
Santee Frazier. *Aurum: Poems*. University of Arizona Press, 2019. 61 pp.
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The epigraph of *Aurum*, taken from Uruguayan political journalist and writer Eduardo Galeano's poem, "Los Nadies" ("The Nobodies"), introduces the lyrical subjects of Santee Frazier's (Cherokee Nation) latest poetry collection. These subaltern "nobodies" are "owners of nothing," who have no kin and are "nobody's children." They have even been rendered "nobodied" and "dying through life, screwed every which way" (Galeano 1991 73). According to Galeano, the interrelated forces of colonialism, genocide, and capitalist exploitation produce these othered, criminalized subjects: "Who are not but could be. /... Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the police blotter of the local paper" (73). In his 1971 work, *Las Venas Abiertas de América Latina (Open Veins of Latin America)*, Galeano situates these nobodies in the long 600-year history of the colonization of the Americas. He shows how the "open veins" of Latin America—both in terms of flesh and of mineral ore—have been "transmuted" into Euro-American capital. He explains that colonial capitalism's transmutations work by brutally yoking both human and non-human systems to the "universal gearbox" of capital—"Everything: the soil, its fruits and its mineral-rich depths, the people and their capacity to work and to consume, natural resources and human resources" (1997, 2).

In *Aurum*, Latin for gold and from which the chemical symbol Au is drawn, Frazier lyricizes a colonial capitalist present that forcibly puts together ore and human bodies into the same totalizing system of capital accumulation. He populates this "afterworld" with nobodies who have transcorporeal ore bodies engaged in the "ritual of sunrise, of shovel, and the gearing mechanisms of progress," such as the man in the poem, "Ore Body," who smears "gold into brick" and "suck[s] the gold from a paper bag" (56; 4). If the book lacks any identifiable Indigenous cultural signifiers, it is because Frazier begins with the premise that genocide, removal, and erasure have nobodied so many Indigenous people. Frazier's collection of poetry attempts to respond to an almost hopeless situation: what are we left with when Native language, culture, and identity are stripped away? To Frazier, this question is not simply about accounting for the horrors of colonialism or capitalism. It is a representational problem: how do we represent nobodies as Indigenous subjects or paved city streets as Indigenous land without substituting stripped away cultural signifiers with racial tropes?

Taking up a concept developed by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), the opening poem, "Lactification," explores the role that Euro-American colonial language

plays in transmuting the “open veins” of North America, in colonizing minds as well as bodies. The poem presents a lyrical image of a beaten body that has been taught “to take a switch across the arches.” As though giving advice to a colonial administrator or to a captain of a frontier fort, the poem instructs, “[s]trike behind his ear,” and uses the musical language of a whipping to describe the beaten body’s “forearms lashed and etched.” At the same time, the poem stages the body as an object of scientific study (or perhaps as a corpse in an autopsy), detailing a “[n]ose, misshapen, / fungal curds over a frown ribbed and chapped.” The language of scientific description cannot help but bleed into the language of colonial violence, where a “[n]ubbin” of wounded flesh only “sounds like a clavicle” and no longer resembles an anatomical body part—the body transformed into flesh. Like Fanon, Frazier is not just interested in representing the physical violence of racism and colonialism. Frazier’s nobodies are not helpless, tragic figures. Rather, he is more interested in how the “culling of melanin,” as a colonial and racial project, extends even into the psychological realm, to the level of perception and self-identity, by making available only a racialized “tale of wiry locks, hank of charred skin” (2).

In *Aurum*, Frazier departs from his more narrative-driven debut collection, *Dark Thirty* (2009), and more fully leverages the power of his language’s precise rhythm and sound to disrupt the violent logics of colonial language and to evoke the Indigenous places of his life not only in Oklahoma City (Frazier 2018, 42-43), but also in Albuquerque, NM, Muscogee, OK, and Syracuse, NY (2020, n.pag). He draws upon his experiences in these places to create the lyrical afterworlds of *Dark Thirty* and *Aurum*. However, where *Dark Thirty* takes us on a primarily narrative-focused tour of Indian Country, his latest collection progressively strips away story in favor of a soundscape of lyrical images. *Aurum* moves from the narrative impulse found in poems such as “Lactification,” “Ore Body,” and “Sun Perch” to the bare, sonic image fragments that constellate the last and longest poem, “Half-Life.” Accompanying the poems in the collection are illustrations by Jameson Chas Banks (Seneca-Cayuga Nation, Cherokee Nation), Micah Wesley (Muscogee [Creek] Nation, Kiowa Tribe), and Monty Little (Diné) that offer multiple portraits of the book’s nobodies and mirror the fragmentated and stripped-down quality of Frazier’s images. These portraits are striking; haunting and taunting alongside Frazier’s verse, they accentuate his lyrical style.

Frazier’s tight control of image and sound to render landscape places him in a poetic genealogy that includes Arthur Sze and Jon Davis, whom he worked with at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, but also, and perhaps especially, Richard Hugo. Both craft exquisitely detailed images of bleak landscapes to explore

how the accumulated detritus of these places shapes individual subjects. Although Frazier's poems predominantly feature lonely and isolated voices, these voices belong to subjects who have adapted to these landscapes and who enjoy how "the hazy night air stank of burnt tar, / hamburger patties, and dumpsters" (22).

Frazier's allegorical persona, Mangled, first introduced in *Dark Thirty*, returns in Frazier's second collection and echoes fellow IAIA alumna Esther Belin's (Diné) persona, Ruby, in *From the Belly of My Beauty* (1999). Mangled is perhaps the loudest of *Aurum's* choir of nobodies and "embodies the struggle of Indigenous people who were left without a sense of identity, or a sense of culture and a sense of belonging to American society and culture" (Frazier 2018, 38). Mangled is no victim, however. He is one-part postindian trickster (who could belong in a Gerald Vizenor novel) and one-part vaudeville, a nobody straight out of the early twentieth century whose "oily iron" face has a "skillet shine" and who has "[n]o kin to call his own" (24). He sings racist Hank Williams songs and pantomimes "playing his ribs" like an accordion "thumb to pinkie, pressing the flesh between bone, foot tamping pavement" (14). For Frazier, Mangled equally embodies *Aurum's* distinctive lyrical qualities and imagery and is defined by an excess of trickster performativity. But what Frazier wants to emphasize is not just Mangled's visual pantomiming but also his "tune, his humming of the knife, the slow slimming of his lips to song"—the musical qualities of Mangled's performance itself (25).

In the associations of place that sound and image can provoke, Frazier sees the possibility—however partial and limited—of rendering and recuperating nobodied Indigenous subjects like Mangled. The fragmented images of "Half-Life" explore these associations of sight, sound, and smell, mapping out a landscape of Indigenous presence. The landscape that these images produce is nonetheless broken and disconnected by ongoing settler colonial violence, like a plat map that shows the checkerboarding of Cherokee lands after their allotment at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even still, Frazier gives us optimistic "glimpses" of Indigenous presence. We hear the sound of children "leap[ing] a puddle, / dome bellied— / sticky with pop— / plum-dark feet and ankles," even as an image of bodies "crammed through the windshield" of a "T-Bird bottomed-out / in a ditch" follows (30-31). The sound and smell of greasy food such as "[p]into beans, / salt meat melted into the juice" and "[c]an-shaped meat, / sliced, / fried in bacon grease" function as rez food signifiers of kin and community, even as they also function as signifiers of the "[b]ean-scum face" of a railroad locomotive (47). Industry and community in Frazier's landscape

are inseparable, and the industrial production of “grain makes everything smell fried.” Industry “is a bowl of beans smashed with mustard” (53).

The most striking feature of Frazier’s images are not visual; his images proceed first from his language’s sonic and even olfactory qualities, from vibrations of gospel on the radio, “[s]immering corn,” the “guzzle” of a water well, and the “chucking” of “grain toward chickens” (49). To understand the sonic grammar of Frazier’s images—especially the violent ones—you must listen to the “vowels echoing / off the carbon steel” of a head smashed into a desk (55). In fact, Frazier’s images prioritize these sensory qualities to counter overwhelmingly visual colonial representations of Native peoples. “Half-Life” concludes with a slide projection show of racist newspaper headlines and a scientific model of a human skeleton made possible through the genocide of Native peoples. Frazier uses the sound of his images to disrupt the visual colonial gaze of the slideshow. It is this colonial visibility that orders the textbook version of events, that says “your village was razed, grunts smothered, / children left to twirl legless in scorched maize” (61).

Aurum is not just an ambitious collection that confronts important political and aesthetic questions about giving voice to Indigenous experience amid the ongoing violence of genocide, settler colonialism, erasure, and capitalist exploitation. It also renders in vivid detail the grounded reality of everyday Indigenous struggle and survival. Frazier’s poems are full of (painfully) exquisite language and searing imagery that offers a truly original poetics of place. The strength of his collection may be in its uncompromising dedication to the power of image and sound to convey the sensory complexity of Indigenous landscapes, to move beyond the colonial dominance of the visual domain, and to weave together other modes of experiencing place. *Aurum* is an enormous achievement and powerfully showcases Frazier’s distinctive and profound lyrical approach. This is a collection full of possibility.

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