

an/other pastoral.

Tjawangwa Dema.

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The Botswana-born poet Tjawangwa Dema's second collection *an/other pastoral* follows on the heels of her prize-winning debut, *The Careless Seamstress* (2019). Dema performs her poetry around the world, lectures at the University of Bristol and has been involved in various collaborative projects. *an/other pastoral* also forms part of a larger collaboration, including beautiful illustrations by Tebogo Cranwell which subtly speak to the poems, an audio work and archive. These can be accessed by sending photos of the illustrations in the collection to a Whatsapp number, opening new layers of world-making and reading.

The first poem in the collection, "Prologue: Hypothesis" (12–4), elaborates the main themes that Dema weaves throughout the rest of *an/other pastoral*. Through her deft use of form, Dema establishes a dichotomy between an "I"—who is other—and a "you"—the reader, the colonial interlocutor—who is walking in nature. The "I" longs for home and is alienated from the "you", specifically through language ("the word is the cruellest flower," the speaker muses). And yet the distance between the "I" and "you" is dismantled when a child enters the poem. The speaker shares how the honeyguide bird shows people where to find honey: "all nature speaks if we listen," she tells the child. Despite this, the child laughs incredulously, but the speaker is not offended; she sees it as an opening, an opportunity to break through received understandings of our relationships to nature. The poem ends with these powerful lines:

here is the line between man and man
and nature,
man-made
as all false boundaries are.

"Prologue: Hypothesis" touches on themes of belonging, movement, borders, the possibilities and shackles of language, legacies of colonialism, and our relationship to the more-than-human world. In the process, Dema offers what Craig Santos Perez calls a "diasporic African ecopoetics" (back cover), submerged in an awareness of the artificiality of borders and the ways in which the more-than-human world continues to resist the divisions we impose on each other and nature.

The theme of movement figures strongly in "Binocular or As Fast As" (28–9), where the speaker is jogging through the woods before realising that someone is watching her. At first startled by this voyeur, she finally realises the power of her body and its freedom of movement in the face of danger: "I'm fast / fast or slow as I wanna be." The next poem, "Meditations on Fugitivity" (30–1), qualifies this freedom for Black bodies throughout history and in the present, and expands these restrictions to include the borders that language imposes wherever "we" and "you" are pitted against each other. And yet, in "Even the Thorns" (58–9), the speaker reaffirms her freedom through movement: "I am always already on my way somewhere else." Relatedly, in "Biography or The Good News" (63–5), journeying is offered as a way of world-making through multiple senses of belonging.

The experience and roots of present-day climate collapse also figure strongly in *an/other pastoral*. In "This is not a matter for" (21–2), the speaker thinks through natural/man-made disasters, including fires in the Gulf of Mexico and the Amazon, and the Covid pandemic. She muses that these disasters have become unending because of our apathy and lust for things:

we've finally done it
altered our object
its permanence
we are enchanted by loss
this is what our having brings us

In the poem "Commons" (42–3), the speaker makes a strong case against the false divisions we impose on nature when we claim possession. What distinguishes us from the rest of nature, it seems, is that humans always want more—everything is never enough. But boundaries are man-made, as we have seen: "what boundary shall we insist upon for the air?" the speaker of this poem asks.

By choosing to centre the text in "Commons", the poet mirrors the borderless belonging that she invokes. There are various other instances in *an/other pastoral* where Dema experiments with form to support meaning. "Bread for the Birds: Act One"

(52–5), for instance, is presented as a dramatic text, thereby heightening the interpolation of the reader as addressee, as co-conspirator in climate collapse. In “You, the One Leaving” (40–1), the poet slightly indents each second line, concretising the theme of borders and edges that the speaker explores through the narrative of a traveller being detained at border control.

In addition to form, Dema also leverages the musicality of language to contribute to a multiplicity of meaning, especially through rhyme and wordplay. The poet does what the “you” of the prologue cannot: “to speak and mean at the same time”. This strategy is key to Dema’s poetics, which she unpacks in “The Netmenders” (37–9). Here, the poet uses net mending as an extended metaphor for poem creation, thereby suggesting that creating poems like nets can restore the possibilities of language which are stripped when the colonising “I” piths language, splitting brother from brother (see “Meditations on Fugitivity”). Thus, language becomes a bridge instead of a border, an

opening instead of a closing, facilitating movement. Read in this way, *an/other pastoral* represents Dema’s expertly woven answer to a frayed world:

That’s how you make a net whole,
one eye on the sun
and what’s left on the sea
of threads.
[...]
A hole small enough for the sea
and big enough for the light and minnow
to pass t’r’u.

Pieter Odendaal

pieter.odendaal@nwu.ac.za
North-West University
Potchefstroom, South Africa
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1679-1399>

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