

Event Outline

Event Title: *Beyond Representation: Intersections of Poetry and Mental Illness*

Event Description: The intersection of poetry and mental illness has a problematic history in the cultural imagination, from Blake's mythologized "madness" to Plath's romanticized suicide. In recent years this connection has been demystified, illuminating that the lived reality of writing with these disabilities is complex—as is the relationship between one's conditions and their art. How do mental illnesses consciously and subconsciously impact poetics? This panel convenes five poets to discuss their experiences.

Event Category: Poetry Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator

Sara Eliza Johnson is the recipient of an NEA Fellowship in poetry, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award, and Winter Fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center, among other honors. Her first book, *Bone Map*, won the 2013 National Poetry Series. Her second book, *Vapor*, will be published in 2022.

Event Participants

Aricka Foreman is an American poet and interdisciplinary writer from Detroit MI. Her debut poetry collection, *Salt Body Shimmer*, earned her the 2021 Lambda Literary Award in Bisexual Poetry. She has earned fellowships from Cave Canem, Callaloo, and the Millay Colony for the Arts. She lives in Chicago.

Daniella Toosie-Watson has received fellowships and awards from the Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop and the University of Michigan Hopwood Program. Winner of the 92Y 2020 Discovery prize, she received her MFA from the University of Michigan. Daniella is a Program Coordinator for Lambda Literary.

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo is a poet, essayist, and translator. He is the author of *Cenzontle*, winner of the A. Poulin, Jr. Prize (BOA Editions 2018), *Dulce* (Northwestern University Press 2017), and *Children of the Land* (Harper Collins). A Canto Mundo Fellow, he co-founded the UndocuPoets campaign.

Rachel Mennies is the author of *The Naomi Letters* and *The Glad Hand of God Points Backwards*, winner of the Walt McDonald First-Book Prize in Poetry and finalist for a National Jewish Book Award. She works as an adjunct professor and freelance writer, and serves as a member of *AGNI's* editorial staff.

Opening Remarks

Hello, everyone.

Thank you for being here.

This is *Beyond Representation: Intersections of Poetry and Mental Illness*.

As we know, poetry and mental illness have a long and complicated history in the popular imagination, often fetishized, and romanticized, with less attention paid to the relationship between a poet's mental illness and their poetics, a relationship that may be neutral or even symbiotically positive.

And as a poet with comorbid mental illnesses, I came to realize, after some time, that these conditions had affected my poetics in ways I couldn't have expected.

I organized this panel because I was curious how other poets with mental illness have found their conditions to affect their poetics, or learned from other poets with mental illness, and what we might learn from each other.

Panelists will present in alphabetical order.

Our first panelist will be Aricka Foreman. Aricka's debut poetry collection, *Salt Body Shimmer*, earned her the 2021 Lambda Literary Award in Bisexual Poetry.

Our second panelist will be Daniella Toosie Watson. Daniella has received fellowships and awards from the Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop and the University of Michigan Hopwood Program. She won the 92Y Discovery Prize in 2020.

Our third panelist will be Marcelo Hernandez-Castillo. Marcelo is the author of three books: *Cenzontle*, *Dulce*, and *Children of the Land*. He co-founded the Undocupoets campaign.

Our fourth panelist will be Rachel Mennies. Rachel is the author of *The Naomi Letters* and *The Glad Hand of God Points Backwards*, winner of the Walt McDonald First-Book Prize in Poetry and finalist for a National Jewish Book Award.

And I will be the fifth panelist. My name is Sara Eliza Johnson. My first book, *Bone Map*, won the National Poetry Series and was published by Milkweed Editions in 2014; my second book, *Vapor*, will be published by Milkweed in Fall 2022.

Please welcome our first panelist, Aricka Foreman.

Participant Presentations

Aricka Foreman

Aricka spoke extemporaneously on intersections of race and mental illness in her poetics.

Daniella Toosie Watson

Daneilla spoke extemporaneously on her experience with hallucinations and her poetics.

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo

Marcelo spoke extemporaneously on his experiences with bipolar 1 and his poetics.

Rachel Mennies

Rachel spoke extemporaneously on her experiences with OCD and her poetics.

Sara Eliza Johnson

Sara presented a short talk on PTSD and her poetics (posted below).

I deal with several comorbid disorders, but today I want to speak on my experience of post-traumatic stress disorder, and its subconscious effect on my poetics, and, consequently, how I've come to understand the legitimacy of a disordered poetics.

It's now clear that PTSD has shaped my poetics from the very beginning of my poetic practice, regardless of my intentions, as unresolved trauma—if trauma can ever be resolved—has a way of infusing every aspect of a life.

As with all mental disorders, PTSD is a term given to a collection of shared symptoms. These include high nervous system activation (aka “being triggered”) and the resultant panic attacks, flashbacks, hypervigilance, and emotional dysregulation. Other symptoms are dissociation, emotional numbness, memory and focus problems, impulsivity, nightmares, and suicidality. PTSD studies show neurological changes, revealing trauma alters brain structure and function. And this alters our cognitive processing, including our relationship with language, and therefore our relationship with our poetry.

I have complex PTSD, a variation of the disorder caused by elongated periods of repeated trauma, which has its own additional symptoms. At times, it has made writing itself very difficult work.

But my work is nonetheless inseparable from it. At this point, I would say my poetics are *symptomatic*, and were so before I understood I had trauma or symptoms. It fascinated me as a writer to see how my symptoms manifested in my poetics unconsciously, as trauma manifested in my nightmares. I was also surprised by how impossible it became to write outside of trauma, to compartmentalize in poetry the way I did in my “real” life, in which I managed to reasonably function.

Retrospectively, I see a traumatic journey unfold in my work over time. For a significant period of my life, I dissociated constantly, and this led to a poetics that some professors pejoratively called “floaty” or “disconnected,” advising me to use more “concrete” and “real world” imagery. They found the work inaccessible. I didn't know how to fix it, but I

tried, fueled by shame. Later, on rereading work from this era, I saw all the effects of dissociation on my poetics: imagery of moving underwater, seeing as if through fog, unable to connect with objects or emotional anchors, unable to “get back to the world,” as I wrote then. This led to the kind of structural and thematic incoherence, cognitive disturbance, and emotional ambiguity in my poetry that my workshops wanted me to fix, and which I didn’t know how to fix because it was simply the state in which I was existing, or trying to exist.

And then later, more recently, I could see the effects of traumatic *activation* in my poetics—signs of feeling too much somatically and emotionally during dense periods of panic and dysregulation—and all the ways that my mind, activated and on overdrive, gravitated towards viscerally intense images of annihilation, of bodies and worlds being torn apart, a chaotic messiness that manifested on the page formally and imagistically, which I continued to try to “fix.” If my dissociative poems frustrated some, my activated poems—what I facetiously call Horror Poems—made some confused or uncomfortable. Just like “floatiness” and structural incoherence, “messiness” and “chaos” in poems are qualities workshops want to correct, and through certain workshop environments I’ve learned—and now try to unlearn—how to “clean up” my poetry, correct its disruptions, assert control over deviation, ugliness, transgression, or ambiguous expression in order to, again, make my poetry palatable to a certain imagined audience.

The aspects of my work deemed “problems” were not stylistic choices. These were impressions of traumatic disorder. I don’t mean to emphasize that poetry workshops are ableist, though in many ways they are, but that symptoms of post-traumatic stress manifested in my work in subconscious ways, and to that end my work was pathologized, which harmed me as a poet, and a lot of my work thereafter has been to de-pathologize my poetry, and accept the more disordered aspects of my poetics, which I now see as reflective of a lived reality I don’t wish to erase from my art, and, correspondingly, don’t wish others to erase from theirs.

To this end, I’ve revised my understanding of audience since graduate-school, and even come to resist my own poetry is *for* an audience at all, and there to people-please, a behavior that has itself been a consequence of trauma. I’ve come to resist the notion that I *must* write for an audience, and accepted that my poems will find their audiences, or not. I’m still unlearning the lesson that I must write for judges and critics.

In my quest to reclaim my poetics as viable, I also learned I wasn’t interested in pitting the “personal” against the “universal” in poetry. In my MFA, which I admittedly attended fifteen years ago, we learned to use the personal to “speak to” the so-called universal, and this erases the experiences of the marginalized, as has been discussed by many in their intersectional critiques of writing workshops. This doctrine demanded I force my poems to perform normalcy.

Relatedly, I’m not interested in leveling qualitative judgements on the critical viability of a therapeutic poetics. A general assumption is poetry written through trauma is therapeutic, and, in that sense, only beneficial for the writer. In this paradigm, poetry of trauma is only about healing, not communicating, and therefore such work is devalued. Moreover, it’s often assumed the only way to write trauma is to write autobiographical

memory—to confess, to put the spectacle of our trauma on display for an empathic other—and this, too, I find problematic.

Even though *I'm* not conspicuously writing autobiographical memory, my trauma manifests on the page regardless, pushing its way into my poetry, as it does in my daily life, in flashbacks and other symptoms—an inescapable presence—and this means I *must* reckon with it and its language in my writing, inhabit its psychic landscape that is by its nature unsafe, chaotic, disorganized, corrupted, corroded, contaminated.

Trauma haunts my work. The poem is its imprint. I've come to accept its effect on my poetics as an essential aspect of what makes my poetry mine, true to myself and my experience of living and moving in a world that continually triggers, disorients, and—from my disordered perspective—seeks to destroy me.

I remember my college professor telling me to never “look away” in a poem, and, as my awareness of my disorder has grown, I've taken it to heart. I've learned to not look away from ugliness in me, and, adjacently, to accept the disordered aspects of my poetics. I'm still learning how to let a poem be something other than beautiful.

To use a crude metaphor: trying to make sense of your trauma is a bit like haruspicy, like trying to decipher the guts of roadkill.

You've hit the animal in the middle of the night, reacted too slowly to save it. You feel terrible for the thing, which wheezes and screeches as you approach it, but you need to see it, to know what you've done.

Trying to process trauma therapeutically is like trying to make a meal out of the roadkill. Can you swallow a piece without puking?

Writing about and through trauma—both subconsciously and consciously—is perhaps more like plunging your hands in the guts of the thing, pulling out all its intestines and organs, and making something new of it.

It's gruesome work. But the remaking has personal and collective function. Here, of course, I don't mean “universal” function, counteractive to the personal, but “collective,” in the sense that any artwork has the *potential* to connect others, to bridge gaps of various kinds between people, and that a disordered poetics has such capacity for connection, and needs no correction.

Thank you.

And thank you very much to all the other panelists for joining me here today to talk about this very important subject.