

Book Review

No Country for Eight-Spot Butterflies

No Country for Eight-Spot Butterflies. By Julian Aguon. New York: Astra House, 2022. 128 pages. USD \$23 (hardcover).

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In the afterward for *No Country for Eight-Spot Butterflies*, Julian Aguon writes: “Looking ahead, I am filled with hope—and not the bullshit kind—but the kind that is earned, from struggle, in community.” (103). Written during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic and energized by the struggle against the current onslaught of militarism in Guahan, Aguon’s book is perhaps best characterized by an urgent, singular insistence on life and a particular kind of hard-won hope. Aguon clearly conveys what it means to grow up in a colony of the US, where indigenous Chamorros are surrounded by the specific sort of fatalism that accompanies colonialism and the active loss of our homelands due to war games.

In the book’s afterward, Aguon frames his writing as a way to process grief. The book itself serves as a striking testament to collective grief—it’s poignant that in her introduction, Arundhati Roy calls the book an embrace (2) and explains that she wrote the introduction as a way to be included in the embrace. The book offers a kind of beauty that has room for us all. What’s perhaps most remarkable here is how Aguon invites the reader to witness a deft weaving of grief and beauty, from an essay written during the threat of nuclear annihilation to a stunning reflection on forging connections to the island’s history through the recovery of ancestors that Aguon could “count on” (44).

The book deals with grief on many levels—from essays that recount with a piercing clarity how Aguon’s childhood was marred by the death of his father, to reflections on the inheritances of a long-standing history of colonialism, and meditations on Catholic prayers for the dead, which mark the collective act of grieving within Chamorro culture. On page 32, Aguon writes that “Guam may have the burden of being a colony in a world suffering from decolonization fatigue, but—to be clear—her people mean to live.” It’s in moments like these, unflinching and seared with bravery despite ever mounting odds, that Aguon emerges most powerfully as a writer who is uniquely positioned to deliver “a love letter to young people,” to call them forth to “do language and to do battle” (5). The book is a call to build power, a tender reminder to witness beauty even in grief, and a testament to writing as a path towards liberation.

Aguon writes with a deft intimacy that speaks directly to the reader. Throughout the text, Aguon’s voice is alive with urgency and intention. As he writes, “climate change has put us on an unforgiving timeline” (1), yet Aguon isn’t in any sort of rush. As a writer, Aguon understands pacing and unfurls his storytelling with a characteristic generosity that calls back to the natural rhythm of Chamorro elders when recounting their own stories.

Aguon's seamless merging of grief and beauty is mirrored in the content and organization of the text itself—it comprises commencement speeches, poems, and essays. Rather than producing a jarring effect, the strength of the book emerges through this transcendent weaving of themes and stories.

Aguon is also inventive in his use of the page. The book's footnotes, which sometimes take up half of the page, work to establish historical and political context, offer up further insights into Aguon's thought process and ways of relating to the world, and also create conspiratorial conversations with the reader. This format also feels like a uniquely Chamorro practice, as if Aguon is continually inviting and making space for others at the fiesta table, a reflexive dedication to the core cultural value of reciprocity.

The book can be seen as Aguon's contribution to the tradition of freedom writers and his own response to the women in his life who taught him about strength and earned hope. The book urges readers to not bend to cynicism or defeat. To end in Aguon's own words: "But then, if I am quiet enough, I hear them, trooping in: the women who taught me how to go about this business of keeping on keeping on" (19).

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