Nature Poem Transcript

Welcome to Reading the Rainbow, brought to you by the Dauphin County Library System. For the book curious looking for their next good LGBTQ+ read. Listen in as queer library staff discuss the Own Voice stories they've been reading.

Ashley: So hi, I'm Ashley, my pronouns are they/them or she/her.

Amber: Hi, I'm Amber, my pronouns are she/her.

Trista: Hi, I'm Trista, my pronouns are she/her, they/them. This week we're discussing *Nature Poem* written by Tommy Pico. Tommy Pico is a poet, podcaster, and TV writer. Originally from the Viejas Indian Reservation of the Kumeyaay Nation, he now splits his time between Los Angeles and Brooklyn. He co-curates the reading series Poets with Attitude, co-hosts the podcast Food for Thought, and Scream Queen. He's poetry editor at Catapult Magazine, writes on the TV shows Reservation Dogs and Resident Alien, and is a contributing editor at Literary Hub.

Amber: Some content warnings for this book include subjects: racism, colonization, death, sex, and the use of profanity. *Nature Poem* is a book-length poem following Teebs, an American Indian writer who can't bring himself to write about nature. Teebs gradually learns how to interpret constellations through his own lens, along with human nature, sexuality, language, music, and Twitter. Even while he recons with manifest destiny and genocide and centuries of disenfranchisement, he learns how to have faith in his own voice and his own identity as a young queer urban-dwelling poet. It's not said anywhere in the book, but Tommy Pico writes these and his other poetry book from the perspective of his narrator Teebs, who is both himself and isn't himself, similar to Beyonce's Sasha Fierce persona.

Ashley: I personally am trying to read more poetry this year, but more in lines of like Mary Oliver. So this was very different from that. Personally, I love the voice of Teebs. I was cackling throughout the different poems. Is this considered a collection of poems or just one long poem?

Amber: It is one poem. I didn't know that until I looked up the summary later on. So I thought it was a bunch of poems, continuous poem, according to the book summary.

Ashley: Dang, I had meant to look that up and then just totally did not. So yeah, I really enjoyed it, even though it was very different from other poetry that I've read this year. I liked it a lot. So I was curious what you all thought.

Amber: I liked it a lot. It is written in a really engaging and funny way sometimes. It's all from a really unique perspective. I liked that a lot.

T: Tommy Pico, he's very direct with his writing. You don't have to look very far whenever you're reading his stuff to know what he's talking about. But I definitely don't think his writing suffers for that either.

Ashley: Yeah, earlier this year, I read a collection of short stories by Samantha Irby. And Tommy Pico's writing reminded me of a poetry version of her short stories because she is so smart, so funny, yet will take a twist in her writing and talk about something so serious where you're tearing up and you get chills. And I found that his poetry, Tommy's poetry, was kind of similar in the twist and turns that takes. So if you like Samantha Irby, you'll probably like Tommy Pico.

Amber: He has such a fun voice. The tone of this book is extremely reflective of just what of the other things I've seen him write, even just his author bio on his website and the way he talks in podcasts. It's very interesting and fun where it's like the things he's saying are really important and valuable to

listen to as topics and concepts to discuss. But he says them in a way that you just don't expect to hear them.

T: I love things like that that are meant to be entertaining, but also have a deep hidden meaning because I feel like it gets more people's attention to issues that are considered big, but not a lot of people know about. With him being American Indian and putting a lot of his everyday struggles into his poetry, his personality sets up a great platform for these difficult topics to be discussed in a manner that I feel like a lot of people could relate with. And I feel like that just shows how good of a writer he is.

Amber: I read an interview with Tommy Pico from Nylon. So he said, "The book was kind of an attempt to understand, confront and reconcile stereotypical ways in which American Indian people have been described in popular culture. Oftentimes we are being depicted as noble savages, being at one with nature and all that. It's dangerous to me because when we become features of the landscape, not human beings, things to be cleared and removed." Americans are taught about American Indian communities. There's both the way they're generally spoken about in a past tense way. And then there is this huge emphasis on connection with nature that kind of relegates them to a separate sphere from the contemporary world. A big part of Euro-American colonization has always been like othering people. And I think with both the way that he describes the book and the book itself sort of points out that effect of colonization of like creating this expectation of this group of people that makes it easier to sort of roll over them.

Ashley: It's been a while since I was in school and learning these things, but my own experience, in central Pennsylvania, yeah, we kind of similarly learned that American Indian culture is a thing of the past and so sad, like they're not here anymore. I had no idea that we had one of those Indian schools here and that we were trying to assimilate children, right, in our community. We didn't really learn about the Susquehannocks who were the American Indian group here in central Pennsylvania. It was failed to be mentioned that they were massacred and the Susquehannocks that were able to escape and leave central Pennsylvania, it's believed that they were assimilated into the Iroquois in New York. So even more assimilation and they didn't have the best relationship with the Iroquois to begin with. It's just such a complex history that we didn't learn about. And we're kind of under the assumption that it is history. It's in the past. I guess what I'm trying to say is not a simple, straightforward thing. It's very complex. So I can't imagine as a contemporary American Indian how to sort through all of that. And so I was kind of surprised because, yeah, we go with that stereotype that if you see a book of poetry by an American Indian called Nature Poem, you're going to automatically assume that it's going to be talking about the beauty of nature and connection to the earth and all of that. And the fact that he flips that stereotype on its head, I like that a lot. And even that is just kind of pushing back, being firm on like, this is who I am and this is how I feel about your nature poems. And it just felt very honest.

T: I can definitely relate with both of you with not understanding how serious the problem was for American Indians. This is a great insight of how modern Native Americans look at the stereotypes that they had in the past and start trying to connect it with what's going on right now.

Ashley: So while we're talking about the expectations of poetry from Native American people, there are parts where he's talking about or writing about an interaction with a white person at a bar or on a date, and they're asking these absurd questions about his nationality and his culture and all of that. And there's a response that's very smart and frank and kind of addresses the inappropriateness of those questions that we white people tend to ask without thinking. But then at the end, he's like, but instead, I just go along with it. I just said a much simpler thing because they're trying to hook up with them at the end of the night. So trying to just sweep those things under the rug. I just thought that was interesting and also just very human to not have to get on your soapbox and stand up for yourself all the time. And that's not always easy to do. And also, it's not your job. It's not his job to educate these random people at bars and stuff.

Amber: Yeah. There's that urge where you're just like, you're wrong. And I want to tell you you're wrong, but at the same time, I don't want to be perceived as the person who's always going to jump down your throat over something. And I don't know if that was the exact feeling that went into that interaction. But that's what it kind of felt like. Where you're like, we're just let's just get past this.

T: Yeah, I don't want to deal with it. I think a lot of people in the LGBTQ plus community can relate with that, even if it's not on a racial level.

Amber: Initially, when I started reading it, I was really thrown off because he writes so often with text speak, like he never writes out the word because it's always B.C. Things like I.D.K. as though he was texting or he'll just use the word R instead of like write out A.R.E. Once I got used to it, I was like, OK, contemporary poetry, I think, is trying to break barriers and do things that other poets haven't done before. But then content-wise, he also speaks and writes like this generally. So I think part of it is doing that thing where he's like, I'm not going to adhere to expectations for what American Indian person writes about. And also, like any other poet, not going to adhere to strict guidelines of what poetry is supposed to be. And in this context, he's like a contemporary American millennial. And that's just how he talks. And so he's going to do that in poetry, too. The second reason that I thought was so interesting is that it's like kind of almost a protest. There's one quote that I really like, which seemed to me why he's writing this way in English, but not following the rules of English. He wrote, "I can't write a nature poem because English is some Stockholm crap, makes me complicit in my tribe's erasure. Why should I give an F about poetry? It is a container." And then he goes on. So, some background research, I wanted to see what languages the Kumeyaay nation speaks. And there are three Kumeyaay languages, but now most of them speak English and Spanish. So, he's writing it in English because that's what he speaks, because that's what his option is. So, he's not just making a statement with the content of his poetry, but with the way it's written. And I love that, both from a place of understanding why he's writing the way he's writing, and a kind of a protest from like a literary perspective.

T: That's definitely a really interesting point that you made about his writing. And the only thing that I would add to it is whenever you write in that particular way, it also puts things in context for other people who may not have gone to school for English or may not be as literate or well-read as others. In the context of making sure your work is understood and heard, it reaches a wider audience.

Amber: Yeah, absolutely. I definitely agree with that.

Ashley: I had read in an interview, Tommy had noted that nature poem he was originally writing as a zine that was to only just be distributed amongst his friends. And then it turned into a much bigger project and was the second published book. So I wonder if that also affected the format or the style if it started out just like with the intention of it going to his friends. Or like you said, it's just kind of very similar to how he talks. Maybe that's just like the ultimate driving force in his writing is his own voice, which is quite nice.

T: I can't remember which page it was on, but I know when I read one of his poems, he referred to the guy that he was with at the time as "nature" at one point. And I thought that was really insightful because he's looking at this other person as a piece of nature.

Amber: Yeah, there were a couple of times where I don't think he said it this way like every single time, but there were a few times where he'd write about something and then he would be like, that's the kind of nature I would write a poem about. I thought that was so interesting. I feel like some of these, it's a perspective that I absolutely have no experience with, which is, very simply, just dating as a gay man. It's just part of the humor for me is that you'd be talking about something that's pretty serious and then you have some beautiful poetry. And then the next page would be like, the top of it says, "gay men are the worst people ever." And I'm like, okay, we're going to do a code-switch real quick. And let's talk about this now.

Ashley: Yeah, I was looking at one of the poems and it starts out in that kind of text-speak talking about how “everyone is looking for their stupid soulmate right now. Sade likens dating to war. So, she's on the front lines, which is also a kind of hunger. Really, I just see teeth.” And then further down the page, it goes into talking about hope and winter. And it's like truly like very poetic and kind of get drawn into like this change in mood. And it gets into kind of that more nature-y kind of poem that people are usually expecting. And then it just goes back into his usual voice. And so, having that switch and kind of like playing with you almost and reminding you like, no, like, actually, I hate nature. I hate being out there. And I really liked when he did that, like flip-flopping.

Amber: Yeah, there's one poem and it's somewhere near the end. It's like a couple of pages that starts actually sounding like the quote-unquote stereotypical nature poem. And then it ends with something like, that's what you expected, wasn't it?

Ashley: Oh, yeah.

Amber: I was like, oh, I was lulled into a false sense of security for a second. Part of it does feel kind of playful. And then part of it kind of feels like a tug of war between like, I'm not going to speak to Tom Pico's experience. But it felt like to me that part of Teebs wanted to write that poetry, and part of him felt like he absolutely couldn't because that would feed into the stereotype of what American Indian writers were supposed to do.

T: I'm trying to find what page it's on. But the poem where he was talking about the day that Princess Diana died and he was confused as to why the media was like up in arms about it because he was young and didn't understand who she was and stuff. And then he said a line that kind of hit me pretty hard. It was something to the effect of, I knew my mother was really upset about Princess Diana dying because she was talking to the paramedic about it while they were taking my auntie away, meaning kind of like the glorification that we put on celebrities like Princess Diana. He was saying his mother cared more about Princess Diana dying than her own sister. And that, I do feel like that's something that in our culture nowadays that we don't think about enough. It's like, sometimes we get so close with celebrities and fictional people and fictional characters that we forget that there's people right in front of us. You know, there's nature, people are nature and nature is right in front of us. But most of us choose not to interact with it.

Amber: There was a poem where death became such a normal thing that, of course, you were devastated about this person you were close to dying, but it's also something that has kind of come to be expected. And there's only so much time and energy focus on each time that happens because it keeps happening. It seemed like it was less that his mom didn't care as much, as more that like, this is such a tragic but expected part of life on the reservation that maybe doesn't register the same way that it would, if that wasn't normalized.

T: I think the point that he was trying to make is that it's such a huge disconnect from how we're naturally supposed to do things, that it ties back into how can he write a poem about nature when no one else cares about nature anymore.

Ashley: And it's one of the more serious parts of the poem, I think, where it starts off saying that “science predicts we'll discover alien life by 2025. Dude's legs on the subway are constantly spreading. Nature asks, aren't I curious about the landscapes of exoplanets” and kind of goes on. Yeah, it goes from like just like a simple fact “science predicts we'll discover alien life by 2025” and ends with his answer to nature. “So now nature, I don't want to know about the colonial legacy of the future” and just like the idea of, you know, humans going into space, which, you know, we've seen private entities exploring that idea. And, you know, the thought of like, what are humans going to do when we get out there? And he just talks about so much on a single page. It really struck me. Part of that, I think, is because I enjoyed that the whole poem is about nature poem, and it all connects to nature or human nature. And my initial thinking was that it would be, you know, nature-nature. But

the fact that he can delve into so many different topics about his own identity and experiences was really impressive. And I think that part of the poem.

T: His stuff was definitely written like he had an emotion and a thought and he just paused right then and just decided to write it down. You get such a raw sense of what he's feeling and why he's feeling those things.

Ashley: That wraps up our discussion about *Nature Poem* by Tommy Pico. Join us next episode as we cover *Written in the Stars* by Alexandria Bellefleur.

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