
Tommy Pico. *Feed*. Tin House Books, 2019. 84 pp. ISBN: 1947793578.

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Rich and Willie and Chase twalk
about the Proud Boys
stalking up Cap Hill 70 strong twice
the size
they were last year
and I can only think how much smaller the year before that or maybe
not smaller but so much less brazen before the terracotta slob slithered
their truth (25)

These lines were written by poet Tommy Pico long before January 6, 2021, the day former President Donald Trump incited violence during a so-called “Save America” rally by encouraging his supporters to “take back” their country and join him on a march to the Capitol.

So we are going to—we are going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, I love Pennsylvania Avenue, and we are going to the Capitol [...] we’re try—going to try and give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country. So let’s walk down Pennsylvania Avenue.
(Jacabo, n.pag.)

Following the then-incumbent president’s speech, Proud Boys, QAnon, and other far-right, white nationalist factions violently stormed the United States Capitol Building. They vandalized and eventually fought their way into the building, gaining access to the House chamber.

Feed, the newest book from Pico, not only marks the completion of an important literary cycle, but also through Pico’s prophetic insights, sheds much light on the ways the Trump presidency has gradually emboldened American racism. A book-length poem largely about food, culture, and growth, *Feed* also sets its sights on the country’s concerningly steady growth of hate. Readers familiar with Pico’s previous titles (*IRL* [2016]; *Nature Poem* [2017]; and *Junk* [2018]) will find *Feed* a deeply affecting conclusion to the Teebs Cycle, an epic four-book reflection on the myriad links between Indigenous spirituality, American history, internet culture, and queerness.

Like his other works, Pico's *Feed* is direct ("Dear reader") and written in present tense, rapidly unfolding *in the moment*. "There's no past tense because the English language is a colonial legacy in the way in which it has absorbed the languages of the people that it's conquered," Pico said when discussing *IRL*, his debut book of poetry, in a September 2016 issue of *NYLON* (Tosone, n.pag.) "English itself is like a living history of colonialism, so when we're using these words, we are living with the past as well" (*ibid*). Given the book's sense of urgency, stylistic experimentation, and other Joycean figurations, a reader's experience of *Feed* might feel akin to navigating a Twitter chain, a data stream, or a lengthy text message conversation. As the book unfolds like a social media feed, Pico gives readers opportunities to pause and hover on one of the many distressing (and real) news headlines that flood the book,

PRO-GUN RUSSIAN BOTS FLOOD TWITTER AFTER MASS SHOOTING (58)

or to reflect on one of his playlist selections:

Track 12: "Shout" by Tears for Fears. First of all, best band name in America. Second, how cathartic am I right? Really, just let it all out. What else can you do in an intractable situation but shout? (52)

LGBTQ readers will find much to appreciate in Pico's queerings of certain playlist tracks. For instance, when it comes to MGMT's "Electric Feel," Teebs tells the reader to "change the pronoun from 'girl' to 'boy,'" resulting in the following lyric: "I said, ooh, boy / Shock me like an electric eel" (42). In Drake's "Hold On, We're Going Home," Teebs, wanting to focus on the difficulty of doing things alone after a relationship ends, asks readers to "ignore the music video entirely" because it's "paternalistic garbage" (37). Throughout *Feed*, Pico is constantly inviting his readers to break norms and create new spaces for the queer self.

Likening poems to "food" or "feed" from the beginning, Pico's *Feed* is complexly refreshing in the way Teebs addresses a variety of hungers—social, spiritual, sexual—in an attempt to fill the absence of any knowledge of his own Indigenous food tradition. In the Teebs Cycle, a recurring challenge for Pico, who grew up on the Viejas Indian reservation of the Kumeyaay nation, is to use poetry to fill in the historical gaps in his own life's story, gaps caused by settler colonialism. For example, in *Nature Poem*, Teebs forces himself to write a new kind of "nature poem," one in which he creates his

own definitions of “nature,” combating stereotypes that frequently link Indigenous people to the natural world. Pico also acknowledges his ideological trappings, hinting at the multi-layered *Feed* to come:

but I don't want to be an identity or a belief or a feedbag. I wanna b
me. I want to open my arms like winning a foot race and keep my
stories to myself, I tell my audience. (30)

To “be” a feedbag in *Nature Poem* is to be the bag that both feeds and muzzles a horse, to be the grain that feeds the past, something Pico wants to avoid at all costs. According to an 1835 census of 34 men from the Kumeyaay Indian pueblo in San Pascual, many cultural changes in Kumeyaay society were caused by the Spanish introduction of horses. Settler colonialism's culture of horses resulted in Kumeyaay vaqueros, muleteers, blacksmiths, weavers, millers, and cheesemakers. For many Native Californians, to separate horse culture from colonizers is an impossibility (Lacson, 211): “Every feed owes itself to death. Poetry is feed to the horses within me” (18).

Like trauma absorbed by mind and body, Pico writes a culture of horses—a loss of Kumeyaay food traditions—into Teebs' body, resulting in a poetic language that sprawls, at times, like a news feed, but doesn't always nourish. According to the speaker, if “poetry,” which is only sometimes food-like, is “feed” and every feed “owes itself to death,” poetry should encourage both mindfulness and dissidence (“Poems light up corridors of the mind, like food” [18]). For example, the numerous Latin phrases that spring up are often attached to figurations of violence. The phrase “terracotta slob slithers” seems to reference the orange-colored Donald Trump, who, during his 2016 presidential campaign, recited the lyrics of a song called “The Snake,” by civil-rights activist Oscar Brown, during rallies in Bloomington, Indiana and Estero, Florida. Trump performed the poem in close proximity to his comments on immigration, Syrian refugees, and Islam:

“I saved you,” cried that woman
“And you've bit me even, why?
You know your bite is poisonous and now I'm going to die”
“Oh shut up, silly woman,” said the reptile with a grin
“You knew damn well I was a snake before you took me in.” (Pinchin, n.pag.)

Pico also references “insulin” in multifaceted ways, juxtaposing “sugar” with “isle” and “island,” prompting one to consider the islands of the West Indies where the slave labor of millions of Africans and Indigenous people shaped the world’s sugar market (Tomich 205).

Undigested sugar molecules rage around the blood, doing all sorts of crimes

Insulin, from the Latin insula: isle

Island—sugar—

Insula: a smattering of convulsions situated at the base of the lateral fissure of the brain (Pico 53)

Interestingly, in a book review in *The New Yorker*, poet Dan Chiasson suggests Pico’s speaker is “luxuriating” in the Latin pronunciation of a vast assortment of plants and flowers,

Indian grass, *Sorghastrum nutans*; sor-GAS-trum newtons
switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum*; panic-UM ver-GATE-um
autumn moor grass, *Sesleria autumnalis*; sess-LEER-ee-uh autumn-
NAY-lus (Chiasson and Pico 56)

opting for an “anti-pastoral” which, again, feels reminiscent of Pico’s project in *Nature Poem*. The presence of Latin in *Feed* is unquestionably a volatile substance. Pico may very well be *luxuriating* in an excessive language of flowers, all while teaching his readers the Latin pronunciation, but this might also be a deliberate move to simultaneously evoke the Latin many Indigenous youths were most likely exposed to during religious rituals in the Indian Boarding Schools of colonial California. Tanya L. Rathburn has compared the strict religious teachings and Catholic rituals at St. Boniface Indian School to Spanish missions where many Christian schools were created to “convert heathen Indians” (Rathburn 156). When contemplating whether “Heartbeats” by Swedish electronic group The Knife is a song about atheism or not, Pico’s speaker claims, “Prayer never helped nobody do nothing” (39).

A stunning meditation on everything from pop culture to astronomy, Pico’s scope is far ranging as usual. The poet seeks to address questions that can only have complex

answers: Can a person be too real? Is darkness a necessary part of life? Is simply choosing to continue a revolutionary act in its own right? Tommy Pico's *Feed* has all the right ingredients—an inspired continuation of a poet's hunger for companionship and understanding: "I am the recipe I protect" (53).

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