



Museum of the Americas

J. Michael Martinez

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Longlisted for the 2018 National Book Award in Poetry

Winner of the 2017 National Poetry Series Competition, selected by Cornelius Eady--an exploration in verse of imperial appropriation and Mexican American cultural identity

"Marvelous, argumentative, and curiosity-provoking" -- *The New York Times Book Review*

The poems in J. Michael Martinez's third collection of poetry circle around how the perceived body comes to be coded with the trans-historical consequences of an imperial narrative. Engaging beautiful and otherworldly Mexican casta paintings, morbid photographic postcards depicting the bodies of dead Mexicans, the strange journey of the wood and cork leg of General Santa Anna, and Martinez's own family lineage, *Museum of the Americas* gives accounts of migrant bodies caught beneath, and fashioned under, a racializing aesthetic gaze. Martinez questions how "knowledge" of the body is organized through visual perception of that body, hypothesizing the corporeal as a repository of the human situation, a nexus of culture. *Museum of the Americas'* poetic revives and repurposes the persecuted ethnic body from the appropriations that render it an art object and, therefore, disposable.

Museum of the Americas Details

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Author : J. Michael Martinez

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From Reader Review Museum of the Americas for online ebook

Jamie says

In “Lord Spanglish Me,” J. Michael Martinez writes, “Spanglish mi lengua para ti/ that I may break open the promise-space of my fear, & /become ladder;” a line that represents the heart of his poetry collection, *Museum of the Americas*. Martinez examines the historical context of immigration and assimilation from a perspective that moves between formal to deeply personal. The personal poems that work to preserve important family moments come as a refreshing shock to beautifully researched and denser poems for which Martinez is our “ladder,” up and through the rungs of images & history that define our people and this country. Martinez takes the reader through the research process: referencing art, photography, and philosophy as introductions to these poems. These moments bring to mind Natasha Trethewey’s historical poems in their breadth, form, and symbolic examination of these influences on our viewpoint. Martinez’s poems examine the body count of American culture, physical and spiritual, requiring the reader to reckon with a history that is ever present.

Jackie says

Stunning and haunting, a must-read collection.

Kathleen says

My review for the New York Times Book Review:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/14/bo...>

During the European Renaissance, men of wealth and learning put together cabinets of curiosities. The contents consisted of objects whose categorical boundaries — in natural history, zoology, archaeology, ethnography, geology and so on — were not yet firmly established. Also known as wunderkammers, or “wonder-rooms,” these motley (and often scientifically and culturally dubious) collections served as the forerunners of what today we know as museums. Like museums, these compilations were hardly neutral. In the words of the art professor Francesca Fiorani, these costly and hard-to-acquire assemblages “conveyed symbolically the patron’s control of the world through its indoor, microscopic reproduction.”

A great many of these cabinets contained holdings from the so-called New World, a place that the assemblers certainly had an interest in controlling. J. Michael Martinez’s third book, “*Museum of the Americas*,” won the 2017 National Poetry Series Competition, but its contents are unapologetically, excitingly hybrid, including prose, lineated verse, vintage postcards and black-and-white photographs. Thus, perhaps, this marvelous, argumentative and curiosity-provoking book is itself best thought of as a kind of corrective cabinet of wonders, one whose portraits and specimens complicate the dominant narratives of imperial conquest and control.

Like a curator overseeing a show, Martinez gives readers the sense that each item he incorporates has been carefully selected and thoughtfully juxtaposed with the ones around it. In an eight-page poem-essay called “Casta Paintings, an Erotics of Negation,” he guides the reader on a tour of this art form, which first appeared in the 1700s when mostly anonymous artists began depicting mixed-race individuals (“castas”) in

Spain's American colonies. With the authority of a docent, he comments on "the calligraphic script underscoring each panel," noting that "this man designates the 'Spanish,' the woman is the 'mulatta,' and their child, carrying a basket of fruit, Nace torna atras, 'a Return-backwards is Born,'" and observes how "Language & oil combine to boundary the body into 'race.'" With the voice of a teacher, he points out how "In the 18th & into the 19th century, casta paintings were employed in New Spain to validate racial identity ('whiteness') in the legislation of land acquisition & in determining civil rights." And with the critical eye of a keen comedian, he remarks, "The cast: kinky historiographical exhibitionism. Sextastic."

Martinez's approach is as brainy as it is entertaining, as political as it is personal. Throughout his heady exploration of the white gaze, colonial trauma and Mexican migration, the author audaciously asserts his well-read academic prowess, not afraid, for instance, to make the reader reach to understand an opening epigraph from Walter Benjamin about "the facies hippocratica of history as a petrified, primordial landscape." But so, too, is the book intensely embodied and intimate, its first section preceded with a photograph of Martinez's parents, Jerry and Mary, at their wedding in 1974. In a later poem about this image titled "Family Photo — Slicing Their Wedding Cake," he writes with obvious admiration of their youthful beauty and love:

They were the story time
& she, the elven smile

wearing a dove falling to frosting
& the curtains amber the parturient

father shape blurred inside
the foreground, auburn bright in snowed

shirt ruffles

Unlike many actual museums, "Museum of the Americas" wisely makes no pretense of being objective. Martinez subjects his chosen artifacts to pointed interrogations. In a series of pieces responding to the work of Walter H. Horne, a photographer for the Mexican War Photo Postcard Company during the era of the Mexican revolutionary general Francisco "Pancho" Villa, Martinez meditates on the white documentarian's practice of mass-producing and selling graphic images of executions and war, effectively bringing about "a vast photographic immigration / of nameless Mexicans." In "The Executioner's Palisade," he writes:

Stamped for address,

the paper carcass seals
word to image,
postscript to passage;

the Mexican — all virgin talisman
when mailed in a sepia ruin

whose only wound is postage —
the distance the body travels
to know another.

Martinez repeatedly calls the very impulse to display into question, from the touring around of the supposed head of the putative "criminal" Joaquin Murrieta to P. T. Barnum's showing off of the prosthetic leg of General Santa Anna at his "American Museum in New York City on the corner of Broadway and Ann Street" to the document of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In doing so, he reveals that even though

“display” ostensibly means “to make a prominent exhibition of something where it can be easily seen,” many such public presentations have problematically exploitive semi-hidden agendas. Even such commonly used labels as “explorer,” familiar to museum patrons from wall texts and audio guides, conceal countless unnamed pluralities and alternative points of view.

In a piece called “Of Maximo and Bartola, the Aztec Children,” illuminating one especially egregious erasure, Martinez writes of the specious explorer John Lloyd Stephens, whose “gratuitous travel narratives had established him, in the popular imagination of the mid-19th century, as having ‘discovered’ the ‘lost’ Mayan culture.” Stephens even went so far as to use the appropriative pseudonym Pedro Velasquez “to authenticate his fiction linguistically.”

Martinez’s power as a memoirist is considerable as well. In one of the book’s most unforgettable pieces, “Brown I See You, Brown I Don’t,” he blends his own experience of being identified racially by different people in different contexts, both threatening and non, with the psychological phenomenon of the Other-Race Effect, or ORE, the widely studied tendency of humans to most easily recognize the faces of the race with which they are most familiar.

The root word of museum originally meant “seat or shrine of the Muses”; its use in the sense of “a building to display objects” was first recorded in the 1680s. In this thrillingly genre-blurring book, Martinez evokes both senses of that etymology: The poetic delights suggest the presence of the Muses, and the items upon which he encourages the reader to focus produce a fresh and necessary gallery that rivets both the interest and the intellect.

Roxane says

This is a fascinating, layered collection of poetry that blurs genre in some really interesting ways. Martinez offers, as the title suggests, a museum of the Americas, and especially engages with Mexican migration and its effect on the body. Given the goings on of the world, this poetry is especially timely. Real standouts include Skin Maps, On the Naturalization of Alien Immigrants and Bodies of 3 Men Lying As They Fell After Being Executed (that one is stunning). But really, every poem or prose in this book offers something beautiful or haunting or illuminating. It is didactic but not in a heavy-handed way. Every thought, every word, every image is precisely rendered. Outstanding stuff here. Check it out.

Milkman3367 says

A moving collection of poems. 'Where Love is Ground to Wheat' is particularly memorable.

Jerrie (redwritinghood) says

This poetry collection, while on the NBA longlist, did not make the shortlist. There are some excellent poems here, but a few that played with form were not as good to me. Many of the poems, however, give a strong message about the Mexican-American experience and the treatment of indigenous peoples in US history. 3.5??

