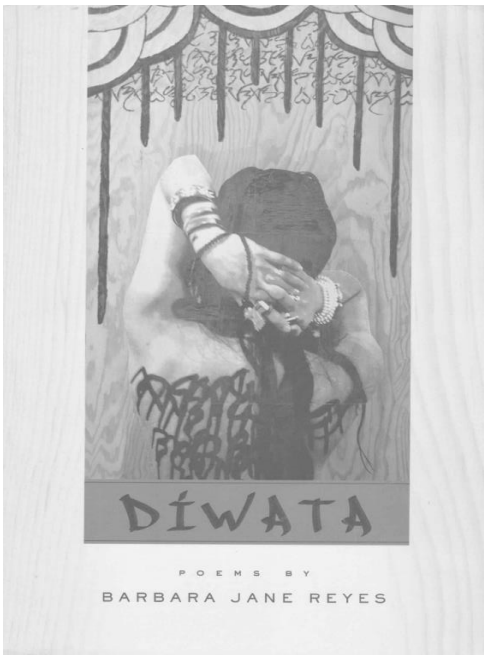
Book Review:
Mythological Woman and the Prose Poem in Barbara Jane Reyes's *Diwata*



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Barbara Jane Reyes, a Filipino-American poet, had her collection *Diwata* published in 2010 by the New York-based BOA Editions Ltd. as part of their American Poets Continuum series. Despite the slimness of the volume – the epigraph, poems, and notes occupy sixty-seven A5-sized pages – it contains an abundance of the worthwhile for comparative mythologists and literary analysts. Diwata is the Filipino term for goddess, fairy, and nature spirit, and the word is derived from *devata*, the Hindi word - most likely originally Sanskrit - for deity ("Devata," n.d.). Reyes employs all these aspects of Diwata – goddess, fairy, and nature spirit – to portray Diwata as the universal, primordial, mythological Woman found in all mythologies, and as the

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representative very human Woman who, through the unfolding of the ages, continues to experience the same longings and sufferings. This is of much interest to the student of myth. For the student of poetry, Reyes's uses of the prose poem, chant-like forms, and multilingualism are a fascinating study.

Mythological Woman

As mythological Woman, Diwata's identity is fluid. In "Diwata," a poem with eight sections (Reyes, 2010, pp. 14-21), and in "In the City, a New Congregation Finds Her" (pp. 64-65), she is the Mother Goddess, a deity worshipped by ancient cultures all throughout the tropics ages before the Spanish introduced the male Christian god to the Philippine islands. One of these ancient planters' first conceptions of divine power probably stemmed from the miracle of a seed containing life within it that with time rose above ground, a miracle paralleled by the capacity of a woman's body to nourish life within it and later give it birth (Campbell, 1987, p. 66). Diwata is also the dryad who takes as mate a mortal man (Reyes, 2010, p. 20). Then as the weaver who "weaves words into the fabric of the sky" (Reyes, 2010, p. 14), Diwata is a version of Arachne, she who competed with Athena in a weaving contest (Ovid, 2009, pp. 141-145), and of Philomela, who, after her rapist had cut off her tongue to prevent her from speaking of his crime, wove a tapestry to tell of her ordeal (Ovid, 2009, pp. 153-161). Diwata's rival is not Athena but the male Christian god, and her ordeal is erasure by Christianity. Furthermore, Diwata is the mermaid in the five "Duyong" poems (Reyes, 2010, pp. 29-33). Reyes uses the Bahasa Malaysian/Indonesian word for mermaid, duyung, ("Duyung," n.d.) and not the Tagalog term, sirena, which obviously was borrowed from Castilian Spanish. Through this she places Diwata within the larger scope of Malay mythology and acknowledges the Philippines' Malay heritage.

Diwata is also the dove whom the hawk abducts from her father's celestial home

(Reyes, 2010, pp. 14-21). Reyes uses the Tagalog word for hawk and capitalizes it, Lawin, personifying the hawk as a rapacious god. According to a Philippine folktale, a hawk proposes marriage to a hen who accepts the proposal and a ring. Reprimanded by the rooster since she is already the rooster's wife, the flustered hen throws away the ring. When the hawk returns, the hawk punishes her by condemning her to peck always at the ground to search for the ring (Cole, 2007, pp. 88-89). Reyes transforms the hawk from a noble, authoritative bird much too good for the foolish hen, into the personification of male rapaciousness and appetite. By doing so, Reyes subscribes to the hawk's larger role in the mythology of the tropical Pacific islands. On the island of Malekula in former times, the hawk was the deity supplicated through animal and human sacrifices. The sacrifices were offered on a dolmen, over which there was a thatched roof. "The main beam of this roof terminate[d] in a carved image of the mythological hawk whose spirit hover[ed] over the ceremonies." The man able to carry out human sacrifice - usually of an illegitimate son or a slave - attained the highest possible spiritual plane and social status, became "identified with the hovering hawk," and could take the name Na-mbal, meaning "hawk" (Campbell, 1987, pp. 447-450).

Eve

An intriguing incarnation of Diwata is Eve, who speaks in different voices and takes on different personas. Reyes synthesizes the Biblical stories of the creation of the world and of Eve with the Philippine myth about Maganda (Beautiful) the first woman, Malakas (Strong) the first man, and Manaul the god of the wind who takes bird form. The epigraph (Reyes, 2010, p. 9) features the two myths. God, as narrated in Genesis Chapter 2, puts Adam into a deep sleep and creates Eve from one of Adam's ribs. Manaul, called "god of the air and lord of the birds," who was already present before creation when there was only water, wind, and sky, and who instigated the

fight between sea and sky that resulted in the creation of the Philippine islands (Eugenio, 2008, pp.8-9), pecks open the bamboo reed that contains Maganda and Malakas. Unlike the Judeo-Christian God, Manaul does not create Maganda and Malakas; there seems to be no explanation for their creation beyond the bamboo's innate fruitfulness. Malakas and Maganda, enclosed inside a bamboo reed, call out to Manaul to free them. He hesitates to do this and only pecks at the bamboo to catch and eat a lizard that has climbed up it. However, this difference in role - releaser as opposed to creator - is not as significant to Reyes as the fact that both Manaul and the Judeo-Christian Creator God are beings of air, air that flies or hovers over primordial water. Genesis starts "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Genesis 1:1-2, New International Version). Besides the similarity in character of the two gods, these two myths are also connected by their contrasting usages of the word "cleave," severance and adherence. In the Philippine myth, Manaul cleaves the bamboo reed in half to release the first man and woman. In the Genesis myth, the man cleaves to the woman in marriage. Reyes employs this double meaning to prepare the reader for the rest of the book in general but particularly for the opening poem, "A Genesis of We, Cleaved" (Reyes, 2010, pp. 11-12)

This opening poem uses the structure of the very beginning of Genesis. It is written in seven paragraphs that narrate the events of successive days in the birth of Maganda/ Eve/Woman. The first paragraph starts with "In the beginning, a man of dust and fire became bone, and viscera, and flesh. The deity of the wind blessed his lips, and he came to take his first breath. Within this strange vessel, I opened my eyes..." The second paragraph begins "On the second day, the unseen hand from above cleaved you in

two, exacting penance for our joy as you awakened from the deepest, most delicious dreaming." This anaphoric rhythm is used throughout the rest of the poem until the last paragraph: "On the seventh day, my love, I surrendered."

As an alternative to the patriarchal tone of Genesis, Maganda/Eve/Woman speaks about her own creation. Man is the womb in which Woman took form. Man's body is safe, nourishing, and comforting. Man's blood is a "haven" and his flesh and tendons a "cradle." Thus, Woman's love for Man is not only sexual, but also filial: ". . .within this, your darkness, I learned to weave song. Do you remember me fluttering inside your chest, tickled by the cool air newly filling your lungs?" Besides being the womb that nourished Woman, in the third paragraph Man is called Woman's "mirror," her reflection, the figure nestled in the other half of the split bamboo reed. However, the opening of Adam's chest to extract the rib causes injury to Malakas/Adam/Man and birth trauma to Maganda/Eve/Woman: "On the second day, my love, I was torn from the haven of your blood, the cradle of your flesh and tendons. A smarting wound strewn across our garden's sweet grasses. I lay raw and aching. On this second day, my hands and feet learned how relentless the cold." This is a description of birth trauma. According to Joseph Campbell in *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (1987), the abrupt fright and pain experienced by the baby during birth, resulting in "caught breath, circulatory congestion, dizziness, or even blackout," makes the birthing process and its attendant imagery - darkness, claustrophobia, a passage - ubiquitous archetypes of transformation in mythology and religion (pp. 61-62).

God, ignoring Woman, comforts only Man for this pain of separation: "On the fourth day, I sang a dirge, the river my harmony. From afar, you watched me, as the unseen hand from above offered you reparations for your brokenness. ...On this fourth day, the scars hardened over your heart."

Woman receives no comfort, and Man learns to live with the pain. “There were no words for the sorrow bolting through me then, as I watched your hands touch the scarring place where I began.” Sorrow bolts through Woman, like lightning, reminding us of Zeus whose weapon is the thunderbolt, and Thor the Norse god of thunder.

Woman disobeys God not by eating fruit that gives knowledge of good and evil but by attempting to claim Man and bring him back to the past, to have his love and companionship in a time before the regime of this deity of the wind, this “unseen hand from above”: “More than anything, I thirsted to embrace you in our ocean, for its saltwater to heal us both...I dreamed that from loss, we began again, a we that knew only of being whole, of sharing heart, and breath, and salt.” The imagery is of the ocean, the primordial water that is as old and sourceless as the wind, and Woman allies herself with this force. It is water that shelters and comforts Woman after her extraction from Man: “On the third day, I found river, and plunged the wisp of my body into its current…I learned to breathe without you…I mimicked the river’s lullaby…On the fourth day, I sang a dirge, the river my harmony.” Reyes’s vision is to be commended for its boldness in portraying Woman as challenging God’s place in Man’s heart, and its realism in recognizing that union with Man not only would be beautiful and safe but would contain its own mystery and danger. Woman dares to imagine the destruction of God’s garden in a fire that results in “suns and thunder,” images of life and fear, in order that she and Man may have a new start at a life together and may become one being again: “A feast of we, luminous as the secret of fruit and seed. A we impervious to cleaving, to fracture.” This obviously, in “feast” and “fruit and seed,” still contains the image of the forbidden fruit. What is forbidden is not the knowledge of good and evil but the union of the two genders, Woman claiming ownership of God’s son.

> On the sixth day, I came to you, and told you of this dream. I touched your scars. You whispered a prayer. I gave you my secrets. You gave me your words. I asked for your breath. You gave me your seed. And as our bodies folded into each other, we dreamed the same honeyed light. Upon awakening, you named me for the morning. But on this sixth day, the unseen hand from above wrested you from me, cleaved us in two once again, and weighted the heaviest sorrow upon me. Never once did he show himself.
>
> On the seventh day, my love, I surrendered.

Man's response to Woman is ambiguous, evasive, and selfish. She touches on his chest the scars of her extraction, an attempt at deep psychological and physical union. In reply he addresses God. She shares her secrets; he gives her "words," the plural form so that it is not mistaken for "promise" but instead possibly interpreted as prevarication. She asks for his breath, symbolic of sharing his life; in response he satisfies his sexual desire for her. The ambiguity is heightened by the romantic tone of the eighth and ninth sentences of the six paragraph. God, too powerful for mere Woman, takes back Man. Furthermore, God visits on Woman's head the "heaviest sorrow" or more rightly sorrows, which she, now without choice or hope, surrenders to - spiritual and psychological separation from Man resulting in heartbreak, the pain of childbirth, and the indignities of a body weaker than Man's and a subordinate role in marriage.

In contrast to the loving, suppliant tone of "A Genesis of We, Cleaved," the voice of Eve in "Eve Speaks" (Reyes, 2010, pp. 46-47) is proud, disdainful, and threatening. The poem begins by evoking an atmosphere of behavioral constraints, frustration, and emotional volatility.

> Let the man who cannot dream be a condemned man. Who comes here but shadows of ourselves, where smoke seeps into plush velvet the color of lipstick and blood. This place is my dreamweaving, its iron sculptures, framed in light. Flickering chandeliers' fake fire. Still, wax melts and

> curls around my feet. The tables here are scratched brass, carved with names and regrets.

The setting could be a prison. The man is condemned, sentenced to a term of incarceration. The man and the speaker are merely shadows of themselves, grim attenuated presences who left their more wholesome, hopeful aspects in the outside world. The sculptures of iron are prison bars. The tables of "scratched brass, carved with names and regrets" are mess hall tables. Alternatively the setting could be a church. The "iron sculptures, framed in light" are crucifixes. The wax comes from tiers of candles found in alcoves in very traditional Catholic churches, candles that people light as they pray for dead loved ones. A third possibility is that the poem is set in a castle-like house where a Gothic romance unfolds. The sofa of "plush velvet the color of lipstick and blood," the chandeliers of guttering light, and the iron sculptures conjure a narrative of a marriage in which one spouse is sinister and secretive and the other victimized and cozened. All three possible settings merge to present a difficult marriage that, because of the religious sacrament but also because of Man and Woman's emotional ties to each other, cannot be simply or easily dissolved.

The marriage is toxic. The wedding rings are now mere "faux gold casing," and conversation is deceitful: "Lover, do not come near, for I see story in your broken parts. Lover, do not promise, for when you do, I come to loathe words. Lover, do not speak, for what you say is vapor." Furthermore, Eve expresses fear at her spouse's aggressiveness and selfishness: "Your need opens something in me which knows to anticipate dread. I anticipate your reprimand, and I anticipate your promise. Tell me then, as if I knew no words, tell me why you have created me to dread you," and also "Let me always glance at empty doorways, knowing the movements beyond these are you drawing near."

Eve however has her methods of defense and retaliation. Joseph Campbell

(1987) remarks that "Before the separation of Eve, Adam was both male and female," meaning that the first human being, before the creator ever thought to have two different biological sexes, was an androgyne (p. 104). Reyes demonstrates this idea when she portrays how Eve reviles her husband by declaring his actual androgyny: "Were I to assign you color, you would be opaque, a fine slice of opal beneath the moon's veil. Were I to touch you, you'd shatter, and crumble into jasmine-scented powder. I would gather you beneath my fingernails, dust my love lines with you." As an opal and as fragrant talc, Adam devolves into items of Eve's jewelry and cosmetics. Eve further copes by threatening to wield her own capacity for violence. ". . . Lover, I will break you and compose a symphony with your bones. Of what remains, I shall grind into dust and mix with rain." Eve is the cannibal ogress, a mythological archetype encountered in all folklores and elevated to "a universal symbol in such cannibal-mother goddesses as the Hindu Kali…who is a personification of 'all consuming Time…" (Campbell, 1987, p. 68).

In "Eve Speaks 2" (Reyes, 2010, p. 63). Eve is a shapeshifting nymph who longs for love. She lights a beacon to guide some oarsmen to her shore, one of whom is the man she desires, whom she calls pilgrim. "Come ashore, my winsome pilgrim, kiss the earth if you must. See how this collection of stolen bones becomes a wolf. Place your open hand there, and the delicate skin of your wrist supine, so that she may know your scent." The poem is a declaration of love and desire. Gone is the mocking, dangerous Eve from the first "Eve Speaks." This Eve is very young and innocent, a girl confined to an uninspiring hometown and ready for the adventure of a great love.

Aswang

An equally fascinating incarnation of Diwata is the aswang, portrayed in the last poem of the book. In the mythology of the Bicol region and Panay island in southern Philippines, Aswang was a god, the evil

sibling or counterpart of the good god who was called Gugurang or Agurang (Clark & del Rosario, 2011). Since Spanish colonial times, the aswang came to embody varied evil beings: a witch, a vampire, a werewolf, or a ghoul. Its most famous version is of the manananggal, usually a woman, who looks normal during the day but then transforms at night into an evil creature that grows black wings, detaches itself from the lower half of its body, and then flies around to look for sleeping pregnant women because of its craving for fetuses (Ramos, 1990, p. 400; Tan, 2008; Clark & del Rosario, 2011).

> I am the dark-hued bitch; see how wide my maw, my bloodmoon eyes,
> And by daylight, see the tangles and knots of my riverine hair.
> I am the bad daughter, the freedom fighter, the shaper of death masks.
> I am the snake, I am the crone; I am caretaker of these ancient trees.
> (from "Aswang," Reyes, 2010, p. 73)

According to Bryan Argos of the Roxas City Museum, the Spanish friar-colonizers wanted to quell uprisings against Spanish rule, to eradicate native religious beliefs, and to promote Christianity and European medicine among the locals. To accomplish these goals they labeled as aswang two groups of women: the fighters who attacked the Spanish at night, and the babaylans, the native priestess-healers (Clark & del Rosario, 2011). The images of the crone and caretaker of trees refer to the babaylan. In declaring herself "the snake," the aswang claims a role mythologically male. According to Campbell (1987) the serpent is "phallic, waterlike, lightning like, by which the maiden is to be transformed" (p. 390). Philippine mythology features a serpent god of the clouds, called Ulilang Kaluluwa, "orphan spirit." In the time before creation, Ulilang Kaluluwa fought with Bathala, the sky god, because each wanted the world for himself. Bathala won and burned Ulilang Kaluluwa's body (Mangahas & Llaguno, 2006). By claiming the serpent's identity, the aswang feminizes it and asserts her own rivalry with the male Bathala. The

aswang is a rebel, the woman who dares to think independently and to decide her own destiny.

Ending the book with only one poem about the aswang leaves the reader with a sense of incompleteness. The collection might have benefited from containing a few more poems that explore this dangerous persona of Diwata, to balance the voice of the victim in poems such as “Diwata” (pp. 14-21) and the voice of longing in poems such as “Having Been Cast, Eve Implores” (p. 67) in which Eve says,

> I want to know the words to your prayer--
> my earliest memory, a thirst for your bones.
> Tell me what you know of redemption, dear one,
> and blossoms of hope unfurling their first petals.
> Tell me you awaken holding my name in your hands.

Historical Woman

Besides being mythological Woman, Diwata is also realistic, historical Woman who has experienced conquest by invading men from various foreign cultures. A number of poems in the collection feature historical Woman, but “Call It Talisman (If You Must)” (Reyes, 2010, pp. 51-54) encompasses the successive pre-historical and historical periods in four pithy yet comprehensive sections and will therefore suffice for a study of this embodiment of Diwata. The poem begins with a woman warrior from a tattooed headhunting tribe of pre-colonial times. The blind old man tattoos her with illustrations of leaves, flowers, insects, a stream, all very harmless, yet she views the stream as a “blade which women conceal beneath their skirts.” Later the Spanish priests would demonize such women warriors: “Women did indeed fight alongside the men once. Few talk about it these days. The black-robed holy men, who carried more curses than prayer, so feared armed women, they branded us savage and sinful, they called us monsters. Women who tucked skirts between their legs, tongues of knives, hands like tilling tools, we returned home to nurse our

babies after washing clean our bloodied hands." If she holds her peace, she suffers oppression, but if she fights, she suffers vilification. In the second section this woman has lost her inheritance, her father's land, to the Spanish hacienderos: "But by the time I grew old enough to marry, all his fields my father lost to the fire, and to the papers of the wealthy, not of this land but of gray cities far away from here." Historical Filipina is therefore constrained, displaced, and impoverished.

The poem's last two sections are set in the Second World War during the Japanese occupation and describe the brutality of the Japanese particularly against women: "But these sun worshippers, they were cruel. They used the young women as whores, slid loaded pistols between their legs, gave them sores and fevers which none of our medicines could cure. The sun worshippers also took heads, but left these to rot where they fell. No hunters were these, but mercenaries, beasts." The case of the "comfort women" forced to provide sex to the Japanese soldiers is historical fact (Asian Women's Fund, n.d.; Steinbock, 2018). The poem though not only remembers but foreshadows. *The Guardian* in February 2018 reported on Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's order to soldiers to shoot women communist rebels in the vagina. Duterte's notoriety as a misogynist and a macho-fascist has since intensified (Ellis-Petersen, 2018). It is noteworthy that these communist rebels, like the speaker of "Call It Talisman (If You Must)," are fighters and are threatened with the same dehumanizing act of violence. *Diwata* was published six years before the start of the Duterte regime (Gutierrez, 2016), and so the prescience in the above quotation disturbs deeply in its proof that several decades may pass but misogyny remains and the oppression of women continues.

Verse Forms and Language

The risk of prose poems is that the arrangement of the text in paragraphs as opposed to carefully separated lines could

lead to argument about whether the paragraphs are prose or poetry. The writer contends that the text is poetry and has it published in a book of poetry, but a reader might consider the text to be prose, perhaps rather imagistic and lilting, but prose nonetheless. Reyes's prose poems can only ever be considered poetry. Even when these poems contain narrative, they are character-based; the speaker is candid, articulate, and well-defined as a personality. Furthermore, Reyes employs abstract words, imagery, and figurative language not merely to state and describe but to create a sense of being, to create precise evocations and presences. Here is a stanza from "Eve's Aubade" (Reyes, 2010, p. 66).

> Remain by my side as wind deity, as word, as eyes bright with both dusk and amber. Remain with me so that we may keep vigil, both of us before morning's honeyed light filters through fire escapes. In our vigil, let there be only witness, and I will offer you stillness rising into unfettered dawn. Here I will weave a dreaming of lovemaking bodies' fire and salt. Here, I will teach your hands to weave crescent moon into ocean current, serpent hiss into river's rush.

"Word" in that first sentence brings to mind the Genesis story in which God speaks creation into existence, and also the beginning of the Gospel of John, in which the Word is identified as God. Hence this aubade is being sung possibly at the dawn of time, or possibly at the beginning of a renewed, more personal relationship with God that Jesus Christ offers, Christ who is called the Second Adam. "Witness" in the third sentence includes testimony in addition to experience, the connotation of vows, without the tense watchfulness of a vigil. "Stillness" in the same sentence is also very carefully chosen. What is intended is not "silence" nor "peace," not something aural nor psychological but something tactile, of the body, and "immobility" is tactile but has sinister undertones of paralysis. Thus, "stillness" is the perfect choice. Regarding imagery, the fire escapes make known the urban setting, with its attendant hectic days, noise, and crimes, so that the gift

of stillness becomes the exact required balm. The weaving hands, and the association of moon with ocean and serpent with river, situate the poem in mythology even while it unfolds in a city tenement. As for figurative language, the hendiadys "dusk and amber" not only reveals the color of the wind deity's eyes but shows Eve's proactiveness in claiming her lover; the poem is an aubade, a song to the dawn, but Eve, or eve, has put her light in his eyes, the light of dusk, thereby taking him from the morning. The synesthesias "honeyed light," combining taste and sight, and "unfettered dawn," combining touch and sight, ensure that setting is presented through the speaker's emotional lenses, her sweet feelings of joy and freedom. The metonymies of "fire and salt" for bodies, "current" for ocean, "hiss" for serpent, and "rush" for river emphasize that it is physical details that bestow depth, fullness, and poignancy to the experience of togetherness.

For the poems in *Diwata* arranged in traditional poetic lines, Reyes uses particularly musical verse forms. She chooses the pantoum for "Sea Incantation" (Reyes, 2010, pp. 44-45) and "The Villagers Sing of the Woman Who Becomes a Wave Who Becomes the Water Who Becomes the Wind" (pp. 61-62). As with the word "duyong" discussed earlier, by using the pantoum Reyes places Diwata within the larger scope of Malay mythology and acknowledges the Philippines' Malay heritage. The pantoum is a Malaysian poetic form, a sequence of quatrains linked by repetition. The second and fourth lines of each stanza become the first and third lines of the following stanza (Strand & Boland, 2001, pp. 43-44). The result in Reyes's poems is a beautiful, indeed incantatory, succession of imagery and sound, favoring character and setting over narrative. Here are two stanzas from "The Villagers Sing of the Woman Who Becomes a Wave Who Becomes the Water Who Becomes the Wind":

she weaves words into the fabric of sky
she knows the stars, an ascension of pearls
she is witness, keeper of starlight

she weeps silver tears when the moon is full

she knows the stars, an ascension of pearls
she is mother, the deepest ocean
she weeps silver tears when the moon is full
leaf storm, rice terrace, color of midnight

Also incantatory is “A Chorus of Villagers Sing a Song from Another Time Now Only a Memory” (Reyes, 2010, p. 60), structured as a call and response:

Come back, return! It is not yet the time to wander,
Come back, return! It is not yet the time to wander.

When it is your hour, then you will be called,
When it is your hour, then you will be called,

Come back to the village, return to the mountain—
Her trees invite you to climb into their arms!

The effect is of group prayer, an invocation to the diwata, and the spaces between the couplets are like spaces of air through which the voices travel, allowing time for each request to be heard.

One of the most interesting poems in *Diwata* is “She Laments Unnumbered Losses” (Reyes, 2010, p. 59), which is arranged as a paragraph but evokes the rhythm and repetitions of the Catholic rosary. Just as the rosary is a series of repetitions of the Lord’s Prayer and the Hail Mary (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, n.d.), “She Laments Unnumbered Losses” chants

What things I have cast into the sea I have done this in order to forget my child if not for this you would curse your fathers their names their fists smother my every cry I have done this in order to forget my child the villagers tell me this is for the best their names their fists smother my every cry our medicine woman’s hands and tongue severed the villagers tell me this is for the best both age and fire have blinded her our medicine woman’s hands and tongue severed

The paragraph form allows for a breathless sequence of images. This works smoothly with the repetitions to elevate the poem above mere storytelling into the portrayal of a traumatized speaker whose mind continuously flashes details of her sufferings and whose heart turns to the kind of prayer she was

taught by the very people who oppressed her and her culture.

A final aspect of Reyes's poetry to remark on is her juxtaposition of three languages – English, Tagalog, and Spanish – in certain poems. Here is an extract from "Diwata" (p. 14).

> A woman's hands make fine threads dance. With needles of carabao horn, of bamboo, she embroiders names into silk—serpent ulap scale luna fire lihim gem azul eye liwanag river mariposa light talà—when she weaves these words into the fabric of sky, a charm against forgetting. With ink and thread she draws her own hands *pero siempre estas manos desaparecen;* she weaves enkanto contra palabras vaporosas, poemas contra vacía alma.

The fascinating accumulation of nouns – "serpent ulap (cloud, Tagalog) scale luna (moon, Spanish) fire lihim (secret, Tagalog) gem azul (blue, Spanish) eye liwanag (brightness, Tagalog) river mariposa (butterfly, Spanish) light talà (star, Tagalog)" – woven by the mythological weaver into "the fabric of sky" present Diwata as a divine memory keeper, immortal, watchful of the movement of peoples and cultures through the millennia, and capable of absorbing all. "With ink and thread she draws her own hands, "*pero siempre estas manos desaparecen*," but always these hands disappear, as the Spanish colonizers attempt to erase as much of the native beliefs as they could replace with the male Christian god and Christian teachings and motifs. Still she keeps on weaving "enkanto contra palabras vaporosas, poemas contra vacía alma," spells against empty words, and poems against an empty soul. Worth noticing is the Tagalog spelling, in a Spanish phrase, for the Spanish word *encanto*.

In *Diwata*, Reyes's featuring of Woman across mythologies – Philippine, Malay, Pacific, Greek, and Judeo-Christian – is a fruitful topic of study for comparative mythologists, as is her portrayal of historical Woman. Students of poetry can learn much from her collection about the possibilities of the prose poem and the qualities of the incantatory tone.

In all mythologies, as in real life, Woman struggles to maintain a relationship with Man, Man whom the outer world constantly pulls away from her and whose impulses too often are towards control. She struggles to be herself, to be allowed expression of her natural liveliness and strength. She struggles to pray, to connect with a god who is often too male and too negligent of her. Her tools are her emotions both sweet and spiteful, her capacity for love and forgiveness, and the imagery that structures and fills her every day: water, light, thread, the body, children, and the voice of the primeval chant.

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