

Presence

Brenda Iijima

University of Georgia Press (Jan 15, 2024)

Softcover \$24.95 (280pp)

978-0-8203-6530-5

In Brenda Iijima's multilayered science fiction novel *Presence*, interspecies and interdimensional communication is transcendent.

On toxic Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay, people from different chronological dimensions coexist, all seeking survival and environmental clues and cues about Earth's shift from the Holocene to Anthropocene era. The collective voice of these future postapocalyptic communal beings reveals that "there are no other animals on Earth besides us that we are aware of except for spiders." Their reliance on exquisite connection with one another is critical for their survival. Meanwhile, twenty-first-century human individuals learn about connection, and cadres of scientists and a performance troupe wearing hazmat suits visit the island to investigate and bring attention to historical environmental destruction.

The plot depends, at first, on the friction between dimensions. The communal beings experience the "uncanny visitations" of individual scientists and performers, raising questions of how perception impacts knowledge and experience. As they sense plants and animals that they thought were extinct, themes of consciousness-as-a-Platonic-cave emerge. And as the communal narrative shifts to individual perspectives, the story becomes more driven by the question of how contemporary humans will evolve into the communal beings of the precarious future—a less urgent need than immediate survival. In captivating scenes whose prose is painstaking and attentive, some contemporary humans hear or otherwise sense the messages of plants. Elsewhere, the language is confident and declarative, adopting a formal, ponderous tone that is reinforced when characters turn from action to musings on postmodern theory.

In the science fiction novel *Presence*, spatial and chronological boundaries shimmer and disappear as people learn about connection and community.

MICHELE SHARPE (January / February 2024)

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