

AWP 2023 Event Outline

Event Title: Beyond the Trauma Plot: Reframing Trauma Toward a Poetics of Justice

Description: In recent years, the focus on personal trauma has narrowed the conversation, prioritizing individual experience over collective outcomes. Where trauma narratives romanticize suffering and offer easy redemption arcs, poetic innovation and craft deepen our understanding of the language of injustice. Five poets—whose works span collective and individual traumatic histories—will discuss the ways they innovate form and language toward more three-dimensional work in both poetry and personal narrative.

Category: Poetry Craft and Criticism

Organizer and Moderator:

Eugenia Leigh is a Korean American poet and the author of two books of poetry, *Blood, Sparrows and Sparrows* and *Bianca*. Poems from her new collection, *Bianca*, were awarded *Poetry* magazine's Bess Hokin Prize and have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Nation*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. A Kundiman fellow, Eugenia serves as a poetry editor at *The Adroit Journal*.

Participants:

Paul Hlava Ceballos is the author of *banana []*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and winner of the Donald Hall Prize for Poetry. His collaborative chapbook, *Banana [] / we pilot the blood*, shares pages with Quenton Baker and Christina Sharpe. He lives in Seattle, where he practices echocardiography.

A poet and librettist, **Janine Joseph** is the author of *Decade of the Brain* and *Driving Without a License*, winner of the Kundiman Poetry Prize. A co-organizer for Undocupoets, she is an associate professor at Oklahoma State University and the inaugural Dean's Distinguished Visiting Scholar at Virginia Tech.

Nathan McClain is the author of *Previously Owned* (2022) and *Scale* (2017), both from Four Way Books. He is a graduate from the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson and a Cave Canem fellow. He currently teaches at Hampshire College and serves as poetry editor for the *Massachusetts Review*.

Vanessa Angélica Villarreal is the author of the poetry collection *Beast Meridian*, and a recipient of a 2019 Whiting Award. She is a 2021 National Endowment for the Arts Fellow and lives with her son in Los Angeles, where she is a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California.

Moderator Opening Remarks & Housekeeping Announcements:

Welcome to our panel, “Beyond the Trauma Plot: Reframing Trauma Toward a Poetics of Justice.”

A few reminders before we begin:

- *For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, (identify moderator), know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.*
- *Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.*
- *Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.*
- *Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.*

I want to be mindful that the topics we’ll discuss today will be sensitive to some. I’d like for all of us to engage in a simple grounding technique before we begin. [Eugenia will guide the room in a grounding exercise.]

If at any point, you need to step out, close your eyes, stretch, or do anything else to ground yourself during our panel, please don’t hesitate to take care of yourself first. [Eugenia will introduce the panel and read participant bios]

Participant Readings + Remarks:

Eugenia Leigh:

In December 2021, a widely-shared New Yorker article called “The Case Against the Trauma Plot” criticized the recent overuse and prevalence of traumatic backstories for characters in fiction and in film. This piece triggered a Twitter discourse in the literary Twitter world, and while I tend not to engage directly with these sorts of public conversations, this particular discourse occurred only a couple of weeks prior to the publication of four new poems of mine: one about bipolar II disorder, one about

parenting and breaking cycles of abuse, and two with the words “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” literally spelled out in their titles.

The article distressed me not because I disagreed with it, but because I agreed with much of it. I came to writing the way many people do: it was my favorite coping mechanism. I wrote less for artistic purposes and more for therapeutic purposes. This kind of writing is valid, important, and life-saving. But not all of it is poetry.

I am a firm believer that writing about trauma is necessary community work. But at what point does writing about trauma become poetry? What tools can we use to reframe writing about personal or collective traumatic experiences not only to address a larger conversation, but also to address this conversation artfully? I will speak specifically about how my poems attempt to answer these questions when writing about mental illness and motherhood.

Paul Hlava Ceballos:

-Can only speak for myself.

-Did interview that bothered me—I only told part of my family story.

-About this poem. [Read Split, pg 76].

-In interview, I talked about mom’s family, but to avoid blaming anyone for the cruel ways she’s been treated as a woman and Ecuadorian immigrant with indigenous roots, I omitted other parts of my family.

-My father as white, with overt prejudices, as poem implies.

-My mistake in interview was sharing my relationship to oppressed but not with oppressor, that is to say that—esp regarding larger structural issues that my book researches, race, class, extraction of resources from global north to global south, of course gender—I am complicit. Inheritor of victim and abuser.

-To see only oneself in trauma means to not see others in their trauma. James Baldwin: *You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read.*

-Interested in trauma and healing as opportunities for connection.

-Craftwise, this means reading diverse authors. For me, it meant research to write poems based on historical events, using persona, and including other voices—polyvocality.

-First I want to recognize my own trauma.

-Second I want to recognize other people’s hurt and feel connected to them. Not the same, but connected. “At the end of my suffering there was a door.”

-If I want to heal—us to heal—I have to ask, how is our trauma inflicted by structural forces.

-Wonder if narrative obsession with trauma is related to myth of American individualism? To show trauma, economic or other, means to have overcome something, means success, no matter one’s current place in America’s hierarchy. “Started from the bottom now we’re here.”

-But I don't think anything in America is individual. Thomas Piketty: Wealth in America is moving to being primarily inherited. Over 40 million people living in poverty, just per the census. Race invention applied to people by Europe/Am for accumulation of land and wealth. Is communal/structural.

-My book focuses on ppl not recognized by archives: border elegies, banana laborers, my mother. Wants to show people affected by structural abuses but also show how they are not just victims, but have agency. "The other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees." Sontag

-To be seen by others recognizes their agency and my complicity. So I need their perspective, their voices in my writing.

-How banana workers fight on their own American corporations, land theft, without needing me, as a writer, or a person from the global north to champion them. They did this through relationships with each other, indigenous coalitions (CONAIE), banana unions, protests, strikes.

-Craft answer for me is polyvocality. Editing state docs, persona poems, collage.

-What allows space for other voices within text to speak for themselves.

-[Read banana worker's text, pg 60?].

Janine Joseph:

Janine Joseph's remarks will include a discussion of her newest book of poetry, *Decade of the Brain*, a collection that "illustrates for us how to build the self after immense trauma," as Sarah Gambito writes in her blurb. Regarding her craft, D.A. Powell writes that "Janine Joseph is a virtuoso of refraction and reflection, resisting metaphor in favor of immediate and vivid description in this remarkable account of a life-changing injury and the effort to recover memory, language, self. Formally inventive, these poems stay awake to the complexities of the human mind even in the midst of recovery from trauma, the way words are always slippery and elusive when we need them most to be solid objects."

Nathan McClain:

"And what / have you learned from / standing here so long / examining pain?" asks the opening poem of my second collection, *Previously Owned*, and that question reverberates not only throughout the collection, but through the entirety of my creative practice, which is rooted in the steadfast "looking" at difficult, and often, personal scenarios, instances, events, and memories. My brief panel remarks, therefore, will consider contemporary art, "Black bodies in pain," the notion of public spectacle, the commodification of trauma and grief, and the quest for justice. My remarks may reference Elizabeth Alexander and Phillip B. Williams, among others.

Vanessa Angélica Villarreal:

- Trauma as “plot” is a transaction
- Trauma as “craft” is a failure of the imagination
- Trauma as “content” is a limitation
- Trauma, by its very nature, cannot be monetized, and is an experience that exists in a pre-language realm; all we can do with it is unravel it
- The critique of the “trauma plot” is a reductive, reactionary reading of the very real and felt condition of living in an exploitative system, and shaming the very real and human impulse of sense-making in a senseless time
- Back to the Fucking Future is a trauma plot by these definitions
- To write through trauma is to go back and seek justice, whatever that looks like for you

A 10-15 minute audience Q&A will follow participant remarks.