of the most important poetry releases in years, one to applaud for its considerable demonstration of skill, its resistance to dominant perspectives and its light wrought of desire.’ (Emilia Philips, *New York Times*)

### Postcolonial Love Poem

I’ve been taught bloodstones can cure a snakebite,  
can stop the bleeding – most people forgot this  
when the war ended. The war ended  
depending on which war you mean: those we started,  
before those, millenia ago and onward,  
those which started me, which I lost and won–  
these ever-blooming wounds.  
I was built by wage. So I wage love and worse–  
always another campaign to march across  
a desert night for the cannon flash of your pale skin  
settling in a silver lagoon of smoke at your breast.  
I dismount my dark horse, bend to you there, deliver you  
the hard pull of all my thirsts–  
I learned *Drink* in a country of drought.  
We pleasure to hurt, leave marks  
the size of stones – each a cabochon polished  
by our mouths. I, your lapidary, your lapidary wheel  
turning – green mottled red–  
the jaspers of our desires.  
There are wildflowers in my desert  
which take up to twenty years to bloom.  
The seeds sleep like geodes beneath hot feldspar sand  
until a flash flood bolts the arroyo, lifting them  
in its copper current, opens them with memory–  
they remember what their god whispered  
into their ribs: *Wake up and ache for your life.*  
Where your hands have been are diamonds  
on my shoulders, down my back, thighs–  
I am your culebra.  
I am in the dirt for you.  
Your hips are quartz-light and dangerous,  
two rose-horned rams ascending a soft desert wash

before the November sky untethers a hundred-year flood—  
the desert returned suddenly to its ancient sea.  
Arise the wild heliotrope, scorpion weed,  
blue phacelia which hold purple the way a throat can hold  
the shape of any great hand—  
*Great hands* is what she called mine.  
The rain will eventually come, or not.  
Until then, we touch our bodies like wounds—  
the war never ended and somehow begins again.

### **They Don't Love You Like I Love You**

My mother said this to me  
long before Beyoncé lifted the lyrics  
from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

and what my mother meant by,  
*Don't stray*, was that she knew  
all about it – the way it feels to need

someone to love you, someone  
not *your kind*, someone white,  
some one some many who live

because so many of mine  
have not, and further, live on top of  
those of ours who don't.

*I'll say, say, say,*  
*I'll say, say, say,*  
What is the United States if not a clot

of clouds? If not spilled milk? Or blood?  
If not the place we once were  
in the millions? America is 'Maps' –

Maps are ghosts: white and  
layered with people and places I see through.  
My mother has always known best,

knew that I'd been begging for them,  
to lay my face against their white  
laps, to be held in something more

than the loud light of their projectors,  
as they flicker themselves – sepia  
or blue – all over my body.

All this time,  
I thought my mother said, *Wait*,  
as in, *Give them a little more time*

*to know your worth*,  
when really, she said, *Weight*,  
meaning *heft*, preparing me

for the yoke of myself,  
the beast of my country's burdens,  
which is less worse than

my country's plow. Yes,  
when my mother said,  
*They don't love you like I love you*,

she meant,  
*Natalie, that doesn't mean*  
*you aren't good.*

### **The First Water is the Body (extract)**

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 metaphor.

When a Mojave says, *Inyech 'Aha Makavch ithuum*, we are saying our name. We are telling a story of our existence. *The river runs through the middle of my body.*

So far, I have said the word *river* in every stanza. I don't want to waste water. I must preserve the river in my body.

In future stanzas, I will try to be more conservative.

### **Discussion Ideas**

- Where does the violence lie in 'Postcolonial Love Poem'? What about violence's opposite? Who or what is the love poem written to?
- The Yeah Yeah Yeahs sing they don't love you like I love you in 'Maps' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olIxlgcuQRU> Beyoncé sings the same <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeonBmeFR8o>. How does the meaning of this phrase change from one song to the next song to the poem? In what situation could you imagine using this phrase yourself? Is it a powerful or powerless phrase?

- 'America is *Maps*' - what's the difference between America and the map of America?
- 'The First Water is the Body' is a six and a half page long poem exploring the Colorado and other rivers and waters – we've extracted its first stanza. What might that word 'conservative' – with all its meanings – be doing at this point in the poem? If you were to say that a river is part of your body or existence, which river would it be?
- What does the term 'postcolonial' mean to you when thinking about poetry? Natalie Diaz is a poet writing out of America – what status has that country in relation to postcolonialism? How might an American answer that question? How about a Briton?

### **Other books by Natalie Diaz**

*When My Brother Was An Aztec* (Copper Canyon Press, 2013)

### **If you liked Natalie Diaz, try ...**

- Joy Harjo
- Layli Long Soldier
- Elizabeth Acevedo

### **Natalie Diaz online**

[nataliegermainediaz.com](http://nataliegermainediaz.com)