

Linda Rodriguez. *Dark Sister: Poems*. Mammoth Publications, 2018. 88 pp. ISBN: 9781939301666.

<https://mammothpublications.net/writers-m-to-z/rodriguez-linda-dark-sister/>

Linda Rodriguez has been publishing poetry since 1994, when *Skin Hunger* was printed by Scapegoat Press. She has worked to broaden and diversify the definition of poetry in the Americas and has connected women and voices across the globe by serving as co-convenor of the Women and Environment Caucus at the United Nations international conference, Women 2000: Beijing Plus Five and editing *The World is One Place: Native American Poets Visit the Middle East* with fellow poet Diane Glancy. She is author of the nonfiction guide to writing, *Plotting the Character-Driven Novel*, and she has proven her ability to do that in a series of mysteries featuring Cherokee and Latinx Chief of Police, Marquitta “Skeet” Bannion. In her latest collection of poetry, *Dark Sister*, she writes of hearing the phrase, “get your nose out of that book” as a child, but it is clear the pages continued to call to her as she became the creator of books always reaching in new directions (9).

Dark Sister takes its name from the way she has been described in relation to her siblings. She is the “dark sister” the “dream sister,” “the witch sister,” “the crow sister,” the sister “stripped of layers of pride and shame, / become glowing cinder in the palm of a hand.” (14) Her ability to look back now on her life and her family is the result of drawing power from these descriptions familiar to many women who dare to be strong, visionary and unafraid of finding their own paths.

The poems in *Dark Sister* appear in four parts, each exploring an aspect of Rodriguez’s being: “Mixed-Blood,” “Mestiza,” “Cherokee” and “Woman.” Although it may seem she wishes to clarify each identity for readers, she instead illustrates the ways in which language and life blur these definitions. Poems in every section touch on the joy, and sometimes pain, of being a woman but the focus is about being a mixed-blood woman, combining all the adjectives that might be hurled her way. She introduces the blended ethnic outcome of generations building lives together in America and does not write within the stereotype of any category as she shares her family’s history. In the poem “Where I Come From” she explains: “I come from Sequoiah and John Ross. . .the Great Smokies and Tahlequah and Broken Arrow, from Highland crofts and Dublin slums. . .from San Diego and Coronado and El Cajon” (9). Through genealogy, Rodriguez writes of people, place and politics and her own origin of her story.

As a whole the collection is a call for more complex definitions. In the United States the term “mixed-blood” has been used to support blood-quantum definitions of identity while “mestizo” was often used in Central and South American nations to support hierarchies of race and ethnicity placing people of mixed European heritage above indigenous people. Rodriguez illustrates how the history of ᎠᎵᎠᎵ ᎠᎵᎠᎵ (Tsalagihi Ayeli, the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma); ᎠᎵᎠᎵ ᎠᎵᎠᎵ (Tsalagihi Detsadanilvgi, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians); and the ᎠᎵᎠᎵ ᎠᎵᎠᎵ (Anigiduwagi Anitsalagi or United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians) is

one that needs unravelling to understand where histories intersect and where agency and equality were denied. These nations represent multiple possible futures for Cherokee people and Rodriguez asks readers to think beyond such terms as American Indian, Native American, even Cherokee, to understand the complexity of multiple identities that have changed over time. Through her poetry, Rodriguez, traces the connections between what her Cherokee ancestors have urged her to remember and how the way Cherokees choose to be in the world today. The carefully arranged collection ends with a reminder to “stop surrounding yourself with mirrors / turn them into windows” experience life, to let it flow as a sensation in her poem “Through the Body” (87)

Several themes are recurring in her poems. Peace is a concept she works to describe a variety of ways. It is the “Indian peace” of a fondly remembered relative (10). It is “the peace of coming to a hard place” in the poem, “God of Hawks” (13). It is also part of the phrase “go in peace” which she whispers in the elegy “The Things She Gave Me” as she thanks Juana (Jenny) Gomez Rodriguez for being the mother she needed (17). And it is included in the apology she makes to Frida Kahlo for the way American culture has mistaken her attempts to stay sane as exotic affect. “They won’t let you rest / in any kind of peace” she says about the ways in which Kahlo’s art is now marketed to consumers seeking an icon of Mexican identity (36). Peace is also echoed when “La Malinchine Speaks of Cortez” and asks, “how was I to live in peace after him?” (37). Giving a voice to the Nahua woman who served as slave, interpreter and bearer of children to Hernan Cortes as he conquered the Aztec Empire is one way for Rodriguez to further complicate, and confront, the deep wounds of history. She points out the need for women’s voices and the long tradition in matrilineal nations of women as part of the process of negotiating a place among other societies and on the land. At a time when many are writing of Mother Nature, Rodriguez writes of mothers and nature, reminding us to nurture the relationships that sustain life. Her place is the center of the continent, and it is in Oklahoma where she finds:

winds and sky that could pull you off your feet
 into infinity if you didn’t have troubles to weight you down
 to the earth, I make my peace with it
 and come home (13).

A second theme in many of her poems is death, which she deconstructs and recomposes as deftly as she does peace. In some cases, she confronts death as a part of shared history, a legacy of conquest and removal. When she writes of the ghost La Llorona “the woman in white, / wandering the night in tears for the children she drowned, / looking for new little victims” she could be speaking of La Malinchine or the ghastly female giant of John Gast’s painting, “American Progress” (17). Rodriguez understands the need for honesty when facing terminal situations. She is brutally frank about her own brushes with death and uses plain words to describe her “ugly, puckered scar” and “3 ½ pain-filled, sleepless weeks” when “lovely bony Ms. Death” came looking (31). But she remains as unafraid as baby raptors learning to hunt and become “death on two wings” in the poem “Redtail Hawk” (76). In the “Ofrenda” she takes fearlessness one step farther to write, “I would wrestle the Lady of the Dead herself / for possession, to wrench you / from peaceful rest in Mictlan / and back into the tempest / that was us” (39). Life is worth living according to the poems of *Dark Sister*. Reaching backward toward

the knowledge of elders in the distant past, she describes life as a connection to a “labyrinth of galaxies spinning out of control,” an “eternal dissipation of energy” (31). She refers to the same maze in the poem “Indian Time” as she reframes “Indian time” as less a cultural contrast in punctuality and more an implication of galactic relativity, an ancient concept worth embracing.

And I see my life’s circular maze,
three-dimensional
rising ever
to join the eternal spiraling
wheel of stars” (56).

This same coil of being is found in the content and form of “At the Stomp Dance” which creates a rhythm by beginning each line with “now. . .” as the feast ends, children play, a fire is started and:

Now, the women set the rhythm with their fast turtleshelled feet.
Now, the circle spirals out from the fire.
Now the dance can begin (81).

Rodriguez teaches readers to try “Living in Aztec Time” paying attention not to time but to the order of things, resting comfortably with the knowledge that someday we will all “reach that hole in the sky” (83).

These lessons in life and death are put forth mostly as free verse without formal structure and in the voice of the poet. A few notable exceptions are a short series of poems written from the perspective of various non-humans. Crow recognizes the Anthropocene and speaks of the “furless, clawless thing” in control of the present (57). Owl speaks of “a long and happy relationship with death” (61). Oak talks about sunlight and strong roots invisible to others while River speaks of the power to survive (62, 63). By viewing the world from another being’s perspective Rodriguez reforges old networks of knowing.

She achieves the same reconnection with her use of Cherokee throughout the book. By mixing Cherokee and English she inserts another ontology into the discourse. The poem “Learning Cherokee” seems to be a list but is a lesson in colonization as the phrase “*ga yo tli ga do hi*, just a little land” is repeated and eventually becomes “*ni gad a ga do a*, all your land” (72). The list also contains the word “*yonega*,” the term for white settlers, which appears first in the poem “Trickster Time” as a grandmother remembers what the “*yonega* ranchers” took and the circles of returning required to become nations again after “*nu na hi du na tlo hi lu i*, that Trail Where They Cried” (23). Readers also learn *ghi gua* is the Beloved Woman, the matrilineal leader who served seven clans (67). This use of Cherokee emphasizes language revitalization as an essential part of cultural sustainability a way to live in the present but also “to go back / to that first world / of belonging, being part of a whole, / *u li he li s di*, / joy” (42).

Dark Sister contains poems which Asga Ya Galun lati (the Great Spirit, Creator) will hear. Some are declarations, others are conversations, others still are chants and prayers to all the beings who take time to listen. They are songs of praise for mockingbirds, lightning, a loved one asleep in the same bed and “all things silent and hidden” (48). They are a reminder:

The world is waiting for you to know.
The sun is there. Bring it into being.
Listen to the blue wind.

Listen to that wind.
Something is being told in the woods (78).

Margaret Noodin, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee