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***river woman* by KATHERENA VERMETTE**

House of Anansi, 2018 \$19.95

Reviewed by **JESSICA RUZEK**

Opening her second collection of poetry, *river woman*, Katherena Vermette appeals to Menominee poet Chrystos in the epigraph, “I assert that poetry without politics is narcissistic and not useful to us . . . there is no neutral safe place we can hide out in waiting for the brutality to go away.” Thus fusing poetics with politics, Vermette undertakes the work of representing the Red River as a home and a haven, as well as a site of violence and loss. She explores these themes as a continuation of her and Erika MacPherson’s 2016 short documentary of the same title, which provides a glimpse into the work of Drag the Red, a team of volunteers who search the Red River for the bodies of missing and murdered Indigenous women and men. This context is the basis for *this river*, in which the Red River is as much a dynamic source of story and life, as it is the tragic terminus for many lives. The Red River—where pain and resurgence meet, where the “waters wash / around each other / and change” (7)—is animated throughout each poem as the language of the collection likewise undulates and unfolds, each poem washing over each other to reveal how life and death coalesce in the river. “Nothing,” argues the speaker of “tongues,” “is inanimate,” including the river (15).

Using the river as the central image, Vermette begins the collection with “black river,” a series of meditations on the fragmentation of bodies, language, the ability to love, and of the inherited and shared trauma of colonialism, the “ghosts stuck on our skins” (18). Keenly aware of how language is held within the body, Vermette addresses the trauma of losing Anishnaabemowin—“the language / I should have known” (23)—articulating how this loss is made visible through the physical and emotional scars left upon the body by colonization. Describing a semiosis of trauma, “scars” conveys how the body suffers this loss of language, and how such scars—their own language, which can serve to unify rather than fragment—can be decrypted:

lines etched on
skin white
against brown
marks imposed
curved

a script to decipher. (16)

The infliction of scars carries with them their own narrative which, read carefully, can be decrypted as yet another story in the history of violence. The speaker continues in the same poem:

lines emboss
once-smooth skin
tattooed secrets

read like code. (17)

To read these codes, the poems suggest, is to interrogate history, a term which does not denote the past but, as the speaker argues in “Métissage / Métis Sage,” “is still happening” (82). Fraught with narratives of theft concealed as national consciousness, ‘history,’ as a term, is replaced with “an other story:”

this country has an other story
one that is not his
or hers
or ours

it is written
in water. (61)

Written in water and within landscapes are the stories and inherited pain endured by Indigenous communities, suggesting that trauma is buried and continues to breathe within the very land and water to which Vermette is connected, and that this land must be thus read accordingly. The ‘other story’ emerges through an attunement to the earth, the elemental and spiritual connection to past and ongoing trauma. By refuting the accepted ‘history’ of colonization and nationality, *river woman* offers a way of reading the trauma within the water, framing it as a decolonial action.

Beyond requiring an understanding of pain endured and the stories central to that pain, held in these poems is the suggestion that to decipher trauma, an understanding of love and connection are required. Loosely defined as an intimacy exchanged upon the recognition of shared loss, love is the capacity to re-assemble fragments, as seen in “pieces,” in which fractures cohere: “seams seem / to fuse” (5). As an act of decolonial resistance, love can be deployed to reunify and restore communities.

Admitting to the fragmentation that informs her subjectivity, the speaker of “broken” opens up possibilities for reconstruction, to the re-weaving of parts into something resembling previous wholeness. Yet the intimacy at the heart of Vermette’s work demonstrates what is at stake when love is no longer central to decolonial action:

let go
and we fall
let go
and we come
a part. (28)

Part of this decolonial project, in addition to love and the reclamation of language, is the intimate knowledge of the land through which the river weaves, a theme most deftly explored in the second section, “red river.” As the central metaphor-cum-agent-cum-body, the river is a

lively site in which trauma is imbricated, carrying forward the theme established in “black river” and in the title poem “river woman:”

this river is a woman
she’s been dredged
and dragged
metal coils catch
her tangled hair. (38)

Echoing the documentary, this passage evokes the dragging of the river to locate missing bodies. Rather than remaining a space in which peoples and communities come together, the river represents the space in which communities are rent apart. But Vermette is careful to avoid framing the river as solely the locus of pain or as a source which erases pain outright; instead, she writes, the river is:

the healing
not the hurt

she is
the knowing
not unknown (34)

The contradictory qualities of the river and the poems are mirrored in each other, of which the speaker is aware: “I come from a place . . . with more contradictions than this poem” (75-77), yet it is this incongruity that offers some reprieve or at least the hope for it:

hard to understand
even harder to forgive
but somehow so easy
to love (77)

Embodied and made legible, the river restores and provides knowledge about lost bodies, language, and stories. Likewise, Vermette’s poetry, embodies the animacy of the river through language that is at once fragmentary and fluid, both gentle and powerful. Both the figurative river and the collection of poems serve as testaments to ongoing healing and storying needed by the land and the Métis people to account for the many narratives of pain obfuscated by established histories.

river woman is a collection of poems that invites interpretation, a kind of poetic dredging. Although it is open, fluid and languid, like water watched at a river’s edge, *river woman* also intimates the haunting of the river by the violence inflicted upon First Nations and Métis bodies. While the collection maintains a simplicity and directness of language, these poems uncoil the deep nuance of their content. Illustrating the river throughout her collection, Vermette infuses her poems with the movement of water, using sparse language and a clarity

of imagery to cohere the landscape with stories of loss. Like shards of glass in “pieces,” the collection’s fragments fuse together, reassembling into a unified whole, whose edges haunt the illusion of seamless connection. Such is the heart of Vermette’s collection: while the pieces join together as though “never broken” (5), there is no frailty associated in their imperfect linking, but a pronounced strength and resilience, wrought from the careful bringing together of stories, languages, and lands.

JESSICA RUZEK is an instructor and doctoral student at Concordia University, where her current research focuses on the environmental humanities, forest and landscape literature/aesthetics, and postcolonial, decolonial, and media studies.