

The 'Nature Poem' Bucking Stereotypes About Native Americans

ARIANNA REBOLINI

JUNE 2, 2017

In his new book-length poem, Tommy Pico sends up Hollywood and literary archetypes with a protagonist who begrudges the great outdoors.

“I love this work.
Unpredictable & sweet & strong . . .”

—EILEEN MYLES



NATURE
POTEM
TOMMY
PICO

Teebs is a young, queer, Native American man who does not want to write a nature poem. The rest of the world seems to want him to, though, which is how he's found himself as the protagonist of a book-length poem by Tommy Pico.

Pico is a 33-year-old Brooklyn-based poet whose last book, 2016's *IRL*, debuted to critical acclaim from *The New Yorker* and *Lithub*. In his work, he tends to complicate Native pop-cultural identity, portraying aspects of the community that are dissonant with Hollywood and literary archetypes. In his new book, *Nature Poem*, main character Teebs confronts the fact that he's not that into nature—he finds it boring, and begrudges spending time in it. “The stars are dying / like always,” *Nature Poem* begins.

The 73 pages that follow show Teebs resisting the expectations he feels non-indigenous people around him carry for his writing (“An NDN poem must reference alcoholism”) and his relationships (“This white guy asks do I feel more connected to nature / bc I’m NDN”). As he navigates living and dating in the New York City, Teebs demonstrates that he's instead a man of multitudes. He's hyperaware of cultural appropriation, but a noted fan of pop culture (he loves Kelly Clarkson); he's hesitant about religion, but is spiritually moved by Beyoncé; he's frustrated by dating, but is still looking to get some.

Pico says Teebs is an extreme kind of “avatar” of himself, Pico “dialed up to a 10.” Nevertheless, the two overlap at some key points: Pico is also young and queer and has somewhat ambivalent feelings toward nature, having lived in New York for the past 15 years. He has struggled against archetypes about the Native American identity and has often described his specific experience of modern, indigenous, queer life through his poetry.

Nature Poem is a thematic continuation of *IRL*, which merged the structure of text messages and the tradition of Kumeyaay Bird Songs to address privacy, pop culture, spirituality, sexuality, and heritage. But it is also an exciting pivot—in its central examination of one contemporary Native man's relationship with nature, *Nature Poem* shows Pico deconstructing a persistent archetype. After the release of *Nature Poem* in early May, *Pacific Standard* spoke with Pico about his his avatar, how he endeavors to complicate monolithic ideas, and what the word “natural” means to him.



***Nature Poem* is about not wanting to write a nature poem, but it does have many lovely bits about nature in it. Would you say you have a complicated relationship with nature?**

Personally, no, I don't like camping, I don't like being out in nature. It's not really my thing. I am a city person. It's funny because I grew up in the middle of nowhere on a small Indian reservation and I felt very much a part of the natural landscape in the sense that it didn't scare me. I could go out into the mountains, to the creek, and it wouldn't scare me. And now as a person who's been in the city for 15 years, nature kind of frightens me again.

You know, the book itself was kind of a lark. I had told somebody, "I can't write a nature poem because that's too stereotypical." This person, he's a white dude, was like: "Oh, you could write anything you want! Why are you holding yourself back?" And that's not really the point. He said "holding yourself back" as if what I was experiencing was an inhibition borne from a lack of confidence or something, that the problem was personal. Really, I wasn't "holding myself back" as much as I was deciding to go in another direction. I funneled that anger into the poem, at least in the beginning.

When you talk about how writing a nature poem would be feeding too much into a stereotype, into that expectation of you as a Native American—who do you think needs to understand that?

I think it's any non-native person. Look, it's called nature *poem*. It is self-conscious about being a poem, and taking on the establishment of nature poetry, and that establishment happens to be extremely white, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson types, people who are like, "Nature is perfection." It's a clapback to the institution of nature poetry, which happens to be mostly white.

How have those expectations manifested in your life, or affected your identity, even beyond the literary world?

In my 20s, I endeavored, in a way, to distance myself from what could be considered stereotypical American Indian behavior. I would never put up a dreamcatcher or anything like that. I think as I've gotten older I've realized—and this is going to sound harsh—that I

was judgmental of other Indian people who, in my estimation, played up to that stereotype.

In reality, every indigenous person has a different way of expressing their identity because a lot of what we had was stolen from us. Sometimes there is pow-wow culture, this pan-Indian culture that [indigenous] people have to borrow from because there's not that much left of their own. In a way, it's forging a new relationship to one's own indigeneity.



Tommy Pico.
(Photo: Courtesy of Tommy Pico)

The book becomes your own version of a nature poem in part by incorporating pop culture and colloquial, abbreviated, text-like language. How do those areas of life fit into your idea of the “natural”?

At the time [I was writing the poem], NPR was writing all these articles asking, “What’s natural?” “What’s organic?” What does this word “natural” mean, what does this label mean? So I was fielding that information.

As for the Internet—I'm in my early 30s, so in addition to living on my phone, as most people do, I also made 'zines when I was a teenager. *Nature Poem* started out as a zine, and in that [format] you have a ton of abbreviation. The audience isn't some literary audience. You don't even really have a relationship with the audience; you have a relationship with the thing and then you leave it at a coffee shop and you go away. It gets to be strange and insular and imperfect and idiosyncratic. I didn't take literature as an undergraduate. I only took natural sciences. I thought I was going to go to medical school. So I didn't even really have a canonical idea of poetry in my head that I was writing for or speaking for, and I always just kind of let it be me. In that way, I think I was able to create a distinct object in a traditional form, which is the long poem.

In the last line of *Nature Poem*, you mention Instagramming sunsets. Two ways of reading that would be, on one side, lovingly—a kind of fondness about the ways we appreciate nature and share that appreciation—or, on the other side, mockingly. Do you fall on one side or the other?

To me that line was a moment of acceptance. It wasn't a judgment. It wasn't like, "Oh my god, all these fucking people are Instagramming the sunset," and it wasn't like, "It's so beautiful, everyone's Instagramming the sunset!" It was just like, this is happening. It was an acceptance that I think the person in the book was searching for the entire time. A reconciliation. Once I wrote that line I was like, "I think this is done? Yeah, this is done."

There is a tendency to equate "natural" with tradition and purity, which you pick apart. Sometimes what's natural is unpleasant, like when you're talking about the body, and sometimes the word "natural" is weaponized, especially for the gay community. How do you feel about the word "natural"?

It is a word used as a weapon in people's agendas. It's also late-stage capitalism; it's used to sell things. Its co-option, by both capitalism and in a punitive way, distorts the word from what it could possibly mean.

What I'm trying as a poet, and as an indigenous poet, and as someone who is continually attempting to create new ceremonies, is to just define that word myself. Because words are defined associatively as much as they are defined by the dictionary.

What's the definition you've come to for "natural"?

I think it will probably continue to evolve as I move throughout the world and gain new experiences and write new books and get older and experience age differently and get in relationships. The way I sort of understand it is: “natural” and “innate” and “intimate” and “reflexive” and “spontaneous” and “resonant”—they all have a similar valence shell. There’s a constellation of words that feed into what “natural” means to me. I don’t really use it, to be honest with you, because I don’t believe in it.

But take something like “honest”—I understand that word. When people are like, “How do you know if your writing is good enough to do X, Y, and Z?” I think “good” and “bad” is the wrong rubric. I don’t know what that means. And I don’t think, if you’re trying to be “good,” you’re going to get what you’re searching for. What’s the goalpost on that? It’s going to keep getting pushed back, because I don’t think it actually exists. What I do believe in is: Is this thing honest or not? I can get a sense of that.

Obviously, there are thoughts on colonialism in here, and what seems like a resentment over the fact that those who want you to perform this reverence for nature are also those who have had a big hand in destroying it. I’m wondering if you could address the politics in this book.

The first thing I will say is I’ve always endeavored to center indigenous queer voices in anything that I do. Politically, it’s important for me to expand the idea of what that is, what that means, what that could be. To breathe life and nuance and humanity into a group of people from whom that has historically been robbed. But I personally can’t muster, within me, that kind of resentment. I mean, I feel a deep and abiding well of anger inside of me all the time, but that anger is useful to me, because I can channel it. I’ve learned how to turn that into a utility, and have it be a part of the art that I make. It’s there, it’s undeniable, I don’t think it’s going anywhere, so I’ve tried to make use of it in a way that I can.

It seems like if you are going to have that kind of deep anger within you, the best-case scenario is to be able to use it to make your art.

And to perform too—I can use it when I’m performing, to just punch it up a little bit. But by saying it’s here and it’s not going anywhere, I don’t mean that it’s not something you can’t fight against. I definitely feel like making texts like these are the ways in which I’ve learned how to resist, and to put that resistance into the world.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Arianna Rebolini

Author

RELATED POSTS

SOCIAL JUSTICE

BRANDING AND PROFILING

This week we discuss the power of market branding, while Emily Badger examines racial profiling.

SEE MORE



SOCIAL JUSTICE

THERE'S AN ANTI-IMMIGRANT AMENDMENT TUCKED INTO THE DEMS' GUN-CONTROL BILL

Twenty-six Democrats in the House joined Republicans to pass a provision requiring that vendors notify ICE when background checks reveal gun applicants to be undocumented.

[SEE MORE](#)



SOCIAL JUSTICE

ON AMERICA'S FARMS, DATA IS THE NEW CASH CROP

Today's farmers are using all of the technology at their disposal to increase yields, which is critical if we hope to feed a rapidly growing population. But digitally driven farming is not without its potential downsides.

[SEE MORE](#)