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Kaleidoscope: Essays on Color

Chloe C. Firetto-Toomey Ms

Florida International University, chloefirettotoomey@gmail.com

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

A KALEIDOSCOPE: ESSAYS ON COLOR

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

By

Chloe Firetto-Toomey

2019

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This dissertation, written by Chloe Firetto-Toomey, and entitled A Kaleidoscope: Essays on Color, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

Denise Duhamel

Maneck Daruwala

Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 6, 2019

The dissertation of Chloe Firetto-Toomey is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
A KALEIDOSCOPE: ESSAYS ON COLOR

by

Chloe Firetto-Toomey

Florida International University, 2019

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

A KALEIDOSCOPE: ESSAYS ON COLOR is a collection of ruminative lyric essays that seeks to plumb the questions How did we get here? following the inauguration of the 45th President of the United States. The speaker's external probing of the present zeitgeist is juxtaposed with personal narrative; the speaker's ongoing crisis of both geographical and ideological citizenship. Significant themes include truth, consequence, migration, and escape.

The literary elements of A KALEIDOSCOPE are informed by Joan Didion's THE WHITE ALBUM as she tracks political and personal events of the 1960s using a journalistic approach. BLUEETS by Maggie Nelson informs the obsessive poetics of the style. Neela Vaswani's YOU HAVE GIVEN ME A COUNTRY provided another valuable model for interweaving cultural discourses, informing how the speaker straddles her British and American identities during the era of Brexit and Trump.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. Flamingos	1
II. The Biography of Orange	14
III. Blue: A Katabasis	67
IV. What Light Can Do: A Triptych	134
V. Encyclopedia of The Trumpian Zeitgeist	154
VI. Landslides of All Our Fallen Vernaculars	302
VII. Yellow Brick Road	315
VIII. What Color Can Do: End Notes	324
IX. And	342
X. Kaleidoscope	344

1. Flamingos

The current total flamingo population in 2017 is 2 million and declining; total plastic flamingo population, 20 million and increasing. If the real bird is synonymous with free thought, is ninety-percent of all thought manufactured?

In this morning's newspaper—Stephen Hawking warns robots will be the end of mankind. Are plastic flamingos the end of the tropical bird?

Thinking such things, how *robot* and *plastic* were once thought-embryos—ideas conceived in the mind—I'm reminded to *mind the gap* between the world in my head and the world outside of it. Watching the flamingos strut in the African mud and thinking of the two plastic birds on my aunt's front lawn, in Miami Beach, I see how language is a magic-conveyor-belt that transforms abstraction to concrete. Words signpost ideas, and things are born—a Virgin Mary carved from oak or marble, ivory chess sets, plastic fun-meal toys, bottles, bags, flamingos.

Williams Carlos Williams wrote, "There are no ideas but in things." I write:

If you can conceive a flamingo
you will never be without
a flamingo.

*

Don Featherstone produced the first ever pink plastic lawn ornament in 1957. A professional sculptor, Featherstone was employed by Union Productions in 1956 to further a collective idea: “Plastics for the Lawn.” The collection consisted of 2D frogs, dogs, ducks, and flamingos, and Featherstone was to use the magic of art to transform the creatures to 3D lawn ornaments. But without access to a real flamingo to mold, Featherstone had to study photographs of the tropical fowl in National Geographic. He saw the bird with his hands and thumb and pressed a bird from the warm clay. The red clay clung to the unmarked skin beneath his fingernails, stained his palms, caked arm-hairs up to his elbows, and smudged his cheeks and forehead. His wife agreed, his hands had a certain magic to them. From clay to plaster cast, he molded a hollow flamingo shape and filled it with plastic. He envisioned the flamingos with wooden legs, but it was too expensive, so he used metal—and the thin wire became the bird’s legs. Thanks to Featherstone, the world would never be without a plastic flamingo.

*

Tens of thousands of flamingos flocked the South Florida coast in the 1800s but were hunted for their feathers—sugar pink plumes used for quills, hats of exotic design, gifts

of fallen angel feathers. Flamingo eggs were traded and sold as a sign of social stature—ornamental or poached. The birds flew away, and Florida lost a native privilege. Imagine a cloud of plumage pink as a Texas dawn, clamoring, black beaks hooking the wind as they migrate south, to the Caribbean and Central America.

When does the bird migrate from the idea of a bird?

How does the President of the United States of America migrate from the idea of government?

*

Wild flamingos departed South Florida a century ago. But Florida embodies the idea of the bird. Flamingos populate lottery tickets, guarding your lucky numbers. *Flamingo Parking Garage* marks where you parked your car at Miami International Airport. The name is stolen from the bird and given to shopping malls and side streets, condo associations and visitor centers. As a child in the 80s, I lived in *Flamingo Plaza*, a condo tower in Miami's North Bay Village. Now, *Flamingo Apartments* on South Beach is where all the young and beautiful party-people live. I pass them sometimes at 6am, on my way to the ocean, and notice their bright eyes, wild faces, bodies bumping to basslines. They are known as the *Flamingo crowd*. Beyond the flamingo crowd are flamingo businesses, flamingo consultants, clothing companies, magazines, logos and

brands. Rare Flamingo Tours depart from the Flamingo Center at Everglades National Park where a flock can occasionally be seen, blushing the distance beyond an edge of sawgrass.

*

Rozzy and Danny, friends from England, are honeymooning in Miami. I'm driving us down to the Upper Keys for a couple of nights. We're nearing the end of the stretch, the strip of road that cuts the ocean and connects the islands, when Rozzy asks:

“Where can we buy plastic flamingos?”

We stop at every tourist attraction on the way down to Islamorada. No plastic flamingos, but Shell World is a hit. They leave with a miniature porcelain flamingo, two conch shells and a shell-wind-chime. Watching the sunset with frozen cocktails at Rumrunner's, Rozzy asks:

“How can there be no plastic flamingos?”

“There are real flamingos at Everglades National Park,” I suggest, “Maybe they'll sell the plastic ones in the gift shop?”

“But then we should go on the rare flamingo tour,” says Rozzy. “I'll feel bad if we only go for the plastic ones.”

“I bet we could buy one online,” says Danny.

“A plastic one? For a moment, I thought you said you could buy a real flamingo

online.”

“I bet you could, from one of those dodgy black-market websites. You can buy anything on there, tiger penises, crystal meth...”

“Who would buy a real flamingo?” asks Rozzy.

“And why?” I ask.

The more we drink, the more interesting the idea of the flamingo becomes.

“What are you writing about these days?”

“Trump,” I say, “Maybe Flamingos.”

*

Sitting on the small couch next to Alan, I flip the channel from PBS News Hour to a nature documentary narrated by David Attenborough: A baboon grabs a flamingo by the tail and pulls it to the clay. The delicate tubular soft pink neck crinkles in the monkey’s fist. An eagle lands on the carcass, interrupts the old-world monkey and chases after it with talons outstretched. The eagle returns to its prized meal, strips meat and feathers. Rows of flamingos with fluorescent orange eyes jerk their half-heart-heads, fuchsias in the African mud.

*