

## **EVENT TITLE: The Importance of Pleasure: Representations of Sex and The Body in Pleasure**

**Event Description:** Writing about sensual pleasure—especially involving female-identifying, queer, and marginalized bodies—is often outweighed by writing that features the body shamed and sexually traumatized. In this panel, a group of writers and editors who work in multiple genres will share their insights regarding the dominance of the trauma narrative, and discuss the importance of destigmatizing the erotic and of both representing and celebrating the body in pleasure.

## **EVENT CATEGORY: Multiple Literary Genres**

### **Event Moderator**

**Angie Dell** is a queer, nonbinary writer, printer, and book artist. They worked for many years as a sex worker and pleasure-based sex educator, and as an organizer in the creative nonprofit world. They run Shut Eye Press, a book and printing studio based in Phoenix, Arizona.

### **Event Participants**

**Taylor Byas** is a Black Chicago native currently living in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she is now a third year PhD student and Yates scholar at the University of Cincinnati, and an Assistant Features Editor for *The Rumpus*. She is the 1st place winner of the 2020 Poetry Super Highway, the 2020 Frontier Poetry Award for New Poets Contests, the 2021 Adrienne Rich Poetry Prize, and a finalist for the 2020 Frontier OPEN Prize. She is the author of the chapbook *Bloodwarm* from Variant Lit, a second chapbook, *Shutter*, forthcoming from *Madhouse Press*, and her debut full-length, *I Done Clicked My Heels Three Times*, forthcoming from *Soft Skull Press* in Spring of 2023. She is represented by Rena Rossner of the Deborah Harris Agency.

**K-Ming Chang** is a Kundiman fellow, a Lambda Literary Award finalist, and a National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 honoree. She is the author of the New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice novel *BESTIARY* (One World/Random House, 2020) and the forthcoming short story collection *GODS OF WANT*.

**Jenny Irish** is the author of the hybrid poetry collections *Common Ancestor* (Black Lawrence Press, 2017) and *Tooth Box* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2022), the short story collection *I Am Faithful* (Black Lawrence Press, 2019), and the forthcoming chapbooks *Hatch* (Ethel, 2022) and *Lupine* (Black Lawrence, 2023). She teaches creative writing at Arizona State University and facilitates free community workshops every summer.

**Jessica Q. Stark** is the author of *Savage Pageant* (Birds, LLC, 2020), which was named one of the "Best Poetry Books of 2020" in the *Boston Globe* and in *Hyperallergic*. Her work appears in *Pleiades*, *Verse*, and others. She is a Poetry Editor for *AGNI* and the Comics Editor for *Honey Literary*.

### **Opening Remarks and Housekeeping**

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to *The Importance of Pleasure: Representations of Sex and The Body in Pleasure*. Thank you all for being here with us today. I feel incredibly fortunate to be a part of this panel among writers and artists I admire, to discuss a topic that is deeply important to me—representation of the body in pleasure.

### **Participant Remarks:**

Taylor Byas: One of my scholarly interests in my doctoral program is how Black women writers write the erotic. The question of sex and women's bodies in literature has always been a complicated one. Even now, I think of the fairly popular twitter account, *Men Write Women*, which is dedicated to highlighting the horrific ways that men depict women's bodies on the page. But for me, as a Black woman writer, this question lies at the intersection of both gender and race. The Black female body has a complicated and traumatic history, one that Black women writers constantly contend with. As a scholarly interest in my doctoral program, I've been particularly interested in how Black women writers respond to an audience in constant flux, and how the writing of the erotic for the contemporary Black woman writer can be an exercise of joy and a creation of exclusivity.

K-Ming Chang:

1. We've spent most of our lives reading sex scenes in literature—the good, the bad, the explicit, the wonderfully suggestive. How did you

approach writing sexual intimacy for the first time, and in what ways was pleasure a consideration, if at all?

I wanted to write in a way that expanded our definition of sex and the erotic. The sex scenes I encountered in literature were often heteronormative or either glamorized or traumatic, and while I loved reading my mom's harlequin romances, I was interested in inventing a new language for sex and the erotic and what could be considered sexual or pleasurable. Because I'm interested in the pleasure and playfulness of language, I think that a sense of playfulness and joy entered my writing about the erotic, though it often coexisted with their opposites.

The first time was completely unintentional - I had a very set definition of what a sex scene was, and I was surprised that people considered what I wrote to be a sex scene, which is probably indicative of my own previously narrow conception of what that could constitute, and how I searched for the erotic outside of more conventional definitions

2. What internal and external pressures do you feel, particularly as women writers, when you include explicit sexual scenes and details in your work?

Sometimes I worry that the scenes will be read in an exploitative way, that people will have a voyeuristic view of them, and that definitely enters my mind as I'm drafting and revising. Part of this I can control by not acting voyeuristic toward my own characters, and I also have to accept that part of it is out of my control as well.

3. As writers, particularly in fiction, we thrive on narrative conflict and know that one facet of compelling writing is to thwart or withhold the wants and needs of our characters. When you depict sexual intimacy, how do you navigate conflict and tension while still making space for pleasure, connectedness, and empowerment?

It's so interesting, because one of the edits I got for *Bestiary* was the idea that there wasn't enough conflict between the main character and her romantic and sexual love interest. I was interested in narratives that didn't center on conflict, but that still had momentum, and while I'm not sure I found it, I think there are interesting ways to create meaning without considerations of plot and conflict (again still something I'm writing toward rather than something I've been able to do)

I often write about the intersections of intimacy and violence, and while I definitely don't want to traumatize or act violent toward my characters just for the sake of it, I do think about the narrators' internal conflicts and blurred ideas of love/violence as entwined - I think a lot about the question of how to love the ones that hurt you, and whether that's possible or feasible

4. In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde extends "the erotic" beyond sexual intimacy to a greater embodiedness and connection to the self, one that fuels female power and agency. Can you speak to the relationships your characters, narrators, or speakers have with their bodies, and why you made those decisions?

This question resonates so much with me! I think of the erotic as encompassing so much - the eroticism of eating and expelling, the eroticism of being shameless, etc - I'm interested in characters who are very intimate with their bodies in a way that could be considered shameful, gross, or base, but that I see as another form of intimacy and resisting a certain kind of shame. I think that embodiedness for me is also tied to writing about class and racialized womanhood, and that rather than writing toward the visibility of our bodies, I'm more interested in writing about embodiedness as a form of pleasure and connection to mythological and ancestral roots.

5. Have you found yourself unintentionally writing to the dominant cultural narratives of objectification, theatrics, shame, and trauma? How do we start to unlearn familiar narratives about sex and how bodies experience pleasure, and what does that look like on the page?

I definitely think that I have a tendency to go overboard with my language and have to struggle not to beautify violence. I love playing with language, but sometimes my language serves to mythologize or make beautiful trauma or violence, which is dangerous. I think that for me, part of unlearning that is to write first and foremost for myself without thinking about an external gaze or audience, so that I don't feel like I'm looking at the characters or acting as a voyeur. Rather, I try to write from a very interior place, trying not to be shaped by the expectations of an audience. I think that that helps me find what is truly resonant and meaningful, rather than what might be sensationalizing or performative.

On the page, I try to let my characters lead, and try to allow them to be complex and contradictory and surprising - I think a lot about what Garth Greenwell once said about shame being a productive emotion, and I both agree and disagree. Shame can be silencing, but I'm also interested in writing so deep into it that I come out beyond it. For me, it's not so much about rejecting the dominant cultural narratives but to head toward them, and find a new path out of them. Writing toward my shame, and then beyond it, helps me find new language and new entrances into other bodily possibilities.

Jenny Irish: In my experience as a reader, teacher, and writer I feel that I regularly encounter depictions of bodies—especially female and queer bodies—being subjected to sexualized violence, and various forms of shaming and humiliation, but in comparison rarely find depictions of bodies being celebrated and in states of pleasure. For me, this experience demanded that I consider the role of sexual trauma and shame in my own writing, which often involves domestic violence and the commodification of the bodies of women and girls. Though I think there is value in the authentic and nuanced representation of trauma, I did not want to present bodies as only sites of pain, humiliation, and anger. Thinking about this, I came to a personal realization that I needed to do more work to celebrate the body and give space to sensual pleasures in my writing and teaching. Having come to that place of realization, I next had to think about how I would approach both writing and teaching representations of bodies in pleasure.

As a fiction writer, the two best pieces of guidance I can offer for writing sex are:

- Write through the character's experience
- Use authentic language

Jessica Q. Stark: In writing about the terms of my mother's immigration to the United States from Vietnam, I encounter questions about the vexed state of the feminine diasporic body, the boundaries of sex work, and the monstrous and intentionally obscure in the backwoods of retold memory. I write through a feminine reclamation of the sexual body as it relates to Hélène Cixous' concept of love as a counter to masculine economies of debt. In this talk, I define bodily pleasure as distinct from sacrificial notions of love that privileges a Western, stable notion of the autonomous individual as the most important aspect of perspective.

My attention to love and bodily pleasure in this way attempts to recalibrate folkloric inheritances (drawing on erasures of different iterations of Little Red Riding Hood) as well as epigenetic trauma and generational debt. Most importantly in this attention, I wish to invert conventional, Western notions of diasporic, feminine victimhood.

Questions:

1. We've spent most of our lives reading sex scenes in literature—the good, the bad, the explicit, the wonderfully suggestive. How did you approach writing sexual intimacy for the first time, and in what ways was pleasure a consideration, if at all?
2. What internal and external pressures do you feel, particularly as women writers, when you include explicit sexual scenes and details in your work?
3. As writers, particularly in fiction, we thrive on narrative conflict and know that one facet of compelling writing is to know what your characters want and need, and then thwart it. When you depict sexual intimacy, how do you navigate conflict and tension while still making space for pleasure, connectedness, and empowerment?
4. In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Audre Lorde extends “the erotic” beyond sexual intimacy to a greater embodiedness and connection to the self, one that fuels female power and agency. Can you speak to the relationships your characters, narrators, or speakers have with their bodies, and why you made those decisions?
5. Have you found yourself *unintentionally* writing to the dominant cultural narratives of objectification, theatrics, shame, and trauma? How do we start to unlearn familiar narratives about sex and how bodies experience pleasure, and what does that look like on the page?