**Event Title:**

Bodily Transformations: Reclaiming the Self

**Event Description:**

Join five diverse poets as they share their artistic work and theories on the merit of writing bodily transformations. Panelists will discuss using transformations to understand societal constraints placed on femme, POC, and queer bodies, how myths and fairytales can be deconstructed to ruminate on historical and personal violences, and how reimagining the liminal body and the mind tethered to it as folkloric, animal, and even monstrous can provide distance needed to reclaim the self.

**Event Category:**

Poetry Craft and Criticism

**Event Organizer, Moderator, and Participant:**

Mary Leauna Christensen is a multiracial individual and a current PhD in Creative Writing candidate at The University of Southern Mississippi. She received her MFA from Eastern Washington University, and is Managing Editor of The Swamp Literary Magazine. Her work can be found in Permafrost, Driftwood Press, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, and Sugar House Review, among others.

**Participants:**

Canese Jarboe is the author of vo/luptuary (YesYes Books, 2020) and the chapbook dark acre (Willow Springs Books, 2018). Their work has appeared in or is forthcoming from Colorado Review, Bennington Review, Willow Springs, South Carolina Review, Indiana Review, and elsewhere. Canese currently lives and teaches in Louisiana.

Christina Rothenbeck is an instructor at Louisiana State University. She is the author of the chapbook Girls in Art, and her poems have appeared in Sugar House Review, Bone Bouquet, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from West Virginia University and a PhD from The University of Southern Mississippi.

Victoria C. Flanagan holds a dual-genre MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University. They are the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize & the 2018 Emerging Poets Prize from Palette Poetry, among other honors. Recent work can be found in New South, Beloit Poetry Journal, & Crab Creek Review.

Cassandra J. Bruner, the 2019-2020 Jay C. and Ruth Halls Poetry Fellow, earned her MFA from Eastern Washington University. A transfeminine poet and essayist, their writing has appeared in, or is forthcoming from, Black Warrior Review, New England Review, Ninth Letter, RHINO Poetry, Third Coast, and elsewhere. Her chapbook, The Wishbone Dress, is forthcoming from Bull City Press.

**Opening Remarks:**

Welcome to the panel Bodily Transformations: Reclaiming the Self. Thank you for being here. Before we begin, I would like to let everyone know that we do have handouts of what we’ll be reading from and going over today. If you need a printed copy for accessibility reasons, please let me know.

I would also like give the warmest appreciation to the talented poets that agreed to be on this panel and who will be sharing their work and theory with us. Please give a round of applause to Canese Jarboe, Cassandra J. Bruner, Victoria C. Flanagan, and Christina Rothenbeck. I am so excited and grateful that you’re here.

When I was thinking of possible panels to propose, I was in the very early stages of understanding and recovering from a recent traumatic event. I had just started trying to write again and I noticed this new writing was different, it was blatantly in flux. As someone who is obsessed with the idea of liminality (and for me this typically means the liminal space a mixed-race feminine person finds themselves in), I was realizing I was in a new liminal and transitional space. One where I felt like I had no solid footing. The walls, the floor, everything shifting, expanding, compressing over and over again. This unsettling feeling, of course, was reflected in my writing. Though, my poetry has almost always had aspects of folklore, usually coming from my indigenous and latinx heritage and spending my formative years (my early 20s) in kudzu-covered Appalachia, what was happening in these new poems was different. Formally, they were more lyrical and, at times, almost abstract. In opposition to the heavily narrative lines and rather straight-forward strangeness found in my older work. But content-wise, something else was happening. In the poems, my physical body was morphing from wolf to a hand of glory to other non-human things. In terms of fertility, I had been thinking of the usefulness of the human body, my body, for a few years. In this shifting space I was now inhabiting, I had to relearn that my body was indeed mine, despite if others found it useful or not. It is a thing. I am a thing. For lack of a better word, it was this “thing-ness” that let me begin the long road to healing. A road I’m still on. Transforming my body, seeing it as animal, monster, creating my own lore around it, gave me the space I needed to not only reflect on what had happened to me, what was still happening, but it gave me the space to begin to reclaim myself.

It was my knowledge (and sometimes this was a very “loose” knowledge) of myths and folklore that allowed me the inspiration and resources to create these transformative poems. And despite my dislike for fairytales growing up (the ones fed to us on a silver-painted Capitalistic platter…pretty pale blondes, wealthy princes, masculine heroes, and tidy happy endings), I understand the importance of fairytales here and how really old and bizarre and even horrific they can be. That in these fairytales, the damsel in distress can be heroic, can reclaim the violences forced upon them. They can reclaim themselves, if they have the need to. For me, all of these tales and myths and folklore have made their way into a collective consciousness, into a web of macro and micro histories. And maybe through our writing and all of us being present today, we are feeding back into that web, expanding it. Allowing for understanding, more inspiration, more resources, and healing.

**Participants Initial Remarks:**

Cassandra J. Bruner:

Today, I’ll be exploring a particular mythic/fairytale archetype, the narrative and imagery of wandering the wilderness. And, of course, the host of cognates it contains: exile, trauma, grief, recovery, etc. Instances of these spaces and solitudes abound. In earlier, pagan renditions of Red Riding Hood, for example, she visits her grandmother deep in the forest and finds herself not only cornered by the wolf in grandmother’s visage, but tied to him in bed. Then, she frees herself, asking if she could go outside to take a piss, where she reties the cord around a sapling. Notably, she flees not to the path (civilization), but deeper into the woods, where a band of washerwomen whisk her to safety then drown the wolf beneath heavy, soaked clothes. What damns her, then, also delivers her. Today, though, I’ll focus on another fairytale that invokes this tried-and-true script, “Allerleirauh” (ATU 510B), and its insistence on the wilderness as a necessary grounds & time for healing the traumas dealt by a misogynistic and violent civilization.

From there, I plan to elaborate on Allerleirauh’s latent queerness and how her undisclosed length of time in a “wild” space could also embody Sedgwick’s notion of “growing sideways,” of maturing in a way the presiding culture could never know or acknowledge. These understandings of the wilderness as healing time and queer time will then funnel into a discussion and dissection of lyric time. Its limits and potentials, as a craft, for navigating these “sideways” stretches of time. Finally, I’ll unpack how this particular story and its notions of fuzzy time, of blurry development, became vital as I wrote a long-form series of persona poems from the perspectives of “chimera kids,” young figures whose half-“animal,” half-“human” bodies & lives (scare quotes as people are also animals) became thinly-veiled navigations of transness, visibility, and survival (whatever that entails).

Canese Jarboe:

a. Ozarkian folklore is less lore and more a lens that pulls the surrounding landscape into focus—a spoon, a knife, or a fork inside a persimmon seed predicts the sharpness of winter. One learns early on to interpret the scales of a fish, the call of an owl, or a group of cattle standing together in the pasture. My father taught me how to dowse for metals underground when I was a child. These old ways, rules even, for how to read the world were simultaneously glistening and bound by the same trappings that necessitated burying any signal of queerness, any vulnerability.

b. As a young adult, it made sense to distance myself from the folklore I grew up with. I’ll address the violence and isolation in traditional European folktales—particularly Rapunzel, and the vehicle that story provided for a deeper understanding of the way queerness and rurality intertwine and how that distance brought me back to the folklore of my childhood as a way to write myself into my own body.

**Moderator Questions:**

* What tropes or figures from fairytales/myths/specific folklore do you tend to work with the most? And why do you think these particular “aspects” interest or call to you?
* Do you pull from your general knowledge of fairytales/myths/folklore to create your own unique characters/stories/transformations? Do you consider this new lore to be cultural and/or political responses?
* With the previous questions in mind, do you consider the tropes and figures found in fairytales/myths/lore to be a part of a collective conscious? If so, how do you believe you and your work are, in turn, contributing to this collective consciousness or this web of historical and personal histories?
* How do these references or “new lore” act as reclamations, representations, recoveries? Or do they even need to?
* In other words, does writing into fairytales/myth/folklore create a space that allows for exploration of the self that might not have been possible in other arenas?

**Closing:**

Audience Q & A