

CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ

The Multidimensional Viscera of Speaking

A Gathering of Matter / A Matter of Gathering, by Dawn Lundy Martin. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007.

Dawn Lundy Martin's *A Gathering of Matter / A Matter of Gathering*, winner of the 2006 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, opens with a compelling question on an otherwise blank page: "What stripping down / can close the cave of grief?" Throughout, the "black marks" of words combine to express various forms of "stripping down" and "grief." At the same time, the black marks confront "a need for unrecognizable speech" that resists "the tyranny of the prosaic, the beautiful, the poetic utopia." Instead of entering a poetic utopia, we are confronted with "the limits of expression," the spaces where language "go[es] limp, break[s] apart, or fall[s] into pieces, stammers, glimpses or just merely the black marks that make up letters." Which is to say, this collection oscillates between the imperative to speak, the difficulties of language, and the longing for silence.

What is gathered in this book—what matters—are various, intersecting bodies of experience: racialized bodies, gendered bodies, sexualized bodies, textualized bodies. And violence dominates these experiences.

In "The Symbolic Nature of Chaos," we read: "There were robberies and thieves, deft cutting into and savaging, portents like a yelling and a tree." Martin takes us further into the darkness of bereft bodies:

Hears the butcher. Bends into
supplication. The meat of the body.
Series of punctures, microscopic
holes. Pungent. Perpendicular.
Constructed as likeness.

Fabrication. It emits. It gags.
Streams into lips, slightly,
unconsciously parted. Putrid
breath escapes, unbeknownst.

Martin's imagery, syntax, and sound remain visceral throughout. Just following the "p" sounds from "puncture" to "pungent" to "perpendicular," and falling towards "lips," "parted" and "putrid" creates a sonically unforgettable sequence. Similarly, we feel Martin's prosodic viscera in a stanza from the poem "Bone":

Toward him. When sleep comes, it comes bare. Barely.
To balance there. *It has been twenty years.*
"What do you think about when you think about him?" Only,
toward him. Brush of him. Breath brush. Rum.
It was my first drink. Hairless arms and legs. Breath
of drink. Breath. Barely breast.

The resonating "b" sounds create a bass foundation that accentuates the narrative, centering the story in language as opposed to being simply language-centered. The language and syntax stammer, glimpse, and fragment, but they never dissolve.

The racialized and gendered body is the body most visible in this collection. From "After Drowning": "Believe that one travels in articulation, is heavy with language, is hunted, breathes and hears black bitch and black ass in the literal field of the carnivorous." In "Bearer of Arms: 1775-1783": "Stored in Jefferson's house—like so many paper boxes in pantry. // That skin which absorbs sunlight // could stand to deaden, be deadened." And from perhaps the most inter-textured passage in the book:

Dancing here, too. Paly. Play. Which came first the black or the nigger? Who is reflected in "nigger jim" of the fat black smiling "mammy"? What is seen? The self. Or hate. Rippled soldiers "that can be made, out of a formless clay, an inapt body." [*Performing gentle strokes to measure and erase the brute. Earthy, not licentious. A goodness. A black pride. Attempt at exorcism.*] A niggarealness. Impossibility of erasure. To purge, instead, by erupting, comforting, lifting to surface.

The three above passages illustrate Martin's diverse range in contouring the body. One may travel in articulation, with language, but one never escapes the "literal field" of the racialized and gendered body and those who might prey on that body. This body, also, can't escape historical and contemporary enslavements—whether figurative or literal. By gathering these bodies together and lifting them to the sur-

face of the page, Martin forces us to examine what is seen and what is erased of the body and of the self.

In this difficult exploration, Martin revisions innovative approaches towards identity and subjectivity. In "Negrotizing in Five; Or, How to Write a Black Poem," she defines five elements of writing a "Black Poem" that incorporates language-centered experimentation and identity-centered lyricism. The first section, "Formlessness," argues there's "No mold to make, fossilizing." In a sense, there's no prescription or ready-made form to describe the complexity of the "Black Poem." In addition, the poem argues that while "castigating black marks condition the body, soften the skin, open into sepulcher," the various bodies "will not be buried there. [They] will put down a thing on the page, emancipated [nearly] by the imagination." Writing can be conceived as an emancipating act, an act that allows the body to resist fossilizing conditioning. In the section titled "Mutilation," we read:

What to bare out? What to pitchfork? You want to be rid of the black. And you want to embrace the black. You write, Grandmother, and cross it out. You peel. You acknowledge the pain of peeling. You are hollowing in, coarse carving a sound to resemble that which must be said. You drag your canvas over and finally write with whatever fluid has spilled.

Martin dwells within the desire to eschew and embrace the markers of the "Black Poem," embodied in the act of writing "Grandmother" and crossing it out, peeling it and experiencing the pain of such an act. And once one begins the peeling, one hollows into language to carve what "must be said" with "whatever fluid has spilled." We can get a sense of the other sections simply by their titles: "Sing a song that cannot be sung," "I/M/A/G/E," and "Completion cleaved."

A Gathering of Matter / A Matter of Gathering peels away the surface of diverse bodies to reveal the complexities of perception and experience. In turn, this collection's formal and prosodic complexity testifies to the multidimensional viscera of speaking about identity, race, gender, sexuality, and language. In this stunning debut, Martin reimagines the diverse possibilities of Black poetics and the diverse powers of poetry.