

A Review of "The Marrow of Longing" by Celeste Nazeli Snowber

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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A REVIEW OF “THE MARROW OF LONGING” BY CELESTE NAZELI SNOWBER

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Abstract: This is a review of *The Marrow of Longing* by dancer/poet/writer/educator, Celeste Nazeli Snowber. This book, presented in fragments, is a heartrending and thought-provoking poetic and visual inquiry into Celeste’s motherline, Armenian cultural heritage, and identity. It will awaken, like it has for me, your longings and need to become aware of what has formed and informed your own life. *The Marrow of Longing* is both an offering/gift and an invitation.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; creativity; identity; intergenerational trauma; healing

Opening

The Marrow of Longing (2021), comprises 54 poems by the dancer, poet, writer, and educator, Celeste Nazeli Snowber. The poems are pensively arranged under three primary sections/fragments: “kitchen & colour”; “earth & longing”; and “spirituality & worry”. This book also includes seven exquisite paintings, woven purposefully throughout the book (and reproduced in colour) by the Boston based Armenian-American artist, Marsha Nouritza Odabashian, and one thought-provoking painting by Grace Terzian Snowber, the poet’s mother.

Figure 1

Book Cover, The Marrow of Longing (painting by M. N. Odabashian)



This collection, which spans 94 pages and opens with a heartfelt introduction, offers a glimpse into Celeste's ongoing passage into her matrilineal heritage. This is a riveting story of Armenian identity and culture, genocide, intergenerational trauma, memory fragments, loss, and longing. It is equally a herstory of paradox, healing, creativity, transformation, relationships (with memories, food, traditions, land, people, traditions, art), and belonging—as the poet/artist reminds us in the introduction, “*longing* is within *belonging*” (p. 12).

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury.
It is a vital necessity of our existence.
(Lorde, 2007, p. 224)

Receiving the Offering & Welcoming the Invitation

I receive this book, and its fragments, in the mail almost a year ago. I leaf through it quickly and find that I am compelled, at first, to read and view *The Marrow of Longing*, a multi-layered text, in stages/phases, like peeling the layers off an onion—first the paintings only, afterwards the poetry, and lastly, the entire collection with images and text together. Before I begin this review, however, I revisit it at a leisurely pace, piece by piece, and explore its entirety.

To start off, I contemplate the cover, an abstract painting, from a bird's eye view. I am enthralled by the human-like silhouettes looking away from the viewer that emerge amidst, what appears to be, a mass of land and body of water. I find myself looking again and again.

Later, I glance swiftly through the sycophantic book appraisals. I am excited to get into it!

Then, I move promptly to the opening quotation, on the next page, and placed before the dedication: “All my longings lie open before you, Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you Psalm 38:9” (p. 6). I am not familiar with this religious text, but I know that it foreshadows what is to come.

On the following page, beside Psalm 38:9, I find the dedication—this book is dedicated first to the poet's/Celeste's mother, Grace Terzian Snowber. My eyes rest on this text, separated slightly by more space on the page from the text that follows (dedicating the book also to the poet's Armenian family, her three sons, and ancestors). I foresee that the relationship with Grace, Celeste's mother, is crucial to this story.

We pass on our family and cultural identities between generations,
 not only through our shared stories but also through our making.
 . . . Such matrilineal knowledge is not written down but is of the body –
 an embodied knowledge transferred between hands.
 (Buller, 2018, pp. 196–197)

(Inherited) M/Otherlines

After a succinct and heartfelt introduction, this three-part collection opens with Odabashian's painting, *Kitchen Studio*. I am immediately drawn into the image of a figure (perhaps, the poet/artist and/or mother merged into one) dancing blissfully in her studio-kitchen—the *temenos*—while an eggplant, pepper, cucumber, tomato, and onion hang with intent in the middle ground. In the background, soft heart-shaped petals of pastel pinks, in various tints and tones, and aubergine dance playfully above the vegetables and the dancer.

When I read the first poem (p. 17), my eyes rest for an extended period of time on the question: “What happens when whole villages are wiped out?”

It is projected that 1.5 million Armenians were killed during the Armenian genocide, an ethnic cleansing of Armenians from Asia Minor (and bordering areas of the dwindling Ottoman Empire) during the first World War, from 1915–1917 (Snowber, 2021, p. 12). Thousands of others were displaced.

I HAVE NO WORDS. In their place, I bestow an image even though I know that “No photo produces / what’s lined in the tissues / scribed in cellular memory” (p. 61). Why? Because I feel compelled to respond and because I have accepted the poet’s invitation to revere and revision what has shaped my own life.

Figure 2

Dendro Series: Xe-Rizoma¹ (Photography by Kathy Mantas)



As I continue to move through the introductory section of the collection, which includes nineteen poems, I encounter Grace, the colourful and multifaceted mother/artist with “an / eggplant soul” (p. 19), who reminds us to “Sweep the [kitchen studio] floor with love” (p. 20). Also, I fall upon a remnant, a letter filled with yearning, from

Grace to Frank (a love letter from the poet's mother to the poet's father). It is dated Sunday, May 27th. I don't know the year, but it is late spring—a time of hope and new beginnings.

I, the guest/*xeni* (feminized Greek word for stranger/foreigner), am welcomed into this intimate and warm kitchen studio with generosity, slices of stories, and an abundance of nourishment (eggplant, yogurt, pomegranate, and figs, to name a few) that awaken nostalgias from my childhood and ancestral m/other/land.

Subsequently, I leave this section of fragments understanding more about what it means to mother, create, and prepare the temenos/kitchen studio from a place of (be)longing. I feel grateful for the hospitality.

The specific preparations begin when I enter the temenos,
the play space.

In ancient Greek thought, the temenos is a magic circle,
a delimited sacred space within which special rules apply
and in which extraordinary events are free to occur.

My [kitchen] studio, . . .
is a laboratory in which I experiment with my own consciousness.

To prepare the temenos—
to clear it, rearrange it, take extraneous objects out—
is [to sweep the kitchen studio floor with love and]
to clear and clear mind and body.

(Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 75)

Before I move to the next section however, I revisit Grace's painting, *Tricentennial (Interpreting Light Year 2076)*, created in 1976, and wonder, as does the poet/daughter: "What if she [Grace] had been granted the same opportunities as her male counterparts" (p. 34)? Indeed, "What if . . . ?"

Expedition to the M/Other/Land

Part II, "earth & longing", includes several more paintings from the artist Marsha Nouritza Odabashian: *Love in the Ruins*, *Villagers*, and *Milky Way Waltz*. I am intrigued by these paintings with their rich brown, red, and yellow earth tones created in part from natural onion-skin dyes—a process that I am at ease with even though I am not Armenian, but of Canadian-Greek heritage. I smile to myself, while I explore the captivating shadowy figures and subtle outlines of architectural structures that emerge

on the canvas. I wish that I could delve into the paintings in-person, to feel the textures and sway with the brushstrokes.

“Earth and longing” also incorporates 18 picturesque poems. Here, I am invited to co-travel with the poet/artist through the m/other/land, the historic and more contemporary Armenia. As Celeste walks through this terrain of longing, both foreign and familiar, she lets Armenia “wash over” (p. 47) her. In the process, she comes to know that “land holds a truth” (p. 48) and her ancestors “are land / baked from the terroir / of arid and fertile soil” (p. 53).

Despite her mother’s sporadic and explosive episodes of anger growing up and the intergenerational trauma she experienced, Celeste, comes to know maternal love, that “the Armenian soul is / varied and complex [like her mother, a survivor of the Armenian genocide] / as the cuisine of food” (p. 60), and that she “come[s] from a lineage of resilience” (p. 63).

While Celeste continues her pilgrimage through the m/other/land, I, the co-traveller and guest/xeni, drink in the topography. Scenes of olive trees, lavash bread baking in ovens in the ground, ancient sites, medieval walls, dark frescoes, the Azat valley, and village in Yeghegnadzor fill my imagination with possibility. Aromas of the earth and foods, like *troushi* (pickled vegetables, what I/we call “toursi”) and *yalanchee* (grape leaves stuffed with lemon-infused rice filling with herbs, what I/we know as “dolmades”) deliciously nourish my soul. Echoes of “inexpressible haunts” (p. 60), unknown tongues, mysterious melodies, the “earth’s song” (p. 51), and unearthed stories of longing, move around and through my body, disquieting and enlivening it.

By co-dwelling briefly, through the poetry and art in/through m/other/lands (in-between places/spaces), I gain a deeper appreciation for the process that is involved in exhuming, respectfully, shared stories of longing and belonging. I, the co-traveller, feel privileged to witness the process of bringing to light Celeste’s ancestral stories.

While in “kitchen & colour” (part I), and before I wander to the third and final section, I decide to revisit the poem, “Seaweed Torment” (p. 55), and ponder further the question: Could art alone heal?

. . . although encounters with them [/the arts] frequently do move us
to want to restore some kind of order, to repair, to heal.
At the very least, participatory involvement with the many forms of art
can enable us to see more in our experience,
to hear more on normally unheard frequencies,
to become conscious of what daily routines have obscured,

what habit and convention have suppressed.
(Greene, 1995, p. 123)

This is an intricate and crucial question, I believe, and I am beckoned to explore it further. I respond by excavating another image.

Figure 3

Dendro Series: Rizoma (Photography by Kathy Mantas)



The Poetic M/Other Tongue

The third and final segment of the collection, “worry & spirituality” (pp. 66–88), comprises 18 poems and an additional three paintings by the artist, Marsha Nouritza Odabashian: *Arbor* (p. 66), *Blood Lessons* (p. 71), and *Guardians of Our Inheritance* (p. 78). These paintings contain many of the same opulent earth hues, but include figures with more distinct shapes. I see people gazing melancholically into the distance, a head/body floating on the meniscus of the deep blue-green waters, a figure in a posture of pondering, pools of red/blood, meandering paths (created with red dots), ghost-like figures hovering in the background, a land in turmoil.

I also witness spirited people in the foreground singing hymns and others standing/sitting, courageously taking up space on the terrain/canvas. I behold several beloved glorious green trees—perhaps, olive trees—in full bloom.

But there is so much more that I do not see, and cannot see, at the moment. I AM WORDLESS AND OVERCOME WITH MIXED EMOTIONS. I share another image.

Images are the midwives between experience and language.
The miracle of image making . . . ; is that it helps birth a story
that holds countless memories and emotions.
Through a single drawing or image, no matter how simple,
we can express and contain multiple feelings,
relationships, and hours of narrative—
and, most importantly—visually translate our experiences
on behalf of our souls.
(Malchiodi, 2002, p. 24)

Figure 4*Dendro Series: On Burls**(Photography by Kathy Mantas)*

After a brief pause, the journey continues, but not through Celeste's m/other tongue, a *glossa* she does not know. It carries on through her mother tongue, a "linguistics of blood and bone" (p. 70), and soul: poetry.

I try to listen with care "to the world beneath the words" (p. 69), as she advises, and find myself transported to a space overflowing with "expression[s] of the sacred" (p. 67). I am blessed with incense, seawater, prayers, and heartfelt hymns. I feel quenched from taking in, at a peaceful pace, the "alphabet of yearning" (p. 69), defined here as, "the Armenian soul proverbs, odes, love songs, lullabies / chants, folk tales, poems, laments" (p. 69).

For me, poetry is philosophy, inquiry, prayer;
 it is learning to pay attention, to listen, to be awake.
 Poetry cuts deep to the bone, makes vivid the flesh
 and sounds of the world and pilgrimages of the mind and heart.
 Poetry asks me to ask bigger questions, to take down the names of ghosts.
 Poetry asks me: what on earth are you doing here?
 It asks me to be fully in the world, to be compassionate, and to be clear.
 Clear not only in writing . . . but clear in how I respond to what the writing asks of me.
 Poetry holds up a mirror and rips off the mask:
 it shows me when I am wallowing, faking it, being precious or insincere.
 It reminds me I know nothing.
 . . . Poetry, in truth, has become my trickster:
 writing it, my crow time, keeping me off-balance, humble,
 and in love with the possibilities of home [and (be)longing].
 (Neilsen Glenn, 2012, p. 19)

In this third fragment, the poet/artist, recollects the inconceivable sacrifices that her ancestors made and ruminates on the “traits passed down / from generation to generation” (p. 71). While recognizing her place of privilege, she offers them—her ancestors and family—sentiments of deep gratitude.

As for her co-travellers, Celeste urges us “to look until we see” (p. 88) and (re)discover “the poetic as a site from which the primordial lives” (p. 12). Moreover, she nudges us gently into a collective remembering of our longings and reignites our “desire to create and to live in the in-between of the already and not yet” (p. 12). Likewise, she opens us up to the process and mystery of “self-creativity” (Randall, 1995, p. 25).

It is self-creativity, that one aesthetic endeavor in which, arguably,
 all of us are unavoidably involved:
 creating not only paintings, poems . . . , but also,
 and primarily, our own unique lives.
 (Randall, 1995, p. 25)

Re-Opening

Since “a fragment can hold a world” (p. 14), I leave you with one final question to ponder: Are you open to receiving Celeste’s offering—an invitation and “a space for you to honour and discover what has shaped your own life” (p. 14)?

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ENDNOTES

1. Through her in-progress and site-specific photographic exploration, *Dendro Series*, Kathy Mantas/artist-researcher has been engaging in acts of *wandering* (while walking), *noticing/gazing* (in wonderment), *attending* (as a caring response but also an act/practice of listening), *being/becoming and living* (in the present moment), and “*trusting*” (in co-creative/becoming processes, defined broadly) as sacred, contemplative, and aesthetic practices, especially since the pandemic started. Through her tree series, she hopes to gain deeper insights into co-creative processes, nature’s artful forms (for Kathy, trees have memory of the past, exist in the present and foster our future imagination), and learn more about how trees are shaped by/change/transform/respond to internal and external tensions (by creating/forming burls, for example). More importantly, through this tree series that she has been working on for many years, she explores concepts of (dis)connection, (dis)location, (be)longing, (up)rootedness/(xe)rizoma, and home(less).