

## Outline and Notes for the Poetry as Witness Panel

What can a poet do in the face of dehumanization and brutality towards groups of people? How can we avoid sentimentality or reducing victims to statistics? How do we communicate the victimization of a people while still conveying their agency and humanity? Do the details of craft matter in the face of mass murder, and how can poetry honor the dead and urge society towards justice and humanity? And what do poets do when we see the attitudes that led to genocide resurfacing today?

This panel comes from experienced poets of different ethnic backgrounds whose work addresses atrocities perpetrated against ethnic minorities. Panelists intend this content to be relevant to current writers speaking against present-day injustice as well as to those who memorialize the victims of past brutality. Poetry is especially able to speak against genocide because of its standing against 'the tyranny of a single idea,' as Stanley Kunitz wrote.

The Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum lists twelve signs of impending fascism and among them are disdain for human rights and for the arts. This panel will elucidate how poetry can fill the social role that makes it dangerous. Poets will read work that has inspired them as well as some of their own work and then speak to the questions in the description.

**Gail Newman**, poet and daughter of Holocaust survivors, discusses writers Paul Celon and Charles Reznikoff.

*Quote from The Poetry Foundation:* "As a German-speaking Jewish survivor living in France, Celon harbored feelings of intense estrangement from the language and thus set about creating his own language."

Newman on Reznikoff's work: "Even without seeing what was deleted, you can see how stark [his poems are] and condensed, how lacking in emotion or comment from the poet."

*From Newman:* *In my own poetry, I found when writing the poems about my family, that I had to step back and tell my parents' story in a factual, sometimes spare manner.*

Poetry can't change the world, but it can give a voice to the persecuted and the disenfranchised. And it can provide both hope and warning for the future.

**Poet Dean Rader** discusses the poetry of witness and why writers turn to poetry as opposed to other forms of writing. Politicians may not necessarily try to change laws because of a poem, but a poem is able to enact a kind of internal revolution.

He cites Pablo Neruda as a poet who was able to merge politics and aesthetics. His poems can be overtly political but never veer over into propaganda. I read the last stanzas of "I Explain a Few Things" and the short poem "America, I Do Not Call Your Name Without Hope"

He reads his poem "America I Do Not Call Your Name Without Hope" and talks about how even though it was written in response to the murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, it has come to be associated with anti-Trump sentiments, having been published in several anthologies. He also reads his poem "History" which was written in response to the riots in Charlottesville, VA.

**Roger Reeves** challenges readers to become better versions of themselves, better for themselves and for others. (Wesley Rothman in *The Critical Flame*) He discusses how his work covers the intersection of politics, subjectivity, aesthetics and race.

Reeves encourages writers to examine how social and political questions inform their writing, even if they are not writing on explicitly political topics. This is because political factors often inform how poetry gets read and received. The ability to choose not to address political questions is a privilege in itself.

He discusses the limits of the power of poetry and the personal empathy it can create to enact real social change towards marginalized groups but finds reasons to read and write poetry of this sort anyway.

**Lorna Dee Cervantes** discusses how her work incorporates cultural memory and addresses questions of genocide, justice, and history. When asked on the panel how poetry and poets can better convey the experiences of the marginalized and bring about social justice, she responds by encouraging writers to produce more poetry.

She reads from her new work "Three Poems Mourning the Murder of Martin 50 Years Later" from *APRIL ON OLYMPIA*.

She is a descendant of cultures which have experienced genocide: as a "Digger Indian" (Chumash from California), as an Indigenous American from both sides of that imaginary border, and as African American. She recently discovered that genetically she's Pygmy, a people who are resisting genocide, from within and without their country and land, to this day. As Cervantes says, "When men in monster trucks dragging the flag of The United States of America try to run me over on the sidewalk for how I'm perceived, it's hard not to think I am still resisting."

In the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Edith Vasquez wrote that although "Cervantes [has] steadily produced a body of poetry which insist[s] on the historical reckoning of injustices committed against her Mexican and Native communities and by extension other populations who have been subject to violence, genocide, or oppression ... her poetry also abounds with poignant verbal portraiture of female personas as survivors, interlocutors, visionaries, and leaders who assert agency in unexpected places and by unexpected means."

From a review by Rose Geiger of Lorna Dee's recent work *Sueno*: "Like her Chicana foremothers and fellow Latina authors of the Chicana renaissance literary movement, Cervantes follows similar techniques including circular logics and personal narrative as theory, advocacy, and presence. Her organization and style of her poems seem to represent individual dreams, as reflected in her masterful scattering of sensuous imagery, logic, and gradual unwinding of truth."