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### *Envelopes of Air: Poetic Correspondence as Partnership*

**Abstract I:** Il 23 maggio 2018 è apparso sul *The New Yorker* un articolo intitolato “Envelopes of Air. Two poets forge a bond amid the shifting landscape of contemporary America”. Al suo interno, la corrispondenza poetica tra Ada Limón e Natalie Diaz, nella quale la vita quotidiana si intreccia alle contraddizioni degli Stati Uniti contemporanei. Il presente articolo si propone di esplorare come Diaz & Limón mescolino voci e immaginario per creare un micromondo poetico comune, un “third space” di amicizia e partnership, fondato sull’intimità condivisa e in grado di sfidare il *dominator mindset* (Eisler 1988) attraverso l’esplorazione del corpo e della terra.

**Abstract II:** On May 23, 2018 *The New Yorker* published a feature titled “Envelopes of Air. Two poets forge a bond amid the shifting landscape of contemporary America”. Within, the poem-shaped correspondence between poets Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz, regarding both daily life and the contradictions of contemporary U.S.A. This article seeks to explore how Diaz & Limón reveal and enmesh their voices, language and imagery to create an eight-poem world in itself, “a third space” of friendship and intentional partnership, built upon shared vulnerability and engaged in exposing and subverting the dominator mindset (Eisler 1988) through the exploration of body and land.

**Keywords:** Natalie Diaz, Ada Limón, *Envelopes of Air*, poetic correspondence, partnership.

#### 1. A Braid of Poems

On May 23, 2018 *The New Yorker* published a poetry feature titled “Envelopes of Air. Two poets forge a bond amid the shifting landscape of contemporary America”. Within, the poem-shaped correspondence between poets Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz.

Ada Limón has authored several poetry collections including *The Hurting Kind* (2022); *The Carrying* (2018); *Bright Dead Things* (2015); *Sharks in the Rivers* (2010); *Lucky Wreck* (2005); and *This Big Fake World* (2005). Her poetry won many accolades, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry for *The Carrying*. In July 2022, she became the 24<sup>th</sup> US Poet Laureate, the first Latina woman to hold such position. Natalie Diaz is a Pulitzer Prize-winning Mojave (‘Aha Makhav)/ American poet and language activist. Diaz is the author of *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020), winner of the 2021 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and finalist for the National Book Award and the Forward Prize in Poetry, and *When My Brother Was an Aztec*

(2012), winner of an American Book Award. She is an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian community.

*Envelopes of Air* consists of eight letter-poems, alternating between the four penned by Limón and the four by Diaz, like any epistolary venture: *Cargo* (Limón to Diaz), *Eastbound, Soon* (Diaz to Limón), *Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in The Air* (Limón to Diaz), *Isn't the Air Also A Body, Moving?* (Diaz to Limón), *Sway* (Limón to Diaz), *From the Desire Field* (Diaz to Limón), *From the Ash Inside the Bone* (Limón to Diaz) and *That Which Cannot Be Stilled* (Diaz to Limón). The collaborative, truly dialogical, approach to the undertaking can be also detected in the decision to include, within *The New Yorker's* feature, audio recordings of the poets reading their letter-poems, as well as illustrations by Rachel Levit Ruiz, thereby integrating written word, audio and image.

The letter-poems are simultaneously poems *and* letters on a literary *continuum*. Their hybrid nature, part epistolary, part poetic endeavour leads to place where the public and private dimension collide, and questions of literariness and artifice arise (Guillén 1994). As will be demonstrated, the letter-poems did not originate with the intention of publication or for the completed lyrics to join the public sphere. However, in the end, they did, both as an independent poetic production with only digital distribution and as additions to the subsequent collections of both poets' works.

On a surface level, the letter-poems appear wide-ranging and vaguely hermetic. Diaz and Limón write to one another about their daily lives, made up of gardening and travels, insomnia, anxiety and health scares. On a closer reading, however, the lines of poetry unveil a far richer enmeshing, as well as a clear poetic (and political) intent. Exchanged during the course of nine months (January-September 2017), the eight works depict lives deeply rooted to the space they unfold in, where the world within and the world without of both poets are mutually resonant by virtue of the intimacy of their conversation. The poets' exchange engenders the actualization of a model of poetic collaboration whose premise and implementation are imbued with Riane Eisler's notion of "partnership model", that is to say, a social system based on equality, mutual care, respect, and reciprocity (Eisler 1988, 2002; Eisler & Fry 2019). Through their collaboration, Diaz and Limón not only challenge and subvert the perception of poetry as an almost individualistic, certainly solitary pursuit, but also demonstrate how, particularly when undertaken as a collective endeavour, it can serve as a means to critique what Eisler defines as "the dominator model" – a social system characterised by fear, violence, inequality, and authoritarianism (Eisler 1988, 2002; Eisler & Fry 2019). A model which, to a certain extent, can be regarded as the core configuration of today's American society.

At its core, *Envelopes of Air* is a creatively intimate and engaged partnership aimed at resisting erasure, while constructing a dialogic alternative to more usual methods of poetry-making (Kuusela 2015). According to Dominique Vargas, it can be regarded as an "embodied political, aesthetic response to settler colonial mapping" (2020).

That of a poetic correspondence was a format Limón and Diaz settled upon organically when deciding the shape and scope of a collaboration they had been meaning to embark on for some time. The first letter-poem was sent by Limón, who, when interviewed by Kevin Young, *The New Yorker's* poetry editor, on the special edition of *The New Yorker: Poetry* podcast,

remarked that the main intention behind what later became *Envelopes of Air*, was that of genuine communication to a one-person audience (*The New Yorker: Poetry* podcast)<sup>1</sup>. Crucial to the collaboration was preserving its authenticity, thus Limón and Diaz did not establish any time restraint (no timeframe, nor deadline), ignored any idea of future collocation<sup>2</sup>, and set a single rule: the letter-poems would exist in a place and time of their own, on the outside of any other form of communication (be it text, email, social media or in-person meeting). The poems were sent by email, in the form of attachments, with nothing in the body of the email save some words in the spirit of “a letter for you”<sup>3</sup>. This, and the degree of intimacy that developed within the exchange, allowed for the letter-poems to become what Diaz calls a “third space”<sup>4</sup> of friendship and vulnerability:

They were that intimate time and space for us, of a poem, of a letter, of a room that was a new room for us to inhabit, individually, as we moved toward or away from ourselves and one another, and together, as we became a new space for each other to fill with words (Diaz 2018).

They became a stepping into one another’s landscape, able to construct a third, merged one, born out of shared perspectives, voices blending without the need to over-explain or

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<sup>1</sup> From this point forward, all references to the podcast will be presented as TNYPP, accompanied by timestamps and by transcripts where necessary. The recording of the podcast is available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/poetry/ada-limon-and-natalie-diaz-discuss-envelopes-of-air> (consulted on 17/05/2023).

<sup>2</sup> At a certain point of the interview Limón states that they “had been asked by this anthology to perhaps work on a collaboration and so we kind of had it in mind that maybe it would become something but we also didn’t want to give ourselves any restraints” (TNYPP, 00:23:42). The letter-poems were indeed later included in *They Said: A Multi-Genre Anthology of Contemporary Collaborative Writing* edited by Dean Rader and Simone Muench and published in June 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Diaz’s reply to Young: “[What] we ended up doing is that when Ada would send me the letter-poem and I would reply back to her only with a letter-poem. We didn’t write an email to give it any context or frame. We also texted but we never talked about [the letter-poems] so they had their own private space between the two of us”. Limón adds: “When we would reach out to each other we would never actually speak about what we were talking about within the poems so that they only really conversed with one another. [...] I think there was this idea of creating this kind of intimate protected space and keeping it somewhat sacred and not trying to muddy it with the everyday conversation [...] but instead make sure that those the language of those poems lived in its own sort of hovering space (TNYPP, 00:02:50 - 00:03:53).

<sup>4</sup> The notion of a third, shared relational entity whose existence originates from collaboration, reciprocity and communal effort is by no means exclusive to Limón and Diaz’s epistolary enterprise. For example, American poets Denise Duhamel and Maureen Seaton, during the course of a decades-long poetic collaboration – comprising of *Exquisite Politics* (1997), *Oyl* (2000), and *Little Novels* (2002) – have developed what they themselves define as a “a voice that is at the same time both of us and neither of us, the mysterious voice that sings between us” (Duhamel & Seaton quoted in MacDonald 2011). Despite the obvious differences in dynamics and methods, it is interesting to note how, for both duos of poets, the forging of some alternative, shared entity, be it a voice or a space, is inherently liberating as well as poetically and politically generative. If Diaz and Limón employ the “third space” as both a place for sharing with one another their thoughts and vulnerabilities as women-poets and a starting point for the fostering of an alternative reading of contemporary life as minorities in the USA, Duhamel and Seaton, with their “third voice”, hope to promote in readers an understanding of their distinct yet interconnected position within the universe and a fresh perspective on femininity, and thus open-mindedness (MacDonald 2011).

perform for an audience, with the certainty of being understood as “a poet reader, a woman reader, a brown-woman reader” (Limón 2018b)<sup>5</sup>.

The enmeshment of voices, language, imagery, and literary references which takes place in the tapestry-like epistolary has also the great merit of expanding the dialogue beyond the “third room”, reaching into a far greater network. The connections made, the voices brought into the correspondence, are especially significant when looked at as collective re-writing of individualistic approaches<sup>6</sup>. One of such references is the mention, on Limón’s part, of Robin W. Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013): “the way *wiingaashk* (is that the word, / the name for sweetgrass that Kimmerer gives?)” (*From the Ash Inside the Bone*). In her work, Kimmerer, “narratively promotes a much-needed synthesis between indigenous and Western understandings of the environment and ecology” (Barnd 2015: 439) going beyond the conventional and accepted logics of “mainstream green politics or policies of preservation and conservation” (Barnd 2015: 439). What lies at the core of Kimmerer’s narrative, and ultimately of her philosophy, is the recognition of the reciprocal interaction at the heart of all relationships with both the human and especially the non-human world. A notion that Native peoples – Kimmerer is herself an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation – have fostered and which the Western world has perhaps discarded or replaced (Kimmerer 2013). Being an exploration of sweetgrass, a sacred plant for many Indigenous peoples of North America (the braiding, drying and subsequent burning of which is used in ritual ceremonies as a way of cleansing, purifying or blessing), Kimmerer’s book advocates for a renewed connection with the land, from a place of nurture and active, communal participation:

A sheaf of sweetgrass, bound at the end and divided into thirds, is ready to braid. In braiding sweetgrass – so that it is smooth, glossy, and worthy of the gift – a certain amount of tension is needed. [...] Of course you can do it yourself – [...] but the sweetest way is to have someone else hold the end so that you pull gently against each other, all the while leaning in, head to head, chatting and laughing, watching each other’s hands, one holding steady while the other shifts the slim bundles over

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<sup>5</sup> During the interview, Limón tells Kevin Young: “I think for me the wonderful thing about writing these poems was that those could just be self-evident and they could just be within the work and they could just be what they are which is part of life and it doesn’t, didn’t, necessarily have to be over explained for an audience or you know ‘you may not understand this but’. And when I was writing to Natalie I never had to say that everything was understood, and that shifts the poems. There’s a freedom in it. Like sort of a great opening” (TNYPP, 00:16:16 - 00:16:52).

<sup>6</sup> Identifying influences which might have played into Limón and Diaz’s epistolary poetic practice, whether explicitly or not, is a complex procedure given the double nature of their endeavour, at once letter writing and poem crafting. When asked by Kevin Young, Limón states that she “thought about the feminist poets that started out [and] how a lot of those poems were talking to one another and sometimes they were chiding one another sometimes they were answering one another but it felt like there was a movement happening” (TNYPP, 00:25:30 - 00:26:40). Limón’s answer appears to evoke the dual nature of her correspondence with Diaz, where the personal mixes with the political. While replying, she also explicitly mentions poets such as: “Rukeyser and Plath and Sexton, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde” (TNYPP, 00:26: 54) further solidifying the connection of the letter-poems with a sort of poetry able to join intimacy and advocacy.

one another, each in its turn. Linked by sweetgrass, there is reciprocity between you, linked by sweetgrass, the holder is as vital as the braider (Kimmerer 2013: ix).

Braiding sweetgrass is a collective act, the braid a *medium* of reciprocity and partnership. The “sweetest way” to braid is communally, helping one another, taking turns, feeling connected to a whole community that surrounds you. In this light, Limón and Diaz’s correspondence can be regarded as an act of braiding, so much so that even the “ritualistic”, cleansing quality of sweetgrass is conjured in *Envelopes of Air*: “I’ll settle for these words you gave me: *sweet smoke*, / and I’ll plant them into my chest so I can take this / circling spell and light it on fire” (*From the Ash Inside the Bone*). Here, Limón calls onto the page sweetgrass’ healing properties to body and spirit.

The publication of *Envelopes of Air*, then, may be regarded as the act of burning the braid of sweetgrass, to propel the “*sweet smoke*” towards a wider audience, as a way of encouraging and honouring the chance at connection<sup>7</sup>. Central to the considerations and reflections found in *Envelopes of Air* is the exploration of the body as a channel as well as the place where that connection (with all its non-linear evolutions) takes place. Evoked in its corporeality and weight, its meaning and its relating to what surrounds it (whether through movement, place-making or touch), the body becomes the threshold between the world within and the world without, a site of resistance to wrongful mindsets and of promotion of more egalitarian, reciprocal ways of living.

## 2. Embodied Correspondence

Since its inception, Limón and Diaz’s correspondence centres around the body as a place in which the intimate and the collective, the personal and the political, collide and enmesh. For both Limón and Diaz, the body is not a neutral terrain: theirs is a female body, a brown body and, for Diaz, a queer body. An entity that, to all intents and purposes, has been and still is marginalised, if not brutally erased, by dominator culture (Hooks 2009). Instead, what *Envelopes of Air* provides Limón and Diaz with is a space where the perspectives operating on the body can be dissected and rewritten in a positive way, no longer “the bruised or wounded or victimized body of brown women” (Diaz, TNYPP, 00:18:40). In addition, to both poets the body is a body-in-place, entangled in the land it inhabits: the U.S.A., whose past and present have been and continue to be shaped by colonial and dominator perspectives (Bacon & Norton 2019; Langman & Lundskow 2016; Steinmetz 2014). For instance, in 2017, at the time Diaz and Limón were corresponding, government executive orders increased the reach of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)’s Enforcement and Removal Operations, which resulted in the arrests of a large portion of immigrants without authorization, regardless of whether they had a criminal record (Bialik 2018). It is

<sup>7</sup> The act of burning sweetgrass (and other sacred herbs and plants) in ritual settings is called a “Smudging Ritual”, its aim is “to better the lives of people and the places they live”. Generally, smudging is regarded as “the bridge between mortal life and higher realms, bringing in good spirits and eliminating any negative, stagnant ones. This ceremony lifts away any sadness, impurities, and anxieties, and remediates poor health, leaving nothing but peace and harmony for both individuals and the environment after the cleansing”, in <https://www.powwows.com/native-american-smudging/> (consulted on 08/05/2023).

not surprising that such events engendered in both Diaz and Limón, the necessity not only to write to one another (without the need to perform, exposing their vulnerabilities) but also that their correspondence organically ended up focusing on the interconnections between body and land.

The centrality of the body is established within the poem's titles, which either explicitly contain the term (e.g. *Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in The Air; Isn't the Air Also A Body, Moving*) or refer to some embodied experience, be it the carrying of a weight/burden, or movement (e.g. *Cargo; Eastbound, Soon; Sway*). The illustrations accompanying the epistolary appear to emphasise such significance, for they depict bodies, limbs or faces inspired by and in direct correlation to lines in the poems.

In *Cargo*, which ushers in the collaboration, Limón words revolve around the body, which appears at first as an entity submerged and perceivably corporeal: "the warm bath covering my ears – / one of which has three marks in the exact shape of a triangle", still at home in its "own atmosphere's asterism"; later as a subject whose movement has been restricted: "we're travelling with our passports now. / Reports of ICE raids and both our bloods / are requiring new medication"; and thus inhibited in its subjectivity by external authorities in a way that "changes the way the body occupies space" (Vargas 2020), specifically the way a certain type of body occupies space. The idea of movement (of a body moving) is exacerbated by Limón's use of train imagery, which swiftly starts to permeate the entire correspondence. Limón mentions the freight trains which "thunder by" her house, directing the readers' / listeners' attention to the poem's title, especially when she asks: "Do you ever wonder what the trains carry? / Aluminum ingots, plastic, brick, corn syrup, limestone, fury, alcohol, joy". It is the insertion of the term "joy" that furthers the idea of some sort of connection being traced between the body and the train, both *carrying* weight, whether in actuality or figuratively (as in the "gray and pitchfork" atmosphere that envelopes Limón's body and surroundings). Diaz's reply in *Eastbound, Soon* adopts a similar imagery, while expanding on the idea of limited movement: on one hand a body unwillingly restricted, her perspective, as an Indigenous woman, "always implicated by a feeling of loss that is similar to Limón's but distinct from it as the object of settler-colonial identity formation in occupied lands" (Vargas 2020):

I have my passport with me these days, too, like you and Manuel.  
Not because of ICE raids, but because I know  
what it's like to want to leave my country. *My country* –  
to say it is half begging, half joke.

On the other hand, a body which finds in desire, in intimacy, its own dimension, its own willing immobility: "a wave of moonlight riding the dusked rails of her arms. / I was tied there – to the moon, those tracks". The use of the train *motif*, becomes a medium to describe Limón and Diaz efforts to reconcile their bodies and the space they inhabit (and are in turn inhabited by). *Eastbound, Soon* presents the body as a willingly or unwillingly restricted subject, yet also as an object, as *cargo*, by casting the shadow of Houdini's wife, who "died on our line, too, / on an eastbound train", over Diaz's own body: "I'm eastbound

myself, soon"; the ominous correlation is quickly turned on its head, since Diaz's voyage is presented as a celebration of embodied life: "the grime I might make of my body in that splendid city". The ambivalent superimposition of bodies and encounters is also present in Limón's reply, in *Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in the Air*, where, at first, she pictures "a body free of its anchors / ... / a locomotion propelling us", only to later scale back the scope of her flight: "but here I am: the slow caboose of clumsy effort". The shift in focus between "us" and "I", and in spatial dimension (locomotion propelling (far away)/ *here* I am) speaks of a sense of identity ever-shifting between the wish to be "untethered and tethered all at once", a body unmoored, and the feeling of being "lived in, like a room". It is important to note, however, that the relational, almost communal nature of Limón's sense of identity never wavers, despite the sensation of splintering it engenders: "I am always in too many worlds". Limón's fluctuation "disrupts the subject/object dyad, insisting on a flexibility of selfhood in communion with others" (Vargas 2020): "another me speeding through the air, another me waving / from a train window watching you / waving from a train window watching me".

Both Limón and Diaz sometimes appear to be in two minds when imagining alternative ways of inhabiting their bodies and the land. Whether fuelled by a sense of loss or anxiety, the uncertainty leaves them to grapple with the way their body occupies a space that has been made inhospitable, if not downright hostile, by history and politics, a space which, systematically "objectifies their presence" (Vargas 2020). Limón asks Diaz (and herself) "Creely says, *The plan is the body*. What if he's wrong?" (*Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in the Air*); Diaz gets stuck contemplating the role of air in the exchange, and how it too may be considered a body, a vital part of every connection.

What both Limón and Diaz enact within *Envelopes* is the capsizing of the condition of objecthood thrust upon minority and Indigenous bodies: the "Dirty Indian" that has internalised the insult, felt its weight, and has worked all her life "to feel clean", since "to be clean is to be good, in America", now refuses to be pathologized, and moves from being "a doctor with a diagnosis. / except I was the condition" to "America is the condition, of the blood and the rivers, / of what we can spill and who we can spill it from" (Vargas 2020). Such a declaration, tellingly, takes place in *That Which Cannot Be Stilled*, the poem with which Diaz closes the correspondence, whose eponymous words are effectively the last on the page – the last to be *heard* in the recordings.

The body becomes a site of resistance, a stepping stone from which to rewrite the land and the world from a perspective diametrically opposed to the dominant mindset – the colonizer's *credo* –, one able to offer a new philosophy. As noted by Vargas, when in *Isn't the Air Also a Body, Moving?* Diaz writes "I am touched – *I am*", she is deconstructing and effectively turning one of the most fundamental tenets of Western identity on its head (2020). Cartesian mind-body dualism, which regards the body as inherently separate from and inferior to the mind, is shattered. The dimension of touch, with its identity-generating powers, is further defined by Diaz as an embodied and bodily experience, integrally linked to its relational quality: "This is my *knee*, since she touches me there. / This is my *throat*, as defined by her reaching" (*Isn't the Air Also a Body, Moving?*). The same embodiment-inducing relational quality is extended to the relationship between body and air, no longer

merely an empty vacuum between one body and the others, but as the poem's title suggests, "also a body" with its relational capabilities:

Sometimes I don't know how to make it  
to the other side of the bridge of atoms  
of a second. Except for the air

breathing me, inside, then out. Suddenly,  
I am still here.

The air (the body-of-air) not only facilitates a construction of identity that is relational, communal: "How is it that we know what we are? / If not by the air / between any hand and its want – touch", but also offers an embodied space of continuous, communal connection:

What if it's true about the air and our hands?  
That they're only *an extension*  
of an outside reaching in?  
I'm pointing to me and to you to look  
out at this world.

It is to this embodied, channelled connection that the title of the correspondence refers. Lifted from Diaz's *Isn't the Air Also a Body, Moving?*, the phrase evokes the creative potentiality of exchange and communal encounter, the embodied experience of touching and holding on, namely of expansion and connection, and, perhaps more prosaically, it also hints at the epistolary mode of communication by using the word "envelope" (while still preserving the bodied and embodied nature of the exchange: the hand as an envelope): "From the right distance, I can hold anything / in my hand – / ... / each is devoured in its own envelope of air / What we hold grows weight. / Becomes enough or burden".

*That Which Cannot Be Stilled* is also the place in which Diaz brings the correlation between body and land onto the page: "Except my desert is made of sand, my skin / is the colour of sand", with the *enjambement* drawing the eye to both "skin" and "colour", an association that carries a bloody burden. For an Indigenous body, for example, the colour red carries the hallmark of colonialism, an epithet fastened to the skin and used both to single out (a skin whose colour differs from white) and to erase (a skin the colour of land – its people, their bodies, indistinguishable from the dirt, the "Dirty Indian(s)")<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, it is significant that Diaz's use of red connects land, body and rage on a single spectrum. In *Isn't the Air also a Body, Moving?* she writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Colour and "colour-politics" are a crucial aspect of Diaz's poetics, for example, in *The First Water is the Body*, she writes: "The Spanish called us, *Mojave. Colorado*, the name they gave our river because it was silt-red-thick. Natives have been called *red* forever. I have never met a red Native, not even on my reservation, not even at the National Museum of the American Indian, not even at the largest powwow in Parker, Arizona. I live in the desert along a dammed blue river. The only red people I've seen are white tourists sunburned after staying out on the water too long" (Diaz 2020: 49).



Everything is iron oxide or red this morning,  
 here in Sedona. The rocks, my love's mouth,  
 even the chapel and its candles. Red.  
 I have been angry this week. A friend said,  
*Trust your anger. It is a demand for love.*  
 Or it is red. Red is a thing

I can trust – a monster and her wings,  
 cattle grazing the sandstone hills like flames.

In her reply, Limón reinforces the association red-anger / red-land: "Red / like our rage. The red of your desert. Your heart, too" (*Sway*), yet she introduces a softer perspective. The use of "our" reconfigures the paradigm of rage: it becomes a shared rage, stronger perhaps, but easier to bear and to wield in proactive ways, to shift the narrative away from any dominator perspective. A few lines later, Limón introduces a counterpart to red by means of the colour green, in turn creating an alternative body / land paradigm: "Maybe this letter is to say, if it is red where you are, / know there is also green, the serrated leaves of dandelion, lemon balm, / purple sage, peppermint, a small plum tree by the shed"<sup>9</sup>.

The use of green is extended further by Diaz in *From the Desire Field* in which the colour is evoked by the use of natural imagery ("field", "garden", "flower", "meadow") as well as juxtaposed to desire, an association Diaz reinforces by quoting Federico García Lorca's *Romance sonámbulo* (1928) and its refrain "Verde que te quiero verde". The meandering, almost frenzied, rhythm, (reminiscent of Lorca's own) creates a sort of dream-like, "unfocused" parenthesis, a "thrashed field" where body and land collide in the quagmire of desire: "I am a field of it". Imbued with Lorca's influence, the "desire field", that blooms in the intimacy of the night, is green and anxiety-inducing, and Diaz pleads with Limón to tell her of the sweetgrass she planted, so that by hearing of the "sweet smoke" she can leave the field of desire. The image of a field is used by Limón, in her reply, albeit with a different intention:

/.../I want to write

of the body as desirous, reedy, fine on the tongue,  
 on the thigh, but my blood's got the spins again, twice

/.../ My body

can't be trusted. MRI says my brain's hunky-dory  
 so it's just these bouts sometimes, the ground rises

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<sup>9</sup> Limón's following words, "I don't know how to make medicine, or cure what's scarring / this planet" denote a wish to expand the scope of her call for steadiness and greenness to mankind's relationship with the non-human, upon which the dominator's perspective has wreaked havoc, and that would benefit from a more partnership-oriented approach: "How it's easier if we become more like a body of air, branches, and make room /.../ how afterwards our leaves shake and strand straighter".

straight up, or I'm trying to walk on water,  
except it's not water it's land and it's moving when

it should be something to count on. A field of something  
green and steady.

The contrast in colouring suggested by “reedy” and “blood”, introduces a green/red contraposition that in turn speaks of the connection between body and land. By suggesting that when the body fails, land “should be something to count on”, but instead “it's moving”, Limón seems to be hinting at the fact that the land should be “a field of something / green and steady”, instead, for minorities, and especially for Indigenous bodies, it cannot be counted upon, and the only colour available is the red of anger and of the forced-upon, colonial perspective. Limón's body, preyed upon by vertigo, and Diaz's own, lost in anger or in desire, are both ailing places, which have been stripped of their subject status; however, they are able to (re)articulate themselves and push back through poetry created in communion, from a place of vulnerable intimacy.

Producing a critical poetics, an embodied communal lyric can transform aesthetics and engender a *poiesis* of space and community. As a possible site of resistance, the intimacy of this space may cultivate a subject that is anchored through touch and embrace, but also exceeds that encounter. In this turn toward radical possibility, a communal lyric can wield political power. Exploiting ruptures and deficiencies in dominant discursive modes, the communal lyric can inhabit and reorient settler colonial discourse that maps the world (Vargas 2020).

Following from Vargas, Limón's wish for a “field of something / green and steady” is an implicit acknowledgement of the need for an alternative measure of bodies and spaces, an “alternative mapping” traced onto the same land, but with a renewed, collective outlook. A mapping that could look like “the third space”, in which the power of shared experience, collaboration and encounter, through which the body and the land are able to retrieve their due, can find expression and be projected outside, be the “extension of an outside reaching in” (*Isn't the Air Also a Body, Moving?*).

### 3. Opening the “Third Space”

The importance of such an unfettered and resonant space in which Diaz and Limón both express themselves and communicate organically is amplified when one considers that the work done with *Envelopes of Air* explicitly and implicitly resonates with their subsequent poetic endeavours. The inclusion of the letter-poems in Limón's *The Carrying* (2018) and in Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) speaks volumes about the genuine quality of the poets' exchange, not merely a performative exercise in aesthetic/political collaboration, but a concrete attempt at poetically re-wiring the circuit boards of Euromerican thought about bodies and land.

Limón's *The Carrying* revolves around the eponymous act, explored in its physical and metaphorical connotations: what we carry and what carries us, be it burden or buoy,

throughout our own existence. However, even though “many of the larger personal and political cogitations in this collection root themselves in desiring a child” (Mrjoian 2018), Limón reaches an all-embracing idea of motherhood, a being-in-the-world able to nurture both the human and the non-human (e.g. *Maybe I’ll Be Another Kind of Mother* in Limón 2018a: 69). A sentiment whose seeds can be observed in *Envelopes of Air*: “I can’t stop / putting plants in the ground. There’s a hunger in me, / a need to watch something grow” (*Sway*). Her exploration is buttressed by the inclusion of all four of the letter-poems from *Envelopes of Air*, all nestled in the third and final part of the collection, with the exception of *Cargo*, inserted as the third-from-last poem of section “2”. The incorporation into the collection’s core is not accompanied by any direct reference to the four poems’ genesis, save for an explanation in the “Notes” section at the end of the book<sup>10</sup>.

Similarly, in *Postcolonial Love Poem*, Diaz includes three out of the four poems making up her part of the epistolary exchange. They are evenly distributed throughout the collection – one for each of three out of four macro-sections. Just like in *The Carrying*, there’s no indication of the poems’ initial receiver, save for a number of notes at the end of the volume detailing their origin and references. *Postcolonial Love Poem* interweaves different strands and thematic nuclei (erotic desire, family relations, colonial oppression), through which “the personal and the political not only ignore official borders, they are actively engaged in the business of tearing down the wall between the two entities and using the scraps for a new mosaic” (Miranda 2021: 95).

Despite the lack of direct acknowledgement on the page of the poems’ birth as acts of poetic letter writing, there is a distinct feel to the poems that separates them from the others (for example, the use of the pronoun “you”, the direct questions), the same impression that simultaneously rises no doubt at their place within each respective collection. Actually, the poems’ unique genesis engenders an expansion in terms of reach, by creating a *fil-rouge* which ties *The Carrying* and *Postcolonial Love Poems* to both *Envelopes of Air* and to one another<sup>11</sup>. Even when separated into their own respective realms and themes (or collections/ works), Diaz and Limón remain attuned, in conversation.

<sup>10</sup> When asked about it, Limón replied that she wanted for the poems to live on their own as universal entities, not only as intimate conversations between two people. Given the fact that the letter-poems were written in the same time period as the poems in *The Carrying*, Limón deemed they fit in the world of the book, so much so that omitting them would, in a way, leave some of the personal narratives *The Carrying* touches upon unfinished (Sakasegawa, Mike (Host). 2018 (August, 29). Ada Limón (No. 73) [Audio podcast episode] in *Keep the Channel Open*. Transcript available at <https://www.keepthechannelopen.com/transcripts/2018/8/29/transcript-episode-73-ada-limon> (consulted on 12/05/2023).

<sup>11</sup> Peculiarly (or perhaps not), the collections themselves seem to validate such partnership, since they both open with epigraphs by Joy Harjo (the 23<sup>rd</sup> US Poet Laureate and a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation), whose words evoke and encompass the themes explored throughout each collection. *The Carrying*’s epigraph “She had some horses she loved. / She had some horses she hated. / These were the same horses” echoes the feelings of ambivalence one can surmise from reading the poems within, as Limón goes back and forth on her desire for motherhood (Lewis 2019). In *Postcolonial Love Poem*, Diaz opens the first section (and thus the collection as a whole) with “I am singing a song that can only be born after losing a country” from Harjo’s *Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings* (2015). Again, the epigraph sets the tone (and the scene) for the whole work “as an act against colonialism” (Neimark 2020) steeped in “bittersweet triumph” (McGee 2020).

Moreover, as mentioned before, being the inaugural poetry endeavour in a new series of recurring digital/online-only features for *The New Yorker*, *Envelopes of Air* is accompanied by audio recordings (as well as a special edition of the monthly podcast) and illustrations – clearly with the intention of expanding upon the email exchange that brought the eight letter-poems into being. The use of email as the medium of correspondence, initially a logistical necessity, as Diaz and Limón reside in different States, allowed for the exchange to take place through a contemporary and commonly used *medium* combining the textual (the letter-poems as *attachments*, text-objects to be sent and received<sup>12</sup>), and the telematic (the exchange takes place somewhat outside of physical reality – within a space that can be kept separate and independent from any sort of influence save from what the correspondents decide to feed into it). As previously noted, Limón and Diaz were adamant that this alternative space remained unmediated and private during the course of their correspondence.

Yet, the publication of the letter-poems as *Envelopes of Air*, unmistakably opened up the digital (and metaphorical) space of the email correspondence onto a larger, albeit still digital, dimension. Such an opening, a *de facto* expansion from a dialogical one-on-one to a dialogical multiplicity, brought with it another sort of enlargement, both in terms of readership and in terms of modality, as suggested by the decision of interspersing the flow of Diaz and Limón’s poetic (textual) back and forth, with visual and audio elements – which almost appear as simultaneous strains of correspondence, both lending power to the textual element, as well as translating it into different codes, in an approach reminiscent of mail-art (albeit perhaps as a digital, deconstructed and collaborative iteration of it). As a matter of fact, the illustrations were not part of Diaz and Limón email correspondence as it took place in 2017, however, their inclusion into *Envelopes of Air* through publication can be regarded as a secondary instance of artistic partnership, both in terms of modality, partnering the textual with the visual (and the aural), and as another strand in the braiding process, with the illustrator, Levit Ruiz, as a third correspondent, replying to the text via artwork.

Similarly, the inclusion of voice recordings of Diaz and Limón reading the words they wrote to one another, adds a layer of meaning, transporting the idea of partnership on a formal/modal level, effectively bridging the gap between “the textual and aural lives of poetry” (Rubeck 2018). Almost voicemail-like, the recordings expand the breadth of the written word, as well as the communication between Diaz and Limón, that are able to “blast past the time-space rift between themselves” (Rubeck 2018).

As a result, *Envelopes of Air* can be regarded as a layered and syncretic exploration of both the personal and the collective, engendered by the need to make sense of both the within and the without of present-day contradictions and paradoxes. Both as a concerted, shared effort and in its singular letter-poem components, Limón and Diaz’s correspondence blurs the line between the intimate and the political in relational terms, calling into question the very idea that any sort of individualistic, imperialistic and dominator-coded perspective can

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<sup>12</sup> The choice of titling the feature *Envelopes of Air* acquires deeper meaning, since, as noted before, during the course of their correspondence, Limón and Diaz, explore the idea of “bodied-air” and its physical qualities in an exchange and in relation to the body. The “envelopes of air” are not empty as a one would surmise at first read – just as the emails the poets exchange carry the attached file, the text-object of the letter-poem.

actually expect to lead to anything other than mutually assured destruction. The weight of insults, microaggressions and injustices (the *cargo* of colonialism) finds a body emboldened and prepared by its encounter with other bodies, who discover, in communality and in proactive collaboration, a space of resistance, a “third space” from which to venture into deeper connections through dialogues of resistance: “Hermana, we know how to speak to our conquerors, don’t we?” (Diaz, *That Which Cannot Be Stilled*).

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