

## **EVENT TITLE: Opening the Gate: Poetry Reviewing as an Agent of Inclusivity**

**EVENT DESCRIPTION:** What is the role of the book reviewer? Are current critics engaging with new poetry in ways that are illuminating and rewarding for readers and writers of different genders, races, and ethnicities? As readers demand that institutions support poets who write into the many traditions outside the historical center, what's the responsibility of the critic? This diverse group of poet/critics considers these questions and others within the context of the changing landscape of writing and publishing.

## **EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Craft and Criticism**

### **EVENT PARTICIPANTS:**

**VICTORIA CHANG:** Victoria Chang's book, *OBIT* was published by Copper Canyon Press in 2020. *Dear Memory: Letters on Writing, Silence, and Grief* was published by Milkweed in 2001. Her children's books are *Love, Love and Is Mommy?*. She lives in Los Angeles and is the Program Chair of Antioch's Low-Residency MFA Program.

**RUBEN QUESADA:** Ruben Quesada is a gay, first-generation Costa Rican-American poet and critic who was raised by immigrant parents. He is the author of the poetry collections *Revelations* and *Next Extinct Mammal*. He serves on the board of the National Book Critics Circle where he is the VP of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

**EMILY PÉREZ:** Emily Pérez is the author of *House of Sugar, House of Stone; Made and Unmade; and Backyard Migration Route*. With Nancy Reddy she co-edited *The Long Devotion: Poets Writing Motherhood*. A CantoMundo fellow, she has received funding from Bread Loaf, Community of Writers, and Jack Straw.

**EMILIA PHILLIPS:** Emilia Phillips is the author of four books from the University of Akron Press, including *Embouchure* (2021). Her poetry appears in *Agni*, *Boston Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. She's an Associate Professor of Poetry in the MFA Writing Program at UNC-Greensboro.

**MANDANA CHAFFA:** Mandana Chaffa is founder and editor-in-chief of Nowruz Journal, a periodical of Persian arts and letters, and a writer and editor at Chicago Review of Books. She serves on the board of The Flow Chart Foundation and was named a 2021-2022 Emerging Critics Fellow by the National Book Critics Circle.

## **OPENING REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**VICTORIA:** Welcome to our panel and we're so happy to be here today. We will each speak for a few minutes from prepared statements and then we'll open things up to a conversation and I welcome questions from all of you as well because I would like this to be a conversation versus me being the only moderator. We're going to go in alphabetical order, starting with Mandana.

### **MANDANA:**

#### **1. Introduction and:**

- who belongs,
- who gets to be a reviewer,
- which poets get recognition, and
- how can we open up this profession for more people with different perspectives?

#### **2. For me:**

- not about certain contemporary poetry or poets replacing others, or newer critics replacing others
- There needs to be poetry coverage across the board
- Mention top 100 list & only two books of poetry

#### **3. Also:**

- relative lack of contemporary poetry reviews in mainstream publications.
- is the public uninterested in poetry or
- would there be more desire for it—and underrepresented voices—if there were more mainstream interest?
- Mention closed-off “top tiers”
- Challenge of analyzing poetry for general critics

#### **4. What would I like to see:**

- Wider representation in content
- diversity of criticism and

- greater availability of venues.

#### 5. Mention my background:

- immigrant; English as a second language; poetry in daily life
- new to the criticism community/corporate background
- generosity of editors and pubs
- deep interest in contemporary poetry, especially from diverse areas and voices
- talk about ModPo and the need/opportunity for us to expand more interest in poetry for the masses AND coverage in mainstream media
- final remarks about what I do now, why I think poetry deserves special role in the arts and in our lives
- appreciation to Victoria and the group

#### VICTORIA:

- Why review?
  - I first started editing and reviewing pretty much when I started writing, as a way to build community, to think critically about books, and also for social justice reasons--to review books that other people weren't reviewing by BIPOCs and those from other marginalized communities.
  - I've continued to review for those reasons.
  - When I think about the benefits of reviewing as a poet, there sometimes feel like there aren't a lot of benefits and there are more downsides. As a poet/critic, and an editor, you place yourself in a position of vulnerability, potentially to get criticized for what you choose to review, what you don't/can't, what you write, what you don't write, etc. Paradoxically, you are viewed as having power, when what you're actually trying to do is to subvert convention and upend power structures. It's complicated, but I'm pretty convinced in the end that being a poet/critic simultaneously isn't for the faint of heart. Basically it's a lot easier to just be a poet and quietly write your own poems. It takes a thick skin and a stomach of steel to put yourself out there as a critic in the name of making change.

- Another challenge is that over the past few decades, you end up knowing a lot of people in the poetry community so you have to be extra careful about conflicts of interest, but the community isn't huge, so there can be conflicts of interest.
- Genesis:
  - One way I've avoided some of these conflicts in the past is by quietly writing a few reviews a year and publishing them with small online journals such as Tupelo Quarterly Review, Boston Review, On the Seawall, etc. Most recently, the poet and critic Dean Rader and I started a new form of review, a review-in-dialogue column for LARB called Two Roads, as a way to subvert the traditional review which hasn't really changed in a long time. By de-centering the critic, and centering the dialogue around the work, these reviews-in-dialogue have been fun to write because they are collaborative. We decide on books together, read them alone, then meet online to discuss, then write together on a shared Google document. We intentionally are selecting books by BIPOC writers and/or those from other marginalized communities.

<https://www.lareviewofbooks.org>

- G.C. Waldrep: *The Earliest Witnesses* (Carcenet and Tupelo, 2020): <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/two-roads-a-review-in-dialogue-of-g-c-waldreps-the-earliest-witnesses/>
- Donika Kelly: *The Renunciations* (Graywolf Press, 2021): <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/two-roads-a-review-in-dialogue-of-donika-kellys-the-renunciations>
- Douglas Kearney: *Sho* (Wave Books, 2021): <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/two-roads-a-review-in-dialogue-of-douglas-kearneys-sho/>
- Tracy K. Smith & Arthur Sze: *Of Color: New and Selected* (Graywolf Press, 2021) and *The Glass Constellation: New and Collected* (Copper Canyon Press, 2021): <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/two-roads-a-review-in-dialogue>

[e-of-tracy-k-smiths-such-color-new-and-selected-poems-and-arthur-szes-the-glass-constellation-new-and-collected-poems/](#)

- Joan Naviyuk Kane: *Dark Traffic* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021): TBD
- 4 first books

## **EMILY:**

I wrote my first book reviews for *Gulf Coast* while I was in grad school. One of those pieces was published online. Based on that essay and my last name, Francisco Aragón, head of Letras Latinas, reached out to see if I would write for The *Latino Poetry Review*. His concept, Latinx reviewers writing about Latinx authors, was the first time I'd considered how reviewing could be used in a targeted way.

I had managed to stay naïve about certain parts of the book business. I'd believed in a magical meritocracy where the best books rose to the top and garnered reviews. I did not understand the forces of marketing and nepotism and the elements of chance occurring behind the scenes.

Aragón sent me books, chapbooks, and magazines, and I wrote two pieces a year for a few years. Around the time the journal went under, I became a mother, and I stopped writing reviews.

At a CantoMundo retreat in 2017, one of our two faculty members was Rigoberto González, whose prolific career included ten-years of writing monthly reviews of Chicano/Latino books for the *El Paso Times*. When the CantoMundo cohort brainstormed ways we could support the Latinx writing community, reviewing was an obvious answer. I made a commitment to myself to return to writing two reviews of Latinx authors a year.

Soon after, I started writing for *RHINO*, where I get to choose my own books. I felt a huge relief after submitting my first piece, only to receive the editor's email about the next month's deadline. I realized then I'd signed up to write every month. This pace has proven a challenge, a gift, and an

education, and it inspired me to write for even more journals, ones with longer wordcounts.

In 2019, I was invited to join the US branch of the Ledbury Emerging Critics, a British organization that supports a cohort of critics of color reviewing authors of color. Through the program I've gained a mentor who edits my writing to make it sound much smarter than it is, and I've gained more connections to journals as well as with other reviewers.

I've reviewed over 50 books in the last four years. I am a mother, a poet, and a high school teacher and dean; reviewing does not advance my work life or my home life, nor does it pay the bills. It also competes directly with time I would spend writing poetry or other essay forms, so I require strong reasons for reviewing.

There are the selfish reasons:

1. reviewing keeps me reading widely, which inevitably makes me a better reader, thinker, and writer.
2. the free books.

And there is the less selfish reason:

I see reviewing as activism. I can use a skill I have and the privilege of not needing to earn money from my writing to shine light on others. I'm not sure how many people read reviews (other than the writer and maybe their mother) but it's possible my review will help an under-sung writer get a foothold with an audience, an employer, a fellowship, a residency, or even with their skeptical parents.

I've abandoned all notions I once had about the existence of "the best" books. As a reviewer, I'm not a tastemaker or influencer; in fact, I'm a 9th grade English teacher. One of my superpowers is finding something good to say about practically anything.

I think of reviewing as an act of introduction. Maybe it's like being an unpaid realtor. I wouldn't show you a place you can't live in, but just because I'm showing it, it doesn't mean it is the right place for you, or even for me. I

want you to see its features and quirks, to think about how it was constructed, what it might feel like to spend time there. I'd love it if we both learned something along the way. I hand you the key, and what happens next is up to you.

## **EMILIA:**

Thanks so much to everyone on this panel. I admire all of you so much, and I mean it when I say that it's an honor to learn from you, in this conversation about inclusive book reviewing.

A few years ago, I made a commitment to myself that I would use my reviewing platform to support poets with marginalized identities. This meant that I would 1) primarily review poets of color and queer poets; 2) never again review white, cisgender men; and 3) call out poets for any exclusionary and discriminatory rhetoric in their poems (which I've just done one time so far).

Admittedly, this was not a commitment with which I was entirely comfortable. As a white, queer, nonbinary person, I wondered who was I to take on reviews of books in which a poet wrote about race? Or transness? Or other identities I did not inhabit? Wasn't it best for me to avoid these topics so that I didn't make mistakes? Wasn't it better for me to review poets whose identities most reflected my own?

I asked myself these questions again and again, a process which I found paralleled in Ari Baniyas's essay "What Do We See? What Do We Not See?" from *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*. Baniyas writes:

"My reluctance to write about race and racism routinely takes the form of preemptive self-judgment—the notion that whatever I write will necessarily be overly simplistic, redundant, without impact, superficial, etc.; the conclusion being I shouldn't bother. This impulse is self-protective, yes, but it also carries inside it a troublesome idea: that race and racism don't really have to do with me, a white person—that I somehow don't 'know' race or know it deeply enough....But I want to call bullshit. The notion that race and racism

somehow aren't my business gives me an unearned pass in matters that intimately involve and implicate me, and discourages me from seeing my life and its material conditions as inextricably connected to the lives of people of color." (37)

Like Baniya, I did not want to give myself an "unearned pass" in matters of race and, also, of sexuality, gender, ability, citizenship, class, and so forth. But I also wanted to handle those issues with care.

As such, I first had to acknowledge my positionality to the works I would review. This included a recognition that my opinions about poetry were founded in the ways I'd been taught poetry by white mentors in academia. Some of my earliest lessons in poetry were those that claimed that poetry written about one's identity was somehow just political rhetoric rather than art, especially when a poet's identity wasn't that of the dominant group, i.e. white, cis men. I had to acknowledge that my opinions about poetry were limited to one—or at least, a few—poetic traditions privileged in white academia. Likewise, I had to be aware of the reviewing tradition in which I was trained. While working for my MFA program's literary magazine, I was trained in a tradition of book reviewing that required assiduous analysis of a poet's craft but encouraged little to no acknowledgement of the poet's identity. This was more than just problematic; it was a racist system that failed to acknowledge how a poet's identity—as well as their relationship to other poetic traditions—could shape issues of craft.

It's important to note that I also had to learn not to overcorrect myself. I couldn't conflate all craft choices a poet makes with their identity. In responding to my first draft of a review of a Black poet's new book, an editor reminded me that I shouldn't focus only on what the poet was saying but also their skill in saying it, especially when white poets are disproportionately reviewed based on their skill instead of their content.

In 2018, as I was making my new reviewing commitment, I wrote a short essay titled "The Book Review in Review" for the *Ploughshares Blog*, in which I wrote that reviewers should acknowledge "their subjectivity,

explicitly in the review or privately in their approach to the review.” I indicated an “ideal practice of book reviewing” that’s “all about balance,” in which “I want to capture the book’s intended and executed work; describe my experience as a reader, with a projective eye toward those of potential readers; attempt to locate the poetry’s relationship to literary traditions (plural emphasized here, as there is no one literary tradition) and its relevance among contemporary movements; and recognize and work against the ways in which my experience of the book may be influenced by power- and privilege-based biases.”

In this essay, I was writing my own rules of engagement. These rules have forced me to reject my privileged viewpoints—particularly my whiteness—as a default center or “norm” for a reader. I now approach most books I review knowing that I might not be its intended or ideal audience. This might mean that I have gaps in knowledge, and some of that missing knowledge cannot be filled in via research. (Some can, of course, but some knowledge can only be known through lived experience.) This has forced me to reframe book reviewing as an exercise in humility, not ego; as such, I view my role not as an assessor of quality but as a facilitator that helps readers find the books for which they are looking and books they didn’t know they needed to read.

Sources:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rX9djmdtNri0\\_msB4AwlfU05ZSbXYMvx/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rX9djmdtNri0_msB4AwlfU05ZSbXYMvx/view?usp=sharing)

<https://blog.pshares.org/the-book-review-in-review/>

**RUBEN:**

I believe that there is a poem and a poet for everyone, but it has become increasingly important to introduce readers to books that may not have otherwise been given due attention. I believe poetry collections reveal broader assumptions about race, LGBTQIA+, and disability issues. I always appreciate an up-front statement about how an author publicly self-identifies. It is always better to be forthright about how someone

publicly self-identifies than to have an insinuation by a reader or reviewer. We must draw attention to the valleys in the poetic continuum of poetry in the US that fail to attend to a need for inclusion of histories and intersectional identities that are more complex than first or third person narratives.

We expect institutions to recognize our singularities or more commonly our intersectional identities. In many ways this tendency to describe our plurality has been at the heart of the American experience. Yet for many institutions, cultural pluralism in literature means chaos. And the end of the ability to control the narrative becomes as chaotic as language. Language traditionally has been a mode of communication to maintain control—the ability to publish and to read has currency. As we know about our own nation, one of the only industrialized nations whose history includes restricting the ability of non-white people to read, among other atrocities.

Technology and access to information and global cultures have given poets access to a universal consciousness. This accounts for an increasingly pluralistic representation in contemporary poetic collections. The life of an individual constantly evolves into an uncertain and complex ethos. But the number of reviews of books written by BIPOC poets is slim. We understand today that our varied experiences must have a seat at the table—a place that recognizes our past, present, and future. But editors must begin to recognize the power of diversity, their privilege, and what reviews they seek to publish.

### **Notes:**

Pluralism as defined by the *OED* is: “The presence or tolerance of a diversity of ethnic or cultural groups within a society or state; (the advocacy of) toleration or acceptance of the coexistence of differing views, values, cultures, etc.”

### **MODERATOR QUESTIONS:**

1. Thinking about some of the things Emily just talked about in terms of finding something good to say about anything [books, poetry], what are your thoughts on positive reviews versus negative reviews?
2. Based on some of the things Ruben just said, I wonder what you all think about the role of technology in criticism? How has social media influenced criticism or even your own critical writing?
3. Based on some of all of your comments, I'm wondering how critics might write about identity without stereotyping the author/poet?
4. What are your views on chapbook [short books of poetry that are usually less than 25 pages and often, but not always made by hand] reviewing?
5. If someone wants to get started writing poetry criticism, how might they do that? Or what advice might you give them?

## NOTES:

- NBCC: National Book Critics Circle: <http://bookcritics.org>
- NaPo: National Poetry Writing Month
- Ledbury Critics:  
<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/new-and-international-writing/emerging-critics/ledbury-critics-apply/>
- Mai Der Vang, *Yellow Rain*:  
<https://www.graywolfpress.org/books/yellow-rain>.
- Anthony Cody, *Borderland Apocrypha*:  
<https://www.omnidawn.com/product/borderland-apocrypha/>.