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Unidad 1, Un paso más

El poder de la poesía de Denice Frohman

Denice visitó la Universidad de Kansas en abril del 2018 y dejó al público sin palabras

As a kid, my mom used to take me to Puerto Rico in the summertime, and I remember watching my abuela, her name was Teresa and so we called her *doña* Teresa, which is sort of a formal sign of respect when you reach *doña-hood*. You know? I feel *doña-hood* should be a thing in the world! It’s like “get your *doña-hood* packet,” like your *bata* and your *cafecito*, your *cane* (overall laughing). Slippers. Somebody said slippers, thank you! But that’s true for pre-*doña-hood* too. I got slippers. You know what I mean? I’m waiting to be adorned with a *bata* one day.

Anyway, my *abuela*, *doña* Teresa – it sounds big in my brain, and I don’t if it sounds the same way to you – but she was every part of *doña* Teresa. Like you don´t want to mess with *doña* Teresa! One of the distinct memories that I have, I was maybe 8 or 9, and I remember we were visiting…. My mom and my abuela they don’t come from money. You know? So they grew up working on a coffee farm. And I remember watching my abuela walk with her cane and grab a chicken and kill it with her bare hands. And I never understood why she did that in front of my face (audience laughing). As much as I rep my roots, I am from New York City, we just go to the corner to get some chicken. I don’t know what happens. So I was *shook-eth*. Literally, and I can’t get rid of that tiny memory. I can’t get rid of it, so I said let me write about this because there is something in it for me. And then, maybe I can understand my mother a little bit better if I understand maybe what doña Teresa was trying to teach me.

**“Doña Teresa and the chicken”**

The wooden house in Castañer didn’t come with air
conditioner or anything cool. The heat was its own
kind of music, and so was abuela—demanding,
sharp-tongued. The kind of woman, I imagine
whose teeth grew in because she told them to.
So the chicken never had a chance.
It ran around the backyard, flapping
its black-feathered wings for mercy, for god’s
attention, but *Papa Dios* knew better
than to get in between a woman
feeding her grandkids. I looked
over my shoulder and there she was,
chasing him, like an old lover
she came back to haunt yelling:
*¡hijo de puta! ¡sin vergüenza! ¡ven acá!*
Her rosary beads slapped against her chest,
over and over like a chant, and you knew everything
in her path was temporary. Even the wind buckled
at the knees, at the sight of a woman
too wise to act like her blood was softer
than it was—and I saw her do it . . . and I think she knew
because the chicken clucked so hard it spit up
its own good throat and she laughed; grabbed it
by the neck and swung it high above her
head like a propeller. All summer I tried,
but couldn’t unsee that. Once, she gutted mom’s
favorite pig with a machete and fed it to her—
on her 12th birthday. Maybe that’s how mama learned
to love us, to kill the thing that feeds you.

Years later, she didn’t go to her best friend’s funeral
or the *vecina* who mothered her in New York. Barely
made it through abuela’s; I suppose all she had was to love
until death. And no more. But when we got to the funeral
home and saw Doña Teresa lying
in the casket—arms crossed, chin cocked up—
the whole family busted out crying,
wanting her to come back, wanting her to shout:
*“Didn’t I prepare you better than this?”*

(Applause)

Are we doing alright? Yeah? OK, good. My hope for the writers and the creators in the room is that you live with the poem you want to write down. That would be really awesome, or an idea or a story you want to return to. I am feeling a lot of you have been already working on stuff. You got some drafts in your computer? Shoutout to the roommates! Roommates are important, who are like “what are you working on”? You know what I am talking about?!

Growing up in New York City, if I have to make a recipe of the things from my childhood, which is a good writing prompt “what would you put in the pot”? For me it would be a CD player with cheap headphones, a quart of water, a 50-cent butter bagel – they were fifty cents – a token like the real one, and it would be a *piragua*, which is also known as a *raspado* for some communities and also known as a *frío frío* for the Dominicans. How many of you what I am talking about? OK. Boom. Those of you that don’t know what I am talking about you are about to learn because now it’s not only women history month, but Latinx history month every day. So we just going to learn together.

(Audience cheering)

So*, piragua* aka *raspado* aka *frío frío,* beautiful things about Latina/Latinx community, different names for essentially the same thing. It is a man who is typically with a cart, I don’t know where these carts come from, they keep being very creative…, and there is a block of ice, shaved ice. It’s essentially what you might call a snow cone but it’s not a snow cone because it is a *piragua*, *raspado, frío frío.* OK? To quote Erika Badu, “I’m sensitive about my s---.” OK?

(Audience laughs)

Growing up I used to get these treats every day in the summer time or spring time. Ya’ll running to the ice cream man, and I am “where is the piragüero?” I’m running toward him. And I remember as I got older the piragüero was harder and harder to find. He was being pushed out of our neighborhoods, even now if you take a picture of the piragüero, the common section in that picture is “where is he?” “What block? What intersection do I need to go to and pull up on to get my piragüero? You know what I mean? It is a relic in our community but it is such a shame that the justificationhas pushed out our most treasured community members. And the beautiful thing about poems is that the people that you pass on the street every day they don’t get the recognition but as part of our communities they deserve a poem. Poetry says they deserve a poem, it says they deserve to have their story told and celebrated. This poem is a celebration of the piragüero but more than that it is a celebration our parents who work with their hands, both my parents worked with their hands, and I think so much of this country is made, people who worked with their hands... (to the audience) you can clap for that.

(Applause)

It is important that we don’t cast away or demean people who might not have degrees, as much as getting their education, I am so happy you are doing that, getting your academic education, but there are many educations to get in this life. Therefore, I want to celebrate those working with their hands, who make the festivals hot, who make our parties hoy, and really elevate and preserve the piragüero tune.

This is called “A queer girl’s ode to the piragüero”

(Applause)

**“A Queer Girl’s Ode to the Piragüero”**

Oh, Piragüero! My first lover.
The only man I ever wanted
anything from. I sprinted half blocks for you, got off
the bus two stops early, took the long way home
just to see: your rainbow umbrella.

Oh, Piragüero!
Candy-cool syrup god
boricua-batmobile
wooden-cart-pushing
bobsled…papi.

When the *viejitas* ask for the 10th time whether I got *un novio*
the closest name on my tongue was you! Who else made me break
my neck in two? Who else gave me so much… for a dollar?
Who raised hell when they nicknamed your island
delicacy: *snow cone,* (or worse) *shaved ice*?

I trusted you! The hallelujah work of your bare hands
the dirty white kitchen towel you laid over
a fat block of ice and never once did I ask questions.
and when they pushed you off 9th Ave., when you packed up
on 96th, I only saw you after ball games on 131st & 5th.

When the hipsters threw ice in paper cups,
added nutmeg and real ingredients like,
mint leaves, called this an “upscale makeover”
for a poor man’s treat. I wanted to shout out: “*No!
Leave my man alone!”*

*(Applause)*

Who else could turn a blue shopping cart
into a 57’ chevy? Or a mom-n-pop shop? Maybe the *elotero*
on El Centro, the *churro* ladies by the A train. Maybe my mama
once, the nanny, who sowed curtains for a couple upstairs,
made an office out of her hands, like my pops.

Who cut his saxophone into the velvet flesh
of night, rearranged the altitude
of a Paladium dancefloor and then:
a plump wad of cash, a worn rubber band**,**a 401(K) shoe-box, which is to say
praise everything we build.

Under the table—the underworld
of workers and wielders, America’s
thumping baseline, the chorus
of a country where 2-for-1
is the best hook to every good song I know.

Like the way you turn my tongue
into a red carpet*,* like the first woman
I ever loved.

Oh, Piragüero…
you winter my whole mouth,
you conductor of cool.

You’re the only one I know,
the only one who can govern
the thick heat, like a DJ scratching
a glacier, you make the whole city
rock.

(Applause)

Now you know what a piragüero is! *Raspado*, *frío frío*! Is everyone doing alright? Awesome.

I was a late bloomer throughout my adolescence into high school and even into college. I don’t know if any of you feel like you are just behind all the time, have a feeling that a lot of people in this room. You feel like everyone has figured it out but you… For me, for many girls, when we inherit this very narrow script of girlhood and womanhood when we get into the world, it is just so narrow that most of us just don’t fit into it. We inherit all these things when we are born that we don’t need. We get our name, that’s cool. I might change it, might not! Right! We get our hair color, our religion that sometimes works for us, sometimes it doesn’t, our sexuality, all these assumed things, and it is like we don’t have a lot of space to make and create ourselves. Right? We just don’t.

A lot of it is unlearning what you were given, and recognizing you actually have agency to create a life that is yours, and all yours, and no one else’s. My first kiss, like makeout sesh, with a boy was a very stressful endeavor, and I don’t know if anyone here has had a good first kiss. I didn’t so I don’t believe you exist. I have decided as a way to protect my feelings that no one has had a good first kiss. And I have done hundreds and hundreds of shows, so I have some data. I always felt like late, my girlhood and for many of us our girlhood is connected to how much we can acquire the male gaze. Before I had language, I am talking about elementary school, that was my truth. I knew what I was supposed to do, and the script that I keep referencing, I was messing up all my lines: what do I say? What do I do? Because it wasn’t organic to me, I would just follow what my friends did. You like Ian, where is he at? I like Ian! Ian is cute! Ian doesn’t know I’m alive. I was 16 or 17, I was at high school, late bloomer, all of my friends with the third or fourth boyfriend. And I had a list in my head, of all the things around partnership that I needed to accomplish: hold boy’s hand, check! Find cute senior to walk down the hallway with, check! First kiss, no check. My best friend, Laura at the time, was the crooner of the group. Before Kelis had a milkshake, you know that song? I have no milkshake, no yard, no boys, nothing, no grass, no land. A metro card, nothing.

This poem is a coming of age story, written as diary entry as my younger self sort of detailing this first kiss and, of course, what happened after that. Anyone here who is questioning their sexuality, or maybe they know how you feel but you’re just worried about everybody else. I wish I known when I was younger, that was nothing wrong with me. I thought I was broken, that my heart didn’t work and when I found out that it did, I was so overjoyed, elated and overwhelmed. Anyone in this room who feels broken … I want you to know that you are not, and that you have agency over your heart, and it gets to decide who it loves, wants to spend time with. And it gets to be unsure. You know what else is true? You get to not even know, that’s real. Here is “First Kiss”

**“First Kiss”**

October 13th
Many years ago, his lips must have
been born in winter but I did it anyway
I am proud of that.
Pothole dimples and a collection of
white teeth so perfect you could tell
God got to him first.

In a dark room I
assembled myself the way I am
imagined any girl should.
Arms up in position and pregnant with waiting.
He kissed me and I waited for the flood,
I waited for God to gift me my own
desire, for the angsty snow to melt
between us, for the muscles in my neck to
howl in an octave I've never known.
For the next chapter of my womanhood to
appear and none of that happened.

When you get stood up by your own first
kiss, you feel like nothing belongs to you,
not even the promise of magic.
Love is a rumor, like Santa Claus.
It lives in some pretty house that nobody has access to.
I must have had a bad past life.
I must have practiced on my hand too much.
My mouth is a terrible Orchestra.
The music it makes is foreign and uneven.
I'm a thrift store of broken piano keys,
a visitor looking at myself from some
window really far away.

See, I can't turn seventeen and have
nothing to say when someone asks if I
know the choreography of heat.

October 28th
Laura's lips look like two oceans

put together on purpose, like something

You are supposed to get lost in and not

know the beginning of, and there's a

whole world in writing that out loud for

the first time. I hope nobody reads us it

was her idea.

I sat down on her couch looking like a

good example of desperation.
I wanted to know if my body was capable of speaking

to another body in a language we already knew.
I wanted to know if I could finally

inherit my magic. If this doom was a

prank caller or if it meant I was going to

be alone for the rest of my life.

My mouth was mine and I know because I gave

it to her. We kissed and my blood became

a congregation of songs. I wrote myself

on the inside of a girl's mouth and I

didn't even care.
Every nerve in my body

sprouted legs. My spine found in a

country of fireworks. This is the

only thing better than the Thriller

album ever.

Every fizzle of me that was now has a name.
My heart isn't some Hail Mary of a

prayer or the secret apology I keep one day.

I am going to write poems about the

woman who loved me so deep I grew color in my bones, I know.

When they asked me about my first kiss I'm going to say I

leaned in with all of my skin and only got half of it back.
I'm going say I'll work really good.

I'm going say that some things are only felt the second time around

(Applause)

It feels like every morning I open my phone and click on social media, there is new rapture, I am always trying not to get on social media as a form of selfcare, it is a lot happening right now but a lot of necessary movements that are happening. Every morning feels like a new rapture. I had a conversation with this woman that works at NASA. I don’t know where these people live… do you go to Starbucks? Whole Foods? Bodega? And then I found one: “you, I got questions about outer space and other live forms, you are going to answer those for me now”. We had an amazing conversation, I started picking my brain and giving him a scenario: “Alright, if you were on another planet and you see something that you think it is alive, what would you do? And very calmly, she said “I would just sit next to it. I wouldn’t bottled it up, I wouldn’t label it, I wouldn’t take it back to earth with me and try to conquer it”, which is the legacy of white supremacy, it is just to take something, claim it, discover it, as if it just was born when you found it. Then you use it and exploit it, and act is if it yours. That’s a tendency and a pattern that we need to undo, as a country. Even just as a country, this is going to be controversial, I was always unconformable when people would say “this is the best country on earth”. Can we be wonderful and other countries be wonderful too? Is there only room for one kind of wonderful? Can my food be fly? And your food is fly? Can my culture be fly? And yours too? Why we want to be the best!!?? Honestly, I have never said that publicly on a mic. If you think about it… I got you!! Thank you, thank you (laughs)… When you hear that, it is not about not being a patriot, like I love my mama, but I love my daddy too! I like French fries and burgers. I love me some Ethiopian, I love meats, *pollo guisado*, I can love anything I want to love. This idea that we got to be the … gotta just have it, it’s strange.

This poem was written after the NASA woman answered my next question. I said, “if you could ask this living thing one question, what would you want to know?”, and very quickly she said, “I want to know how they coexist because we do not know how to”. This poem was written in conversation with that question. A year ago, almost to the day NASA announced the discovery of seven earth-size planets, all of which could have water, three are in habitable zone meaning that they could contain multiple ingredients to sustain life. This poem is an open letter to those seven planets. I feel challenge by the planets to show up for my communities, and to show up as an accomplish for other communities as well because I believe as well our liberation is connected and we are bound of being each other, and if I am not free, you are not free, and if you are not free, then I am not free… We need to remember this, to stay side by side, not in front or behind. Sometimes behind, but at least side by side.

**“An open letter to the seven new planets”**

Tell me dear friends,
Are the stars still soft where you are?
It’s honey the currency of your kind?
It is just this trend in your solar system?
You laugh in our man-made boundaries,
Shake your head, puzzled by our papers,
How in our all movies you fly to us, right?
In some spaceship with NASA bright lights
And each time our people are fighting
yet we call YOU alien.

I am sure you have seen our news.
A flood of scandal episodes trending to actual *Scandal* episodes.
A series of words trickled across screen,
a band, a bomb, a border.
You find these things unholy,
because everyone in the world is always a citizen of it,
because everywhere we breathe is home,

Tell me, what are your songs?
Does your music wake the dead?
Do you make tradition out of feeding the hungry?
Do your laws say love?
It is the only job we’ve got.

Tell me, you have different problems.
Like how to kiss these many beings all at once.
Like how to travel the distance of touch,
like how everyday feels like a holiday
when all your traffic jams turn into jam session.

See here on earth, we know a thing or two about making good music, right?
Have you seen our people march? And clap, and pray and praise.
Our hand can become a fist, how a fist can become an anthem,
And anthem can become a choir slow dance into a freedom song,
have you seen our street corners, ha?!
Where *bodegas* seem like churches, where crowds hold talent show with bucket drums
and break dance. May that be the soundtrack of this movement for every
Have you ever seen a man fly from the free-throw line?

Camera of flashes popping like hot grease,
his legs scissoring through the sky, and after that
we were never the same, and after that
we discovered in each other a new god,
and I am sure you wonder, how we got all this air
and still can´t some of us breathe?

This is what you show us?!
Dear friends, that this mess is our making!
And there is a better world that conquer.
The liberation is a sweeter song with all the people can sing it
that the closest sun we got is each other.
And we built us a new world.
And we built us a new world.
And maybe one day you write back
a love letter and say: “my god! I do see signs of life!”

(Applause)

I have one more poem for you all. Thank you so much for being here. Then we can maybe do a five-ten-minute Q&A. Does that sound okay? If you have to bounce, bounce. But if can stay and you want to ask a question, I always make myself available to answers, a five-ten-minute intermission, there is some mics going around.

This is my last poem. I want to thank you all for being here. Thank you for being an amazing audience. Can you clap? Can we clap? I am going to clap for you (Applause). Thank to all student groups and leaders, thank you to all the different sections in the crowd for giving a different energy and giving me life. Thank you so much for being such a generous audience. I hope you left with a question, I hope you feel seen, if you don´t feel seen, I hope you write your own story, I hope that we get to listen to it one day, and again, thank you to everybody. If you are uncomfortable, you are welcome! I think moments in my life where I am uncomfortable have been some of the most radically transformative moments. They are actually oftentimes gifts. And if you are uncomfortable, then you stay! Thank you! That is how we struggle together forward. We have talked about struggling forward, and not about disposability culture, I really hate it, it is unproductive, we need to learn how to struggle forward. Struggle forward! (Audience laughs) Anyway, I want to dedicate this poem to a high school student named… - I won´t actually say their name for privacy reasons – who lives in the area, who really wanted to be here tonight but couldn’t because their family was concerned about who I was. This is a student that identifies in the LGQTP family, and so, to that student, if anyone knows them, you might want to record what I am going to say right now. Because I want to say I see you, and hopefully, I can meet you one day. But until then, this poem I dedicate it to you.

**“Dear Straight People”**

Dear straight people,
Who do you think you are?
Do you have to make it so obvious that I make you uncomfortable?
Why do I make you uncomfortable?
Do you know that makes me uncomfortable?
Now we’re both uncomfortable.

Dear straight people,
You’re the reason we stay in the closet.
You’re the reason we even have a closet.
I don’t like closets, but you made the living room an unshared space
and now I’m feeling like a guest in my own house.

Dear straight people,
Sexuality and gender? Two different things
combined in many different ways.
If you mismatch your socks, you understand.

Dear Hip-Hop,
Why are you fascinated with discovering gay rappers?
Gay people rap. Just like gay people ride bikes and eat tofu.

Dear straight people,
I don’t think God has a sexual orientation,
but if she were straight, she’d be a dope ally.
Why else would she invent rainbows?

Dear straight women,
I mean, “Straight Women.”
Leave me alone!

Dear straight men,
If I’m flirting with you
it’s because I think it’s funny. Just laugh.

Dear straight people,
I’m tired of proving that my love is authentic. So, I’m calling for reparations.
When did you realize you were straight? Who taught you?
Did it happen because your parents are divorced?
Did it happen because your parents are not divorced?
Did it happen because you sniffed too much glue in 5th grade?

Dear straight people,
Why do you have to stare at me when I’m holding
my girlfriend’s hand like I’m about to rob you?

Dear straight people,
You make me want to fuckin’ rob you!

Dear straight allies,
thank you, more please!

Dear straight bullies,
You’re right. We don’t have the same values.
You kill everything that’s different.
I preserve it.
Tell me, what happened to
Jorge Mercado?
Sakia Gunn?
Lawrence King?
What happened to the souls alienated
in between too many high school walls,
who planned the angels of their deaths in math class,
who imagined their funerals as ticker-tape parades,
who thought the afterlife was more like an after party.
Did you notice that hate
is alive and well in too many lunch rooms,
taught in the silence of too many teachers,
passed down like second hand clothing
from too many parents.

Dear queer young girl,
I see you.
You don’t want them to see you
so you change the pronouns in your love poems to “him” instead of “her.”
I used to do that.

Dear straight people,
You make young poets make bad edits.

Dear straight people,
Kissing my girlfriend in public without looking to see who’s around
is a luxury I do not fully have yet.
But tonight, I am drunk in my freedom,
grab her hand on the busiest street in Philadelphia,
zip my fingers into hers and press our lips firmly,
until we melt their stares into a standing ovation, imagine
that we are in a sea of smiling faces,
even when we’re not
and when we’re not,
we start shoveling,
digging deep into each other’s eyes we say,
“Hey Baby, can’t nothing stop this tonight”
because tonight, this world is broken
and we’re the only thing
that’s going to keep it together.

(Applauses, cheering)

Thank KU! You have been amazing, I appreciate it so much, for being here!

(Applauses, cheering)

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