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A Review of Vanessa Angélica Villarreal's *Beast Meridian*

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\$15.

In her 2017 collection, *Beast Meridian*, Vanessa Angélica Villarreal creates a liberatory cosmology and common sense for her brown girl speaker, who is trapped in the “assimilation rooms” of the United States. Villarreal’s style is associatively lyrical and reliant on symbolic imagery that builds across the poems—namely a “braid,” the “pines,” and a “split” in the self or the “meridian.” Through this associative imagery, we see an anti-colonial common-sense develop in the resistant speaker that results not from *healing* a cleft in the self, caused by colonialism, but from entering deeper into *nepantla* in an ancestor-guided act of transformation. The poems are rendered across three sections: “An Illness of Pines” chronicles the adolescent daughter of migrants living in a Texas border town; “A Halo of Beasts” features a cosmology of persona poems in the voice of the speaker’s ancestors; and “The Way Back,” an 11-page poem, recreates the speaker’s transformation as a brown girls’ apologue.

The first section of the collection spans 30-plus pages and works, ceaselessly, to communicate the headspace—via clauses fractured by white space—of the speaker, a young girl split between the realities of her Mexican household and her U.S. classroom. The first poem of the first section, a justified square entitled “Malinche,”¹ introduces many of the important symbols of the collection. The speaker, like the Mexican/Nahuatl historical figure this poem is titled after, marks a moment of rupture:

I cleave // white the wilderness take / violence
into ourself // elsewhere: // I hunt my hunter /
the wilderness in // myself I open my illness / to
the kingdom I am // cleaved by the old an d/ new
world

The cleft, the organizing symbol of the collection, is introduced here, and a large white square opens in the center of the poem, forcing a visual and aural rupture in Malinche’s voice. This rupture becomes the major extended metaphor of the collection and disrupts patriarchal narratives of Malinche. As queer, feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa—whom Villarreal uses as one of the book’s epigraphs—explains in her seminal Chicana biomythography, Malinche has been historicized as “*la chingada*—the fucked one. . . the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards. . .” (44). Here, however, Villarreal presents Malinche—similar to her speaker—as a woman between two worlds, the old (pre-colonial) and the new (colonial). This telling of La Malinche serves as a proper opening to poems seeking to challenge settler epistemes that rationalize brown girl as beast, as bad and morally corrupt.

Another poem in the first section, “Dissociative States,” chronicles the rupture in the speaker herself and introduces the associative images of the “braid” and the “pines.” In the first section of the poem, Villarreal writes,

11 & we are in pain because our umbilical cords
have grown back & root / themselves to object of
vice 12 but mine is a braid snaking out of myself 13
to / find its root in the pines

and further down in the first section,

¹ Important to note that Villarreal includes a poem entitled “Malinalli” in the second section—a progression that suggests a move from contemporary Mexican cultural identity to pre-colonial Nahuatl-language native culture. This poem begins, “history is a woman slandered” (70).

24 I call to someone, try to warn, but I am
suspended tighter still 25 my hair / tangled up in
leafy branches, toenails twisted into roots—

Here the braid “snakes” from the speaker’s head, calling up the Gorgon of Western mythology, Medusa, but something important is happening with the braid as a symbol in the mythology that Villarreal is establishing. The braid is an umbilical cord, a symbol of family lineage, and the subtle “but mine” distinguishes the speaker’s actions from the rest of her family—if they’re going to vices to deal with the pain, she is going outside of herself at first, becoming a beast with “toenails twisted into roots.” Here, Villarreal risks calling up Western, enlightenment strategies of dehumanization, which rationalize brown peoples, native peoples, and colonial subjects as fauna, or features of the land, primitive.

However, Villarreal writing the brown girl as beast isn’t an ironic or unconscious move. At the beginning of the collection, Villarreal quotes Fanon: “When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms, he constantly refers to the bestiary.” Villarreal’s choice to use this Fanon quote, which indicts the settler’s limitations, not only makes us aware of the way settlers see native peoples—as non-human animals and fauna of the land—but elevates this language as the context in which we should be reading the symbolism within the poems. The speaker confronts herself as the beast Western epistemes would have her be. Embracing this self allows her to resist. “The feminist rebel in her is the Shadow-Beast. . .” Andalzúa writes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and in many moments throughout the collection, it is clear how much Andalzúa influences these poems, not least as the other epigraph of the book alongside Fanon. In that epigraph, Andalzúa introduces her concept of *nepantla* as a place where “Transformations occur,” as an “always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (Villarreal 5). With these epigraphs providing context, the rupture pro-

gressing across the first section can be read as the *nepantla* described by Andalzúa. It would seem this is the space the speaker finally enters as a result of her pain, and where we find her in the second section of the collection.

As opposed to the splitting that’s merely in-progress in the first section, by the second section the speaker is already cloven and has come to terms with it. In “Beast Meridian,” the title poem, Villarreal writes,

girl // never / forget this night sky // torn into in
your center— / the widening line that splits //
your body into halves / was always a star-map // to
home

Here the speaker addresses herself in third person with a combination of instruction and affirmation. Crucial to note, is the vertical cleft, fashioned here as a meridian. The meridian is an imaginary vertical line that runs through the North and South poles of the earth. In this poem, the poet presents the meridian as a “widening line that splits,” and, also, as that which indicates the night sky, or which reaches upward. One could read this widening line, cleaving the speaker’s body into halves, as *nepantla*, the in-between place introduced and inhabited by the speaker in “Malinche” at the beginning of the collection. It is this widening line that allows the speaker to reach toward her matrilineal history and rightful land as home. It is this in-between place in which she recovers what she’s been separated from, and with it creates a new cosmology, “the return of the beasts,” the return of her ancestors, pre-colonial and since.

In the final section of this collection, Villarreal composes an apologue that makes an intervention into the fairy tales of the Western canon—those in which evil beasts threaten young, white princesses who are saved by white prince charming. Villarreal’s fable provides a comprehensive and reflective story



that details how the speaker arrived at her new cosmology and its accompanying rationality. In the first line of the poem, the speaker addresses the American Dream: “It begins with the estrangement from the land, born into a system of dreaming, of dreaming about the dream.” In this fairytale, the status quo of the settler nation-state is transposed. The American Dream is exposed as an insidiously misleading trap, and the white prince, the knight-and-shining-armor of Western kingdoms, is not presented as a symbol of safety but as an omen:

One day, an uncursed / boy invites her into the
pines. . . The uncursed are the corn-fed sons,
inheritors of the kingdom, all sinew and muscle
and / good blond genes. The West has lain down
for their conquest . . . The kingdom takes back the
boy’s coins, charges her interest. For failing to pay,
she is / labeled a criminal, made ever suspicious

As a result of her pain, the girl in the legend transforms into a beast and goes deep into the forest, a storyline that we recognize from the first section. Other symbols across the collection reappear—the braid, the pines. It is clear this fairytale is a rendition of the events the speaker has experienced: the cleave, the entrance into *nepantla*, and the creation of a new cosmology. We learn that “The girl takes a knife to her scalp and crops her hair, braids the wild black strands to each branch as offering,” before she “runs through the forest in the old way,” where her “grief becomes passage—into the land, into her body, into the waters of herself and all the mothers before her.” The brown girl speaker creates this fairy tale for other brown girls as a last act, so that they too might resist the assimilation rooms of the West and embrace the beast meridian—the cleft that creates an opening into *nepantla*, where they might “fashion a crown of constellations.” The place where they might be connected to their ancestors and “repair the seams between worlds,” no longer

estranged from their rightful home or victims of a national narrative that criminalizes them.

Subverting the narratives of the nation-state is one of the important functions poets can have. The narratives the nation-state has chosen to push as its history and legacy, and the choices in language that have created these narratives, are washed in blood. Villarreal doesn’t just testify to the brown girl’s experience in the United States—she shows us an alternative world in which the brown girl might begin to live whole.