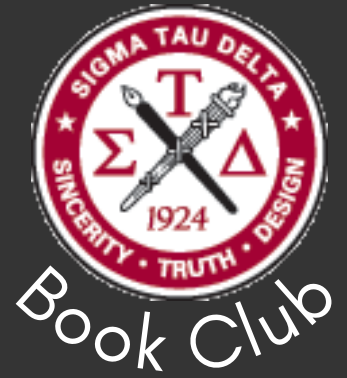


# When My Brother Was an Aztec

## Natalie Diaz



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## How to use this kit

This kit contains a variety of sheets to be used for discussion. It begins with an introduction to Natalie Diaz and a discussion of poetic form to jumpstart book club conversations. Then there are four pages that focus on one theme or element. You can discuss all four or pick which ones you would like to use. Each of these sheets includes discussion questions, interactive activities, and sparks to inspire service-related conversations. At the back of the kit, there is a list of community resources for chapters interested in pursuing service projects related to the collection's themes. Once you've completed your book club experience, don't forget to share it on social media with Sigma Tau Delta!

## Introduction

Natalie Diaz's debut poetry collection *When My Brother Was an Aztec* was published in 2012. Among the many stories woven through the collection, it portrays a sister's struggle with her brother's drug addiction. Fraught with the tensions of her past and present, the collection also pays homage to Diaz's childhood in the Fort Mojave Indian Village in Needles, California and her professional basketball career, which she pursued before returning to school for her MFA in poetry and fiction. Diaz won the Pulitzer Prize in 2021 for her second poetry collection, *Post-Colonial Love Poem*, and is renowned for her unapologetic exploration of fear and desire.

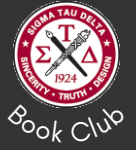
## Poetics

Observing form in poetry is an excellent way to build literary connections and focus on how poets build meaning. Start a conversation about form in your chapter using some of the following considerations:

1. How does Diaz make use of white space in her poetics?
2. Find 5 line breaks in her writing that stand out to you as significant. How does Diaz use line breaks to enhance her meanings?
3. Why did Diaz choose to arrange the poems in the collection in this manner? How would the meaning of the collection change if you were to switch the orders of poems?
4. What images and motifs reoccur throughout the poems?
5. Read one of the poems aloud. How does this change your reading of the poem?
6. Choose two poems that approach similar topics. Do they have similar forms, or are they approached in different manners?
7. Why was this title chosen for the collection? How does it describe the movement of the collection?

# When My Brother Was an Aztec

# Character



## Introduction

In addition to the title poem, “When My Brother Was an Aztec,” Diaz creates strong character studies in poems such as “Reservation Mary,” “A Woman with No Legs,” and “The Gospel of Guy No-Horse.” This page asks you to consider these characters in conversation.

## Questions

1. Which characters stand out to you the most? Why?
2. How does Diaz make her characters so distinct?
3. Why might the poems take different forms/structures? How does the form contribute to the feeling of a character?
4. The narrator shares different relationships with the characters who make up the subjects of their poems. Reflect on these relationships. How do we learn more about the narrator through their relationships?

## Activities

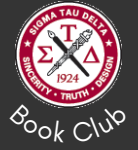
1. Create a character portrait either through drawing or writing a poem or short fiction piece. Focus on conveying the characters through detail, using Diaz’s style.
2. Make a playlist for one of the characters highlighted in Diaz’s poems or a character of your own creation.

## Sparks for Service

1. How can you be more observant of the characters in your lives and communities?
2. Are there characters in your community you’ve neglected to see?

# When My Brother Was an Aztec

## War



### Introduction

Several poems deal with images of war overseas, including “The Elephants” and “Why I Don’t Mention Flowers When Conversations with My Brother Reach Uncomfortable Silences.” Others like “Cloud Watching” detail the experience of war wrought out on Native Americans throughout a bloody history of subjugation. Still others deal with a more metaphoric concept of war, such as the war addictive substances wage in the body and in families. This page asks you to question your understanding of wars and the people who fight them.

### Questions

1. Where do you see war represented in Diaz’s poems? Does one stand out the most?
2. How do each of these poems speak differently than one another? What might this difference say about the way we define war?
3. How does war become part of the narrator’s story? How is it part of yours?
4. How do these poems relate to the rest of the collection?

### Activities

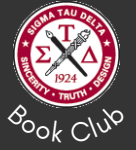
1. Look at a picture of a battlefield from history or current events. Describe what you see/feel in a poem or short fiction piece.
2. Research one war that you’ve never heard of before or find one historical instance of violence that should be recognized as a war. Reflect on what you find either in writing or through sharing with the rest of your book club.

### Sparks for Service

1. What other wars are being waged around the globe today?
2. Who in your community is most effected by the legacy or immediacy of war? How can you help?

# When My Brother Was an Aztec

## Ghosts



### Introduction

Poems like “Hand-Me-Down-Halloween” and “Why I Hate Raisins” paint the picture of a childhood brushed by the ghosts of generational trauma. This page asks you to consider ghosts of the past that continue to haunt in the present.

### Questions

1. What do you make of the structure of “Hand-Me-Down Halloween”? How does this contribute to the poem’s themes?
2. How might different costumes function in the poem to evoke the narrator’s childhood experience?
3. Diaz includes poems that bring to mind different stages of her life. What do these poems about childhood add to the overall collection?
4. What other metaphoric ghosts can be spotted throughout the poetry collection?

### Activities

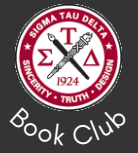
1. Look through *When My Brother Was an Aztec* for images that evoke Halloween (skeletons, blood, ghosts . . . etc.). Consider how the supernatural can be used as a device to convey meaning. Create a poem, piece, or other artwork that speaks through its use of the supernatural.
2. Recall a costume that you wore one Halloween and one you wanted. Write down as many details as you remember. Do you remember anything about the surrounding circumstances that alters your perspective of this memory?

### Sparks for Service

1. How might these poems alter your perspective of Halloween or other holidays cherished in childhood?
2. How can we recognize and address hunger/disparity in our communities?

# When My Brother Was an Aztec

## Desire



### Introduction

“I Watch Her Eat the Apple” and “Toward the Amaranth Gates of War or Love” are two poems that deal with desire in the narrator. This page asks you to consider the place of desire in Diaz’s work.

### Questions

1. What place does desire take in Diaz’s collection? Where do you identify desire? What different kinds exist?
2. How does Diaz convey desire in her collection?
3. Consider Diaz’s references to mythology. What do these contribute to her depiction of desire?
4. How do the narrator’s desires contribute to our picture of her and her story?

### Activities

1. Write a poem or short fiction using an object, creature, or food as an image to evoke desire.
2. Make a collage of different things you (or we, as a society) desire. This can be digital or using clippings from print sources like magazines. Consider what all of the many desires lead back to.

### Sparks for Service

1. What do we, as a society, desire most? Would obtaining these desires contribute to a better world?
2. How can we recognize different desires in our community?

# Community Resources

Exploring the following websites will provide valuable resources for how to better understand many of the issues addressed in contemporary literature. Chapter members should consider the many ways that researching these sites may inspire individual or chapter actions. Remember: no project and no action is too small! Volunteering time and skills is also a valuable resource. Hosting open discussions about issues raised in Book Club is a way of serving individuals, groups, and communities. Service through words is an important part of raising awareness.

**The Trevor Project:** <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

**Human Rights Campaign:** <https://www.hrc.org/resources>

**Narcotics Anonymous:** [na.org](http://na.org)

**Nar-Anon Family Groups:** <https://www.nar-anon.org>

**Alcoholics Anonymous:** <https://www.aa.org>

**Al-Anon Family Groups:** <https://al-anon.org>

**National Domestic Violence Hotline:** [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

**The Gay & Lesbian Review / Worldwide (The G&LR):** <https://glreview.org>

**The National Education Association (NEA):** [www.nea.org/professional-](http://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-)

[engagement/tools-tips/resources-teaching-about-indigenous-peoples](http://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/resources-teaching-about-indigenous-peoples)

**The American Indian College Fund:** <https://collegefund.org/students>

**GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation):** <https://glaad.org>

**NDN Girls Book Club:** <https://ndngirlsbookclub.org/>

You might also consult various Literacy Programs and Literacy Councils in your community. Valuable resources can also be found by visiting the websites of some of our Society's sponsors and partners, including:

**League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC):** [lulac.org](http://lulac.org)

**Lambda Literary:** <https://lambdaliterary.org/>

**National Council of Teachers of English/National Center for Literacy Education (NCTE):**

<https://ncte.org/contact-us/>