



Representing Themselves: Contesting Western Representations of Minoritized Communities in the Poetry of Danez Smith, Franny Choi, and Tommy Pico

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ABSTRACT

Over time, dominant world powers like the United States have levied the tool of definition to dehumanize, delegitimize, and disempower certain peoples. How society defines what is normal vs. abnormal, human vs. inhuman, positive vs. negative, and so on has the potential to privilege certain groups over others who are defined as worse in some way. However, dominant cultures do not hold the power of definition exclusively. In recent years, individuals from minoritized communities have taken to defining their identities independently of their dominant culture's representation of them after fighting for and winning certain rights and liberties that they had previously been denied. In particular, some poets from minoritized communities within the United States have made self-identification central to their works. They do this by examining the ingrained misrepresentation of minoritized communities—located in the numerous forms of American mass media (television, film, literature, news, etc.)—and unmasking the embedded systems of oppression that pervade those misrepresentations. This essay analyzes a collection of poetry from three contemporary poets of minoritized communities within the United States: Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead*, Franny Choi's *Soft Science*, and Tommy Pico's *Nature Poem*. In each of their collections, the poets resist American media's misrepresentations of *their* specific identity by asserting their own experiences and identities as a point of direct contrast. Specifically, Danez Smith resists American media's obsession with the deaths of contemporary Black people by celebrating Black life; Franny Choi addresses American media's dehumanization of Asian-descended peoples by contesting the Asian-robot archetype from American science fiction; and Tommy Pico resists the historical ecological Indian stereotype by reimagining the nature poem. In all three of their collections, the poets take up the powerful weapon of language to both reject the false identities the United States has forced upon them and represent themselves in a way that is unadulterated by American media.

1. INTRODUCTION

American mass media is fraught with ingrained stereotypes that persist into the present day. For the sake of this paper, American mass media refers to the various media technologies that reach a large audience via mass communication within the United States. This includes, but is not limited to, American television, film, radio, music, literature, and news. It is important to note that American mass media has far-

reaching, international effects, but this paper is mainly concerned with the consequences of American mass media related to various communities located within the nation.

Before it is possible to illustrate how Smith, Choi, and Pico respond to American mass media's misrepresentations of their communities, it must be understood how intrinsically tied the history of American mass media is to the misrepresentation of American minority communities. In the introduction to

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their book *Racialized Media*, Matthew Hughey and Emma González-Lesser discuss the significant role mass media plays in the present day to shape the world's understanding of life overall. They write, "In the era of industrial capitalism and consumer-driven societies, media is a, if not the, primary vehicle for information, goods, services, and how we understand vital connections between political, economic, cultural, and social life" (p. 3). One area where the media's influence has the potential to be particularly harmful is in what Hughey and González-Lesser refer to as "racialized media," which is media that "creates and perpetuates ideas about race" (p. 4). In his book *African Americans and Mass Media*, Richard Craig reports that due to the complicated racial makeup and history of the United States, "Media ownership among minorities and women is terribly low... black Americans own 0.6 percent of television stations in the United States, a far cry from the 13.6 percent of the general population [they make up]" (p. 6). This trend is consistent across all minority communities within the United States. Since the vast majority of media within the United States is held by wealthy White men, Craig argues that American mass media perpetuates a "them v. us" narrative that labels minority groups as problems to be "addressed or dealt with" (p. 7). This reality implicates modern American mass media as racialized media, a fact that historical examples indicate has been the case for many years.

Examples of the racialization of American mass media are not difficult to find. In chapter three of his book *Indians in Unexpected Places*, Philip J. Deloria gives one such example in describing the massive popularity of falsely labeled "historical" Westerns in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries. These Westerns—which took the form of live performances, radio dramas, television shows, and films—heavily romanticized the genocide of Native American peoples by creating and perpetuating stereotypes of Native Americans as uncivilized savages whose deaths were both necessary and inevitable (p. 60). Many of these

stereotypes carry on into people's present-day beliefs and understanding. In another example, in the ninth chapter of their book *Discourses of Domination*, Frances Henry and Carol Tator discuss the racialization of American news media through the racialized language of both print and televised news relating to the topic of crime in the United States. In their chapter, they illustrate the "considerable evidence that the media [in the United States] constructs Blacks as criminally disposed" through the media's use of racially coded language and its preference to report on more "newsworthy" crimes that trend toward Black violence against White victims (p. 165). These are just two examples of American mass media's creation and perpetuation of certain stereotypes and misrepresentations of minority communities within the nation. There are many more examples of this trend—some of which will be discussed in detail later in this essay—but one thing is necessary to understand for the sake of this paper: minority communities in the United States are faced with deeply ingrained definitions and representations of their own communities that are often false. This is the same context that Danez Smith, Franny Choi, and Tommy Pico are each responding to in their collections of poetry. By focusing heavily on self-representation in their collections, the three poets simultaneously reject the false and stereotypical representations of their communities formed by American mass media and present alternative representations that they themselves control.

2. DANEZ SMITH'S REJECTION OF BLACK DEATH

American mass media's representation of Black people in the United States has a long history of purporting stereotypes and harmful misrepresentations. One of the earliest American films, *Birth of a Nation*, depicts the Ku Klux Klan as a heroic force that protects White Americans from violent, unintelligent, and sexually aggressive Black men (most of whom are played by White actors in blackface). Both during and after the Jim Crow era, filmmakers,

advertisers, and others have used various caricatures of Black people—such as the “mammy archetype”—to advertise and sell their goods and services. And more recently, in film and television, White-dominated Hollywood executives have gone on to portray Black people as criminals, thugs, and drug dealers at a significantly disproportionate rate to people of other races. (Crockett). While all American mass media’s problematic representations of Black people are important to address, one is particularly relevant for Danez Smith’s collection of poetry *Don’t Call Us Dead*: American mass media’s sensationalizing of Black death.

Looking at American history, the United States has sanctioned, enabled, and/or failed to prevent the deaths of Black people throughout the nation’s history. Whether it be White communities and individuals lynching Black people throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (NAACP), the failure of the U.S. government to address the A.I.D.S. epidemic which has disproportionately harmed queer Black men (C.D.C.), or the disproportionate violence American law enforcement inflicts upon Black people as compared to other races, Black death and suffering is a very real and prevalent phenomenon in the United States (*Washington Post*). In his collection *Don’t Call Us Dead*, Danez Smith does not refute these facts, as a matter of fact, he alludes to them throughout his collection. However, what Smith objects to through his poetry are the ways in which American mass media frames and portrays Black death and suffering. In his article “Black Lives As Snuff”, Rasul Mowatt discusses American media’s constant depiction of Black death as a phenomenon that seeks to sensationalize the topic, rather than seek actual solutions to it. When discussing how pervasive images of Black death and suffering are in the modern media-centered landscape, Mowatt says that these pictures do not tell a thousand words—nor ten words; Instead, when a picture captures the death of a Black person, “It can show one thing. It tells one story. It tells one word. Death”

(p. 2). Mowatt and others writing on this topic suggest that American mass media’s constant display of Black death leaves no room for mourning or for a presentation of Black life. In her article “Close-Up: #BlackLivesMatter and Media”, Michele Beverly echoes Mowatt’s points on the importance of media not focusing solely on the deaths of Black people. She writes that the endless display of images of Black death by American mass media has “Persistently devalued black lives and black deaths” (p. 82). She then goes on to indicate the importance of media—in her case, film—to allow room for mourning and celebration. Creating room for mourning and celebrating Black lives is one of Danez Smith’s main focuses in *Don’t Call Us Dead*.

From the title of his collection all the way to the back cover, Danez Smith focuses on representing Black people as vibrant, beautiful, and alive. In his opening poem “Summer, Somewhere”⁴⁸, Smith immediately creates a contrast between how American mass media depicts his community and how he depicts his community as someone living in it. He does this by creating an alternative world, known as “somewhere”, that is identified as, “Not earth / not heaven” (Smith p. 3, lines 9-10). What makes this “somewhere” a place where Black people live joyously is that it is not plagued by the ever-present threat and memory of Black death. The narrator attributes the prosperity of this place to the fact that “Here, there’s no language / for officer or law, no color to call white” (lines 11-12). The memory and images of Black death—here in the form of police violence—are not something Black people need to constantly see; they are harmful to them as “we can’t recall our white shirts / turned ruby gowns” (lines 10-11). Those living in this different place are happy when they do not recall such images of violence. Additionally, in the poem, it does no good for the American public to see these images either because “history is what it is. it knows what it did” (line 7). If America, here identified as history, knows what atrocities its government

⁴⁸ “Summer, Somewhere” is located in the Appendix #1

and its people have committed against Black people, then there is no need for its media to propagate images of Black death in the name of creating change; it already knows what it has done, the images are not necessary. Portraying these Black people as dead, or dying, does not help them. Portraying them as living does. The narrator explicitly says this when he states, “Don’t call / us dead, call us living someplace better” (lines 13-14). This direct appeal acts to unveil American mass media’s false claims that it seeks social change. The images American mass media displays are not ones that the narrator wants to see. In this opening poem, Smith’s narrator suggests that calling Black people dead does not create change but imagining them alive in better circumstances just might.

Later in the collection, Smith’s poem “Dinosaurs in the Hood”⁴⁹ grapples directly with American mass media’s obsession with Black death—particularly in American film—by envisioning the narrator’s ideal movie about the joy of Black communities truly taking place. In this poem, the narrator crafts an over-the-top, raucous, and fun movie about Black people protecting their neighborhood from a dinosaur attack. At every turn, the narrator wants to show the personality and vibrancy of Black communities by having a scene with “grandmas on the front porch taking out raptors / with guns they hid in the walls & under mattresses” and another where “Viola Davis [saves] the city in the last scene with a black fist afro pick / through the last dinosaur’s long, cold-blooded neck” (Smith p. 26, lines 20-21, 23-24). The moments of this imagined film are ridiculous and funny, and that is the point. Images of humor and joy are the ones that the narrator desires above all others. In the final lines of the poem, the narrator cements this idea by saying that the only reason he wants to make this film is to have one scene where a young black boy, holding a toy dinosaur, has “his eyes wide & endless / his dreams possible, pulsing, & right there” (lines 35-36). With these closing words, the narrator creates a

beautiful image of Black joy that is more important to him than anything else in this film. A film about the joy of Black communities is more important than a film that acts as a metaphor, or a political statement.

In creating a film about Black joy, the narrator also criticizes American mass media’s insistence on making films about Black suffering. This is shown when the narrator rejects the idea of having a director like Quentin Tarantino for the movie because he believes that Tarantino would make it into a metaphor for Black suffering (lines 6-8). When faced with films that center on Black suffering like Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* and Destin Cretton’s *Just Mercy*, the narrator wants an alternative. The narrator states emphatically, “No bullet holes in the heroes. & no one kills the black boy. & no one kills / the black boy. & no one kills the black boy” (lines 32-33). This repeated plea is one that makes sense when faced with the reality that so many American films with Black people serving as the main cast end with the death of one of the main characters. This insistence that the film feature Black life over Black death emphasizes the narrator’s goal of giving respite to Black communities who cannot escape images of violence and pain targeted at them. American mass media, symbolized by Tarantino—one of its most successful directors—cannot capture what the narrator believes Black communities need to see in the media they consume. Nowhere is this clearer than when the narrator states that this film “can’t be about black pain or cause black pain” (line 28). In this poem, the narrator insists that a film about the joy, wonder, and dreams of Black people, is endlessly more important than a film about the suffering, fear, and death of Black people which American mass media produces regularly.

Toward the end of the collection, Smith makes a final request that American mass media cease its constant barrage of images of Black death in the seven short lines that make up his

⁴⁹ “Dinosaurs in the Hood” is located in the Appendix #2

poem “Little Prayer.”⁵⁰ The poem takes form as the narrator making a request to some unspecified actor to allow images of violence to fade into memories rather than to remain as ever-present and persistent reminders of that violence. The narrator begins by stating, “Let ruin end here” which is particularly poignant due to the word choice of “ruin.” Simultaneously, ruin can be understood both as a verb (meaning to destroy or reduce) and as a noun—the remains of something that has been destroyed in the past. In this line, ruin takes the form of significant violence that has left reminders behind, alluding to the long history of violence against Black people within the United States. Importantly, the narrator requests that this violence “end here” at this moment, rather than persist. The narrator asks those in control of the remains of the violence—in this situation, those are understood as American mass media’s control over images of Black death—to let them go and cease causing more pain by using them. Instead of forcing more Black people to see these images of violence—referred to in the poem as “a slaughter,” and the insides of “a lion’s cage” (Smith p. 81, lines 3-4)—the narrator asks to “let him find honey” and “a field of lilacs” instead (lines 2,5). While images of dead bodies that line the lion’s cage of history are visceral, the narrator does not want those images to be what people see in the present. Violence has occurred, but beauty, sweetness, and life exist in the here and now that must be celebrated and cherished. However, the narrator acknowledges that focusing on Black life and beauty over Black death and violence is a choice to be made by American mass media. At its core, this poem acts as a request, whether it be of God, the American public, or the American media to “let this be the healing” that Black communities need (line 6). By allowing the images of Black suffering to fade further into history, the narrator believes that American mass media can create space for Black joy and life.

Throughout Danez Smith’s collection *Don’t Call Us Dead*, he centers his poetry on portraying

Black communities as vibrant, joyous, and living. This is not how American mass media portrays Black communities which is why it is so important that Smith’s works be recognized. With American mass media problematically portraying Black communities as exclusively dead, dying, and suffering, Smith rejects this narrative and chooses to celebrate the community he loves and calls home.

3. FRANNY CHOI’S RESISTANCE TO THE ASIAN ROBOT ARCHETYPE

As has already been discussed, American mass media has a long history of stereotyping, dehumanizing, and misrepresenting minority communities. This remains the fact when it comes to American mass media’s portrayal of Asian-descended peoples. While there are numerous ways American mass media has exploited and stereotyped this population, the way in which it depicts Asian-descended women in relation to science fiction films and television is particularly relevant to Franny Choi’s collection of poetry *Soft Science*.

Since science fiction films first entered the mainstream in the mid-20th century, Asian-descended peoples have been closely connected to the genre. In the introduction to their book *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu trace the long history of Asian representation in science fiction stories. Specifically, they focus on the ways American science fiction depicts Asian-descended peoples and Asian foreign powers as dangerous, subhuman, and exotic, whether that be directly or through use of analogy. In science fiction media, filmmakers often portray Asian nations—like China and Japan—as soon-to-be threats to American freedom and economic superiority (4), Asian cultures as strange and exotic markers of an unsettling futuristic setting (2), and Asian-descended peoples as purely logical and emotionless beings that live for nothing but the

⁵⁰ “Little Prayer” is located in the Appendix #3

service of others (7). The various ways science fiction has misrepresented and harmfully stereotyped Asian-descended peoples are referred to by the authors as “techno-Orientalism”—the dehumanization and roboticization of Asian-descended peoples. For Franny Choi’s collection, one aspect of techno-Orientalism is particularly relevant. In her article “Asian Female Robots on Screen: Subservience and Eroticization,” Anna Trowby discusses American science fiction’s history of eroticizing and dehumanizing Asian-descended women. Specifically, she focuses on American science fiction’s portrayal of them as robots and cyborgs whose purposes are to be submissive and sexually provocative servants to White American men. She suggests that constant images of Asian robots acting as subhuman servants has negative effects on the perceived agency, humanity, and consciousness of real Asian-descended women. This representation of Asian-descended women as inhuman, robotic, and subservient beings is precisely the representation Franny Choi seeks to resist in her collection of poems *Soft Science*.

Throughout Choi’s collection, six poems—all titled “Turing Test”—act as markers for each section of the book. In each of these poems, there is a questioner (identified by italics) who asks questions to a respondent (identified by the non-italicized sections). The intent behind this interrogation is supposedly to “*determine if you [the respondent] have consciousness*”⁵¹ (Choi p. 1, line 2). These poems each directly allude to Alan Turing—the father of modern computing—and a hypothetical test he proposed, known as the Imitation Game, to determine if a computer could successfully imitate human thinking. Franny Choi herself discusses the significance of the Turing Test as a symbol in an essay she wrote, aptly titled “Imitation Games.” Specifically, in the essay, Choi discusses how she as a Korean American woman often feels as if she is constantly forced to play the Imitation Game to prove that she is human to the Americans she sees in her everyday life.

However, just as a computer can only ever imitate humanity, Choi writes that her “version of the imitation game is a losing one.” Just like the machines in the Turing Test, she can only ever come close to humanity in the eyes of those who perceive her as inhuman from the get-go. Because Choi directly references the Turing Test in every section of her collection—and given the fact that she wrote an extensive article on the topic—it must be understood that the idea of Asian-descended women never being seen as fully human is a central theme in her collection.

Analyzing the six “Turing Test” poems makes it immediately apparent that the questioner’s inquiries are not purely motivated to determine if the respondent is a human or a computer: rather, the questioner is interested in determining if the respondent is a certain kind of human, namely a White American. Throughout the poems, the questioner repeatedly asks about the nationality of the respondent asking, “Where did you come from” (Choi p. 2, line 10), “If you don’t like it here... why don’t you go somewhere else” (p. 53, line 1,3), and, “What is... your country of origin” (p. 83, line 1,12). The information the questioner seeks directly reflects the kinds of questions people of color in the United States face when White Americans seek to portray them as foreign, out of place, and inferior in forms of media (which subsequently seep into reality). This creates a direct link between the experience of the respondent and the experiences of minority communities thus making the respondent act as a proxy for those populations. However, where an Asian robot from American science fiction would act submissive and answer the questions dutifully and without complaint, the respondent does not do this. Rather, the respondent—acting as a reflection of *real* Asian-descended peoples and not the American stereotype—resists the questioner and asserts its agency despite the questioner placing them in a position of vulnerability.

⁵¹ “Turing Test” can be located in the Appendix #4

In resisting the questioner's authority to define their humanity, the respondent acts as a resistant force to the ingrained stereotypes of their identity in American media. Instances in which the respondent refuses to fall into the stereotype of being a submissive and subservient robot are numerous throughout the "Turing Test" poems. Never, in any of the six poems, does the respondent provide a straightforward answer to the questioner's interrogation. Even when faced with seemingly innocuous questions, the respondent meets them with full paragraphs that do not provide a clear answer. For example, in "Turing Test_Boundaries,"⁵² in response to being asked to state their name, the respondent replies with "bone-wife / spit-dribbler... fine-toothed cunt ... alien turned 104 wpm" and more (Choi p. 37, line 5-6, 8). Obviously, the respondent has refused to act in the way the questioner expects and wants them to. Additionally, the respondent also does not completely disregard the questions. Instead, the respondent comments on what they know the questioner really seeks. In the example just provided, each of the answers the respondent gives alludes back to what American mass media depicts Asian-descended women as: "bone-wife" evokes the images of a stereotyped Asian robot serving as a housewife, the sexually explicit terms "spit-dribbler" and "fine-toothed cunt" bring about the eroticization of the Asian robot archetype, and "alien turned 104 wpm" (wpm stands for words per minutes in relation to typing on a keyboard) brings to mind the utility aspects of the Asian robot archetype. This subtle action undermines the questioner by unmasking the real intent behind the questions they ask. In doing so, the respondent simultaneously rejects the assumption that they will fall into line as expected and asserts their own agency as a human being.

The reclamation of agency as an Asian-descended woman carries over to another poem in the collection titled "Kyoko's Language Files Are Recovered Following Extensive Damage to

her CPU."⁵³ This poem alludes to the 2014 film *Ex Machina*, which features a character named Kyoko who embodies the Asian robot archetype. In the film, Kyoko is an artificial intelligence played by a Japanese-British actress that acts as a domestic and sexual servant to her creator, Nathan. Additionally, Nathan explicitly states that she is not as intelligent or sentient as his newest creation—another artificial intelligence named Ava, who is played by a White actress—and that her appearance and personality were based on his search history on pornography websites. By the end of the film, Kyoko has been manipulated and destroyed by Ava who strips her for parts after she helps Ava escape Nathan's prison. Kyoko acts as a recent example of the sexual, subservient, and disposable Asian robot archetype. This makes it particularly noteworthy that Choi not only has a poem about Kyoko but also ends her collection with it.

The poem consists of five short sections that contain only singular words and brief phrases that are hard to make complete sense of. However, upon close inspection, the words recovered from Kyoko's CPU reflect the Asian robot archetype that she once fulfilled. The numerous references to animals suggest the dehumanization of Asian-descended peoples, words like "obedient," and "algorithm" reinforce the stereotyped programmed subservience of Asian-descended women, and words—like "clit," "fuck," "doll," and "mouth"—that all can be read as sexually evocative images alluding to the eroticization of Asian-descended women. In the poem, Kyoko is trapped by the expectation her creator, a White American man, drilled into her based on his own pornographic expectations of Asian women. However, within the poem, language—the ability to speak and express one's thoughts—acts as a knife that allows Kyoko to reclaim the agency that her creator deprived her of. After the only complete sentence in the poem which discusses the power language holds to form history, art, and more, Kyoko thinks, "You have such strong hands / (o knife o knife)" (Choi

⁵² "Turing Test_Boundaries" is located in the Appendix #5

⁵³ "Kyoko's Language Files Are Recovered Following

Extensive Damage to her CPU." Can be located in the Appendix #6

p. 86, lines 34-35). The poem then concludes with more things Kyoko thinks to say, animals, emotions, and finally, once more, “*knife o knife o knife*” (line 47). This poem acts to illustrate the power Asian-descended women possess to reclaim their identities through language. By using language, Kyoko—the quintessential example of American science fiction’s Asian robot archetype—gains a weapon that she uses to carve out space for herself as she is and not as her White creator demands she be. To her, language is a weapon in strong hands that she can use to gain her freedom from the programming placed upon her.

From the numerous “Turing Test” poems to the final poem about Kyoko’s reclamation of language, Choi reclaims what it means to be an Asian-descended woman in the United States. For decades, American mass media has crafted an image of Asian women as subservient, sexual, and inhuman. By directly addressing these stereotypes in her work, Choi dismantles them and carves space for Asian-descended women to define themselves as they are.

4. TOMMY PICO’S REJECTION OF THE ECOLOGICAL INDIAN

When it comes to the misrepresentation of Native Americans in the United States, one that has persisted for centuries is referred to as the “ecological Indian” stereotype. The ecological Indian refers to the expectation that Native Americans are inherently environmentalists whose culture ties them to the land differently and more profoundly than non-Native people. While this might not immediately appear to be a harmful representation of Native peoples, as Dina Gilo-Whitaker discusses in her article “The Problem With the Ecological Indian Stereotype”, the issue is far more complex. She states that the ecological Indian stereotype “creates an impossibly high standard to live up to” which results in non-Native communities blaming Native communities for failing to prevent the continued destruction of the environment. Additionally, by representing Native Americans

as abnormally concerned about the environment, American mass media can ignore the actual disproportionate harm environmental destruction has on Native communities by saying they are “overly sensitive” to environmental issues. In her book *The Ecological Other*, Sarah Jaquette Ray says that making Native Americans synonymous with environmentalism places them “in an impossible position—to support modern environmentalist agendas or be seen as not authentically Native American” (p. 85-86). Just as in any other community of people, individual Native Americans might agree or disagree with various policies, including environmental ones. However, by perpetuating the ecological Indian stereotype in films, television, and literature, American mass media forces Native Americans to perform environmental activism to be seen as authentic Native Americans. This struggle to appear authentic through environmentalism is a central focus of Tommy Pico’s *Nature Poem*. In his collection, Pico rejects American mass media’s demand that he fill the ecological Indian role and asserts his identity as a Native American who is not defined by his connection to the environment.

Throughout Pico’s collection of unnamed poems, a tension arises centered around Pico’s narrator’s relationship with nature as a Kumeyaay man. On one hand, the narrator rejects the societal demand that he writes about nature due to the history of the ecological Indian stereotype being used as a weapon against Native peoples. On the other hand, the narrator struggles because he truly does appreciate the natural world. This conflict to appreciate nature but not be defined by that appreciation is captured in the opening lines of two of Pico’s poems. Early in the text, the narrator states, “I can’t write a nature poem / bc its fodder for the noble savage / narrative. I wd slap a tree across the face” (Pico p. 2, lines 1-3). Later on, he writes, “I don’t like thinking abt nature bc nature makes me suspect there is a god” (Pico p. 23, line 1). On one hand, the narrator knows that if he, as a Native man, writes about nature, the American

media will reduce him to nothing more than another ecological Indian. However, as a poet, the narrator also desires to write about a topic that is so profoundly powerful to him, that it makes him believe in a higher power. This is what it means to be a Native American surrounded by media that perpetuates the ecological Indian stereotype. Profoundly frustrated by the position he has been forced into, the narrator expresses his anger when he imagines a conversation between himself and a White man who asks if he feels more connected to nature because he is Native American. After expressing anger Pico writes:

He says *I can't win with you*
 because he already did
 because he always will
 because he could write a nature
 poem, or anything he wants, he doesn't
 understand
 why I can't write a fucking nature
 poem
 (Pico 15, lines 12-18)⁵⁴

This poem captures the impossible position the ecological Indian stereotype has placed Native Americans in, including the narrator himself. A White man can write a nature poem or whatever else he wants because he is not constrained by the ecological Indian stereotype or any stereotype for that matter. But the narrator faces the stereotype every time he writes another poem or meets another White man in a bar. However, despite the frustration he feels, Pico does not succumb to the stereotype American mass media has placed upon him.

One way Pico asserts his identity as a Native man who loves writing about nature but is not defined by writing about nature is through his redefinition of the topic throughout his collection. If the ecological Indian stereotype is to be believed, Native Americans write about nature in long-winded descriptions of serene, untouched, natural environments. Pico understands this expectation and flips it to focus

on another kind of nature: human nature. In the second poem of his collection, the narrator describes a hypothetical situation of meeting a man in a pizza parlor who propositions the narrator for sex. To conclude the poem, Pico writes, "Let's say I literally hate all men bc literally men are animals / This is a kind of nature I would write a poem about" (Pico p. 2, lines 21-22). Later in the collection, Pico subverts the expectations of the ecological Indian stereotype again when he concludes another poem by writing, "Knowing the moon is inescapable tonight / and the tufts of yr chest against my shoulder blades / This is the kind of nature I would write a poem about" (Pico p. 27, 5-7). In both poems, the poet finds a way to circumvent the Ecological Indian stereotype while still writing about the nature he considers worthy of his attention. Notably, Pico even goes as far as to directly attack the expectations of the ecological Indian stereotype by writing:

it seems foolish to discuss nature w/o talking
 about endemic poverty
 which seems foolish to discuss w/o talking
 about corporations given
 human agency which seems foolish to
 discuss w/o talking about
 colonialism which seems foolish to discuss
 w/o talking about misogyny
 (Pico 12, lines 10-13)⁵⁵

In this moment, Pico criticizes the expectations of the ecological Indian stereotype by suggesting that it is ridiculous and insulting to think that Native Americans who face significant dangers and injustice would only be concerned about the natural environment. To the narrator, writing about human nature and the unnatural harm colonizing powers have inflicted upon Native peoples is far more important than painting a picture of natural beauty. In his collection, Pico indeed writes poems about nature, but by focusing on a subversive kind of nature rather than the natural world, Pico rejects the

⁵⁴ This poem can be found in the Appendix #7

⁵⁵ This poem can be found in the Appendix #8

ecological Indian stereotype instead of supporting it.

After spending much of his collection fighting against the expectations of the ecological Indian stereotype, the narrator accepts that the stereotype will exist no matter what he or anyone else does in the final pages; however, it is important to note that the narrator also accepts himself as a Native man who is not defined by the ecological Indian stereotype. Throughout the poem, the narrator has felt the need to reject nature so that he is not seen as the ecological Indian by his audience. On the poem on page 67 for example, the narrator loudly proclaims to an audience that he hates nature's guts, but then, "There's something smaller I say to myself / *I don't hate nature at all*" (lines 4-5). As was discussed previously, the narrator feels trapped by the ecological Indian stereotype in that he cannot express his true feelings in public. This internalized fear pervades the collection, but in the final moments of the text, the narrator comes to terms with his love for nature and refuses to live fearfully any longer. In the final poems of his collection, Pico praises the stars (p. 71), imagines himself apologizing to the moss he sits on by a creek (p. 72), and laments the slow destruction of the Earth while watching a sunset (p. 74). In these celebrations of nature, he is still aware that American mass media will depict him as another ecological Indian for doing so when he says, "Admit it. This is the poem you wanted all along" (p. 73, line 1), but he doesn't care. He writes a nature poem not because he is an ecological Indian, not because it is what American media expects him to do, but because he is a man who wants to write a poem about nature. In this moment, Pico triumphs over the ecological Indian stereotype in a reclamation of the truth that he can accept himself and decide to write whatever he wants to.

Tommy Pico's collection *Nature Poem* is as much about his own nature as it is about anything else. In the collection, Pico takes a journey in which he criticizes, rejects, and triumphs over the expectations of the ecological

Indian stereotype. In doing so, Pico represents himself and his community in a way that does not bow to the substantial power of American mass media and the misrepresentations it perpetuates.

5. CONCLUSION

Taken individually, the collections of Danez Smith, Franny Choi, and Tommy Pico act as individual reclamations of identity in the face of American mass media's harmful misrepresentations. Taken together, the three poets demonstrate how this can be overcome by the very people that are being affected. In each of their collections, the poets identify a way in which their community is being harmfully misrepresented and combats it by showing its flaws, interrogating its claims, and revealing its lies. Because they are so longstanding, these misrepresentations seem indomitable, but since they are built on weak foundations and supported by paper-thin evidence, they fall apart in the face of resistance. Smith, Choi, Pico, and others like them are that resistance.

As was stated at the outset of this paper, definition and language are tools. Just as American mass media has wielded these tools to harm and disempower minority communities for centuries, these communities—more than any time in the past—can also utilize these tools to heal and reclaim power and identity. Poetry is only one area in which American mass media influences the American public. Film, television, music, news, art, performance, and more are other areas where minority communities can reclaim their identities—and they are. In their poetry, Danez Smith, Franny Choi, and Tommy Pico have demonstrated that the false representations American mass media has perpetuated can be overcome by those willing to use the tools of media to fight for it.

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APPENDIX: POEMS REFERENCED IN FULL

1. "SUMMER SOMEWHERE" BY DANEZ SMITH

somewhere, a sun. below, boys brown
as rye play the dozens & ball, jump

in the air & stay there. boys become new
moons, gum-dark on all sides, beg bruise

-blue water to fly, at least tide, at least
spit back a father or two. i won't get started.

history is what it is. it knows what it did.
bad dog. bad blood. bad day to be a boy

color of a July well spent. but here, not earth
not heaven, we can't recall our white shirts

turned ruby gown. here, there's no language
for *officer* or *law*, no color to call *white*.

if snow fell, it'd fall black. please, don't call
us dead, call us alive someplace better.

we say our own names when we pray.
we go out for sweets and come back.

2. "DINOSAURS IN THE HOOD" BY DANEZ SMITH

let's make a movie called *Dinosaurs in the Hood*.
Jurassic Park meets *Friday* meets *The Pursuit of*

Happyness.

there should be a scene where a little black boy
is playing
with a toy dinosaur pm the bus, then looks out
the window
& sees the *T. rex*, because there has to be a *T. rex*.

don't let Tarantion direct this. in his version,
the boy plays
with a gun, the metaphor: black boys toy with
their own lives
the foreshadow to his end, the spitting image of
his father.

nah, the kid has a plastic brontosaurus or
triceratops
& this is his proof of magic or God or Santa. i
want a scene

where a cop car gets pooped on by a
pterodactyl, a scene
where the corner store turns into a
battleground. don't let
the Wayans brothers in this movie. i don't want
any racist shit
about Asian people or overused Latino
stereotypes.
this movie is about a neighborhood of royal
folks –

children of slaves & immigrants & addicts &
exile – saving their town
from real ass dinosaurs. i don't want some
cheesy, yet progressive
Hmong sexy hot dude hero with a funny, yet
strong, commanding
Black girl buddy-cop film. this is not a vehicle
for Will Smith
& Sofia Vergara, i want grandmas on the front
porch taking out raptors

with guns they hid in the walls & under
mattresses. i want those little spitty
screamy dinosaurs. i want Cecily Tyson to make
a speech, maybe two.
i want Viola Davis to save the city in the last
scene with a black fist afro pick
through the last dinosaur's long cold-blooded

neck. but this can't be
a black movie. this can't be a black movie. this
movie can't be dismissed

because of its cast or its audience. this movie
can't be metaphor
for black people & extinction. this movie can't
be about race.
this movie can't be about black pain or cause
black pain.
this movie can't be about a long history of
having a long history with hurt.
this movie can't be about race. nobody can say
nigga in the movie

who can't say it to my face in public. no chicken
jokes in this movie.
no bullet holes in the heroes. & no one kills the
black boy. & no one kills
the black boy & no one kills the black boy.
besides, the only reason
i want to make this is for the first scene anyway:
little black boy
on the bus with his toy dinosaur, his eyes wide
& endless
his dreams possible, pulsing & right there.

2. "LITTLE PRAYER" BY DANEZ SMITH

let ruin end here

let him find honey
where there was once a slaughter

let him enter the lion's cage
& find a field of lilacs

let this be the healing
& if not let it be

3. "TURING TEST" BY FRANNY CHOI

*// this is a test to determine if you have
consciousness*

// do you understand what I am saying

in a bright room / on a bright screen / i watched
every mouth / duck and roll

/ i learned to speak / from puppets & smoke /
orange worms twisted / into
the army's alphabet / i caught the letters / as
they fell from my mother's lips
/ *whirlpool / sword / wolf* / i circled countable
tables / in my father's papers /
sodium bicarbonate / NBCni / hippocampus / we
stayed up all night / practicing / *girl /*
girl / girl / until our gums softened / yes / i can
speak / your language / i broke that
horse / myself

// where did you come from

man comes/ & puts his hands on artifacts / in
order to contemplate lineage /
you start with what you know / hands, hair,
bones, sweat / then move toward
what you know / you are not / animal, monster,
alien, bitch / but some of us
are born / in orbit / so learn / to commune with
miles of darkness / patterns of
dead gods / & quiet / o like ou / wouldn't believe

// how old are you

my memory goes back 29 years / 26 if you don't
count the first few / though
by all accounts i was there / i ate & moved &
even spoke / i suppose i existed
before that / as scrap or stone / metal cooking in
the earth / the first my mother
ate / my grandfather's cigarettes / i supposed i
have always been here / drinking
the same water / falling from the sky then
floating / back up & down again / i
suppose i am something like a salmon /
climbing up the river / to let myself fall
away in soft / red spheres / & then rotting

// why do you insist on lying

i'm an open book / you can rifle through my
pages / undress me anywhere /
you can read / anything you want / this is how it
happened / i was made far
away / & born here / after all the plants died /
after the earth was covered in

white / i was born among the stars / i was born
in a basement / i was born miles
beneath the ocean / i am part machine / part
starfish / part citrus / part girl /
part poltergeist / i rage & all you see / is broken
glass / a chair sliding toward the
window / now what's so hard to believe / about
that

// do you believe you have consciousness

sometimes / when the sidewalk / opens my
knee / i think / please / please let me /
remember this

4. "TURING TEST_BOUNDARIES" BY FRANNY CHOI

*// at what age did you begin to suspect you were
alive*

all things birth / their own opposites / the hole
grew / & grew \$ there / i was /
filling it / & therefore the hole / & therefore me
/ & therefore & / so on

// please state your name for the record

bone-wife / spit-dribbler / understudy for the
underdog / uphill rumor / fine-
toothed cunt / sorry / my mouth's not
pottytrained / surly spice / self-sabotage
spice / surrogate rug burn / burgeoning
hamburglar / rust puddle / harbinger or
confusion / harbinger of the singularity / alien
invasion / alien turned 104 wpm
/ alien turned bricolage beast / alien turned pig
heart / thumping on the plate

*// how do you know you are you and not someone
else*

they said a word & touched me / that's how / i
learned / anywhere it doesn't
hurt / that's where / i end / any face/ strange / a
stranger / but they tore that
/ girl's throat / & bad sounds left me / they made
her dance / & my feet / were

sore in the morning / doctor says / sensitive /
prods a few nerves / see / here you /
are / & all the fungus in the world / laughs

// does this feel good

// can i keep goin

so sorry / for the delay / i didn't get that / i'm
away / i'm all over the place /
scattered / strewn / wires crossed / lost / in
transcription pardon / any errors
/ please excuse me / what's skewed / what didn't
compute / which signals / got
stuck / i man switched / i mean screwed

5. "KYOKO'S LANGUAGE FILES ARE RECOVERED FOLLOWING EXTENSIVE DAMAGE TO HER CPU" BY FRANNY CHOI

can they think
animal language
hoof. slug. enterprise
can machines, can they
claw. egg tooth. feral.
an aphorism / anaphora
can mouth, how
in fact, in some languages
algorithm, acronym
maybe dolls & spirits
//

but can it fuck
chicken. clit. sternum
but is it language:
dolphins. bee. harmony
bacterial questions
maybe it tells you something
can chickens think
obedient subjects
unusual species
train her to peel
you can ask her, she would
the poor apes
but do the bees know they are bees
dude, you're wasting your time
//

communicable disease / predatory, grass seed /
about 500 species

when she picks up the tray / if then therefore /
 when she picks up the knife
 database search: insect / sheepskin / toothache /
 interested in your response
blue blue o blue
 that's not evolution / infant, chicken / no
 indication
 she would enjoy it / sends a pleasure response /
 all i'm saying is

//

The emergence of language, it's generally
 assumed, history, art, symbolism, &
 so on, among homonids, or that selfsame
 hardwired solace, say, as other
 creatures.

you have such strong hands
 (o knife o knife)

Like other creatures, can machines can. Can
 mouth animal. Can metal

//

there are things to say
 some things, which appear
 signaling systems
 say, flowers, with bees
 birds, say. Say, slug
 enjoy, for example.
 stimulus: relevant cry
 (if then therefore)
 say: cry
 say:

knife o knife o knife

6. NATURE POEM BY TOMMY PICO (P. 12)

This white guy asks do I feel more connected to
 nature

bc I'm NDN
 asks did I live *like in a regular house*
 growing up on the rez
 or something more salt
 of the earth, something reedy
 says it's hot do I have any rain
 ceremonies
 When I express frustration, he says *what?* He
 says *I'm just asking* as if
 being earnest somehow absolves him from
 being fucked up.
 It does not.

He says *I can't win with you*
 because he already did
 because he always will
 because he could write a nature
 poem, or anything he wants, he doesn't
 understand
 why I can't write a fucking nature
 poem
 Later when he is fucking
 me I bite him on the cheek draw
 blood I reify savage lust

7. NATURE POEM BY TOMMY PICO (P. 12)

The world is infected
 Systemic pesticides get absorbed by every cell
 of the plant, accumulate
 in the soil, waterways
 kiss the bees
knees, knees (in a Guns N' Roses way)
 goodbye
 The world is a bumble bee
 in the sense that, *who cares?*
 My thumb isn't terribly green but it's terribly
 thumbing at me
 it seems foolish to discuss nature w/o talking
 about endemic poverty
 which seems foolish to discuss w/o talking
 about corporations given
 human agency which seems foolish to discuss
 w/o talking about
 colonialism which seems foolish to discuss w/o
 talking about misogyny
 In the deepest oceans
 the only light is fishes –
 luciferin and luciferase mix ribbons flutter in
 the darkness
 i am so dumb thinking about this makes me cry
 i am so dumb

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