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Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: 10.1353/ail.2005.0017

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A “Touching Man” Brings Aacqu Close

KENNETH M. ROEMER

You have to not only see color but you must touch it, in a sense become that color, know it, let it become part of you. I think that old man knows. I like to watch him. He pushed his steel rim glasses with bony knuckles back up the bridge of his nose. I call him Touching Man.

Simon Ortiz, “Two Old Men”

I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a big bag which was used for carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into this bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gnashes.

Frederick Douglass, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Great distances of time, culture, place, and race separate Frederick Douglass from Simon J. Ortiz, but they are close enough to touch. Both know that they have life-giving stories to tell about the beauties and injustices of their times and places—times and places that are so far removed from most of their readers that they have to find powerful rhetorical strategies that invite those readers to allow the distant to “become part of [them].” Ortiz is especially conscious of this challenge. In the opening pages of Woven Stone (1992) he defines his literary calling as “[m]aking language familiar and accessible to others, bringing it within their grasp and comprehension, [this] is what a writer, teacher, and storyteller does or tries to do. I’ve been trying for
over thirty years” (3–4). “Grasp” is indeed a strong component of his mission. Like Douglass, Ortiz is a master of tactile imagery, and he uses this mastery to transform topics as remote and small as a dry root in a wash and as hidden and apocalyptic as the Jackpile uranium mine into living parts of us. In this informal appreciation—a small catalogue of poem excerpts with brief discussion—I can only skim the richness of this grasping. But my skimming at least suggests the diversity and sophistication of Ortiz’s tactile imagery that makes graspable the death and destruction of people and land; the complexity of place and time; celebrations of creation and re-creation; and moving insights into a hope that mingles with loss, a hidden beauty and faith in survival in places of death, and a sense of loneliness that proclaims a deep sense of wonder.

Ortiz is known for his condemnation of technological and governmental forces that wreak havoc in Indian Country. Three of his poems indicate the variety of ways he uses tactile images to voice his protests. In the “Electrical Lines” section of “The state’s claim . . . ,” he personifies a machine (“it pointed”) that tears up the earth:

When they were putting up the lines,  
there was this machine.  
The machine had a long shiny drill  
which it pointed at the ground  
and drove it turning into the earth  
and almost suddenly there was a hole (A Good Journey 256)

In “For Our Brothers: Blue Jay, Gold Finch, Flicker, and Squirrel,” the impact of highway construction and cars is brought as close as a touch of fur, mutilated fur:

I touch it [a squirrel corpse] gently and then try  
to lift it, to toss it  
into some high grass,  
but its fur comes loose.  
It is glued heavily  
to the ground with its rot
and I put my foot
against it and push it
into the grass, being careful
that it remains upright
and is facing the rainwater
that will wash it downstream. (A Good Journey 253–54)

The use of the tactile imagery in this poem is typical; Ortiz often saves powerful tactile images for climactic sections of his poems (in this case squirrel is the last of four road-kill victims) and images of touch are frequently enhanced by synesthesia (here the “smell” of “disintegration” immediately follows the above quoted lines).

Possibly the most potent example of touching the core of technological and governmental impact appears in “Ray’s Story,” a poem from the “Too Many Sacrifices” section of Fight Back (1980). Despite the humor of the opening—the focus of the poem is “Lacey, from Muskogee,” who is known for his enormous member—“Gawd, the Okies would say, / that Indian is big”—the foreman’s (Ray’s) story is one of impending doom (299). Lacey’s job is the most dangerous in the uranium mine. He has to stand by the “vibrating chute” to watch for debris (drill bits, cables, timbers) mixed with the ore that could plug up the “Primary Crusher.” When spotted, the debris has to be extracted by reaching, or even crawling, in to get it after signaling to stop the movement. According to the “official report,” Lacy tried to grab for a moving cable, became tangled, and was sucked in, “right down into the jaws” of the crusher (301). Instead of the up-close view Ortiz offered in “For Our Brothers,” we get indirect touches: the Foreman became aware of the tragedy when he noticed that the crushed ore “was wetter than usual” and when he spotted the “only thing / that had been noticeable about Lacy before” (302). This instance of distancing from the actual process of crushing by concentrating on the “results” implies both the horror of the event—a death and dismembering beyond words—and the ways technology and destructive policies can distort the very meaning of life and death. Lacey’s fate is a sickening tale of from dust to dust.

Many of Ortiz’s poems, especially in Good Journey and Fight Back,
imply or describe the destructive effects of technology and governmental policies on the land of the Southwest. But as reviewers and scholars have noticed ever since the publication of his first collection, *Going for the Rain* (1976), Ortiz celebrates the restorative powers of the land that offer healing counter forces in a technological world. Again tactile imagery plays a key role in making healing landscapes seem close at hand. After the dislocations of the second (“Leaving”) and most of the third (“Returning”) sections of *Going for the Rain*, one of the hopeful signs of change occurs near the conclusion of the third section in “East of Tucumcari.” A man on a bus surprises the bus driver by asking to get off “sixteen miles east of Tucumcari”; he is “coming home,” a home signaled by the “brown water / falling from a rock” but most of all by a literal act of feeling: “It felt so good / to touch the green moss” (116). This feeling of home is immediately linked by juxtaposition to images of fecundity, femininity, and origins of regeneration:

It felt so good  
to touch the green moss.  
A woman between  
the mountain ridges  
of herself—  
it is overwhelming. (116)

To the eye, the setting of “Dry Root in a Wash” expresses a striking contrast to the moisture of home’s “green moss.” But as in this poem from the fourth section of *Going for the Rain* (“The Rain Falls”), there is almost always more than meets the eye in Ortiz’s poetry. In a subtle process of synesthesia, the visual images of the juniper root and the Shiwana “upstream” are framed by stated and implied tactile experiences. “The sand is fine grit / and warm to the touch,” opens the poem; “Underneath the fine sand / it is cool / with crystalline moisture, / the forming rain” closes it (140). The speaker of this poem invites readers to permeate the dry wash visual images with tactile feelings of fineness and warm moisture and then fulfills those feelings with the promise of a dazzling (“crystalline”) regeneration.
There is more than the mixing of sight and touch in “East of Tucumcari” and “Dry Root in a Wash.” As in most of his landscape images, there is the mixing of place and time: a touch of green moss becomes an emblem of the timeless forces of Earth Mother’s creativity; a dry root reminds impatient humans to feel the promise of renewal in the warmth and hidden moisture of Her skin. Other poems strong in tactile imagery address more directly the continuity of the ages made manifest in the present. “Old Hills,” one of the early poems in the second section of *Going for the Rain*, opens with a humorously provocative progression of understatement to hyperbole:

West of Ocotillo Wells,
the hills are pretty old.
In fact, they’re older than any signs
telling the tourists where they’re at,
older than all of millennium’s signpainters. (69)

The storytelling voice in this poem contrasts this depth of time with the shortsighted way a group of students measure their experience in these hills. They are making a film “worth six credit hours” (69). Again a tactile image heightens the contrast in the climactic lines that echo the opening and blend sight and touch to evoke memories of the ancient ocean that covered the Southwest:

These hills are pretty old.
Some have worn down to flat desert valley.
Some stones remember being underwater
and the cool fresh green winds. (69)

Ortiz can also capture the touch of the past in images of humans as old as the hills. “Curly Mustache, 101-Year-Old Navajo Man” follows “Dry Root in a Wash” in *Going for the Rain*. “Curly Mustache” imaginatively gathers central regenerative images from this collection: hands, roots, hills, mountains, water, wind, and the poet as ancient trickster-cricket/cicada. The climactic stanza once again invites
closeness (in this case to great antiquity) with a tactile image charged with sight and sound:

A thousands of years
old cicada
here one moment,
one place
in millennia.

Tell me about the glaciers.
Tell me if this is correct
what I have heard: the scrape
of a glacier sounds
like a touching wind
on stone, wood,
in someplace mountain dream. (141–42)

New life poems express some of Ortiz’s most moving expressions of the time depths of the present and of regenerative forces operating in the timeless present. It is significant, though certainly not surprising, that the first personalized signs of new life in the opening section of Going for the Rain (“The Preparation”) come in the form of tactile images:

O child’s tremble
against your mother’s innerwall,
is a true movement
without waste or hesitation,
a beating of wings
following ancient trails
to help us return. (42)

The miraculous flutter of the human fetus energizes this and other poems (for instance, “The Expectant Father”), but Ortiz doesn’t limit himself to the touch of new human life. An especially poignant poem expressing the spontaneous and profound interconnections between
the old and the young and among plant, animal, and human new life hinges upon a tactile image of new (mice) life. In “My Father’s Song” a recollected child’s voice recalls a rather ordinary interruption to the ritual of corn planting that a father’s insight and love transformed into an extraordinary learning experience:

We planted corn one Spring at Aacqu—
we planted several times
but this one particular time
I remember the soft damp sand
in my hand.

My father had stopped at one point
to show me an overturned furrow,
the plowshare had unearthed
the burrow nest of a mouse
in the soft moist sand.

Very gently, he scooped tiny pink animals
into the palm of his hand
and told me to touch them.
We took them to the edge
of the field and put them in the shade
of a sand moist clod.

I remember the very softness
of cool and warm sand and tiny alive
mice and my father saying things. (57–58)

“My Father’s Song” highlights an unstated motif running through my comments about Ortiz’s ability to evoke closeness with tactile imagery: the central role of hands. Hence it is appropriate that I conclude this brief appreciation essay by concentrating on two of his best hands poems: “A Story of How a Wall Stands” from Going for the Rain and the “Two Old Men” section of “Poems from the Veterans Hospital” from A Good Journey. Both echo themes of death and destruction. As readers of Fighting Back know, the setting of the former—the
wall of the ancient graveyard at Aacqu—is a stone-hard reminder of many deaths going back to and before the successful Pueblo revolt of 1680 and the retaliatory massacre against Acoma in 1692. The latter more directly images the results of modern wars: a relevant “Indian” topic since in the twentieth century a higher percentage of American Indians have volunteered for the armed services than any other ethnic group in the United States. Both poems acknowledge by implication the dark sides of mortality, but the hands-on tactile imagery helps to balance the darkness with solid foundations of love and wonder.

As in “My Father’s Song,” the father in one of Ortiz’s most frequently anthologized and discussed poems “A Story of How a Wall Stands” turns an everyday (though extraordinary) sight at Aacqu into a powerful teaching experience. An ancient stone wall somehow restrains the weight of “tons of earth and bones”—“a graveyard built on a steep incline,” the father explains that the surface of the wall, which “looks like loose stone,” is underpinned by stones carefully “woven together” and secured by mud expertly mixed “to a certain texture” (*Going for the Rain* 145). This sensible engineering lesson helps to explain the longevity of the wall (and graveyard) and helps readers to understand the origin of the title of Ortiz’s collection *Woven Stone*. But the real power of the “lesson” is in the father’s hands. In each of the three stanzas, the hands demonstrate, dramatize, and personalize, making the unseen foundation familiar to the young man and an unfamiliar, remote structure as accessible as the memories of a parent’s touch and gestures to a willing reader. The repetition of the words constitutes auditory and visual reinforcement of the repeated hand motions:

and with his hands he puts the stone and mud
in place.

[. . .]

He ties one hand over the other,
fitting like the bones of his hands
and fingers

[. . .]
he says, “the mud mixed
to a certain texture,” patiently
“with the fingers,” worked
in the palm of his hand.
[...]

He tells me those things,
the story of them worked
with his fingers, in the palm
of his hands, working the stone
and the mud until they become
the wall that stands a long, long time. (Going for the Rain 145)

By the end of the poem Ortiz has woven the wall, hands, and story
into one graspable mystery.

“Two Old Men” has attracted less attention than “A Story of How a
Wall Stands,” but it expresses a touch as powerful as the lessons gestured by Ortiz’s father. The “Poems from the Veterans Hospital” focus
on “men broken / from three American wars” (A Good Journey 270), a
topic and place distant from many readers and a topic that could easily invite depressing stereotypes of Indian victimization and alcoholism. The particular subject of “Two Old Men” is a silent old man—
“He has never said a word that I have heard” (A Good Journey 271).
wandering at the edge of a marsh. Instead of pitying this lonely, weak-eyed veteran, the observant voice of the poem is captivated, even
awed, at the joy this nameless veteran’s hands see in the colors of a
common “tangle” of “autumn rushes”:

He believes that colors
have shape, texture, substance,
depth, life he can touch.
I know they do.
I believe him.
When he is reaching
his long bony fingers
to a lettered sign
or a dark spot in the sidewalk,
there are the frankest features
of delight, surprise, wonder
in his face.

I believe him.

[. . .]

Form is not all
nor hearing
for the tensile mass
vibrates against
my tendrils
the mind that sprouts
and reaches into depths
of the tips of my fingers.

He touches me with spider tendrils.

[. . .]

Touching Man, you know things only
a very few know, and that is your strength
your aloneness. (A Good Journey 272–73)

As in his best poetry, Ortiz does not hide the suffering and loneliness of this “Touching Man,” a torment that often reflects five hundred years of suffering at the hands of European and American wars and ways. But he also infuses this story with senses of survival, wonder, and delight that are made accessible to readers far from Acoma Pueblo by Ortiz’s powerful sense of touch.

Certainly Ortiz’s other poetic senses—his conversational tone, his narrative skills, his creative use of explanatory prose, and his use of visual and auditory imagery—can bring readers close to his landscapes and concerns. And certainly there are many other significant examples of his power of touch (recall, for instance, in From Sand Creek [1981, 1999], the frightening image of blood spurting on the plains so forcefully that hands were as helpless as sieves at containing the outpouring). But I hope this rather old-fashioned bit of New
Critical image hunting and informal admiration offers insights into the intricate layers of Ortiz’s craft and politics. One of the most important types of cultural and political “work” that American Indian authors can do is the creation of works that, to borrow words from the prose of “Two Old Men,” invite readers, “not only to see,” but to “touch” and “in a sense become” part of the realities of oppression and destruction, senses of place, time, and balance, and the gift of love and delight in the midst of graveyards and loneliness. Ortiz’s grasp of the power of touch makes him one of the revered workers in these fields:

It doesn’t end.
In all growing
from all earths
to all skies.
in all touching
all things,
in all soothing
the aches of all years,
it doesn’t end. (Going for the Rain 147)

NOTE
1. All the quoted poems in this essay appear in Woven Stone (1992), which gathers together three of Ortiz’s previous collections: Going for the Rain (1976), A Good Journey (1977), and an updated version of Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, For the Sake of the Land (1980). Citations include the appropriate collection title and page number from Woven Stone. I would like to thank Simon Ortiz for permission to quote from Woven Stone.

WORK CITED