**Event Title:** Biography: The Radical Work of Writing Lives

**Event Description:** “I’ve entered LA to anti-erase, which is the work of resistance,” writes Courtney Faye Taylor in *Concentrate*. This panel of poets and nonfiction writers considers biography as an act of anti-erasure, recovering lives that systems of power seek to efface. Panelists discuss biography’s ethics, challenges, and possibilities, including redefining “archives,” reconciling evidence, interpreting gaps, and reimagining genre conventions to do justice to a subject’s lived experience.

**Event Category:** Multiple Literary Genres Craft and Criticism

**Event Organizer & Moderator:**

**Morgan Graham** is an English PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota, where she studies auto|biography. Her work has been supported by the Women’s History Institute at Historic Hudson Valley. She is managing editor at Pleiades and has published work in *Chicago Review of Books* and elsewhere.

**Event Participants:**

**Eloisa Amezcua** is from Arizona. Her debut collection, *From the Inside Quietly*, is the inaugural winner of the Shelterbelt Poetry Prize selected by Ada Limón. A MacDowell fellow, her second collection of poems, *Fighting Is Like a Wife*, was published by Coffee House Press (April 2022).

**Iris Jamahl Dunkle** was the Poet Laureate of Sonoma County, CA. Books include *West : Fire : Archive* (The Center for Literary Publishing 2021) and her biography *Charmian Kittredge London: Trailblazer, Author, Adventurer* (UOP, 2020). She teaches at Napa Valley College and the Napa Valley Writers' Conf.

**Janice N. Harrington**’s latest books of poetry are *Primitive: The Art and Life of Horace H. Pippin* and, for children, *Hurry, Kate, or You'll Be Late!*. She teaches creative writing at the University of Illinois.

**Courtney Faye Taylor** is the author of *Concentrate* (Graywolf Press, 2022), selected by Rachel Eliza Griffiths as the winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize. *Concentrate* was named a finalist for the NAACP Image Awards, the Lambda Literary Awards, and the Society of Midland Authors Award.
OPENING REMARKS & HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Welcome, everyone, to this panel, “Biography: The Radical Work of Writing Lives.” A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know so I can give you a printed copy.
- 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.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- 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.

With that said, let’s go ahead and get started. I am overjoyed to be here with these four incredible writers to talk about biography. I’ll introduce each of them and then give some opening remarks to frame our conversation today.

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota, where I research biographies written by and about women. My research has led me to believe that biographies that are not about straight, cis-, white men are radical. They are radical because they depart from the centuries-long tradition of writing biographies by and about white men, and because they tell stories of subjects whose lives have not been well-documented, or that systems of power have actively sought to erase.

Biography can be a powerful tool for complicating and correcting the historical record. All four of these writers do this in their work. Their poetry and nonfiction demonstrate that biography can be adapted across literary genres, and that by innovating with the tools of biography, writers can seek to do justice to their subjects’ lives. I hope that whether you are an avid reader of biography or about to start writing your own, this panel will spark your thinking about the challenges and possibilities of biography and how you might reimagine genre conventions to infuse humanity and complexity into human stories.
Now, I’ll turn the time over to our panelists to introduce their work, after which we will discuss five prepared questions. We’ll have about 10 or 15 minutes at the end for a Q&A, so if questions arise during our discussion, please hold onto them to ask during the Q&A.

**PARTICIPANT OPENING REMARKS:**

**Eloisa Amezcua:**

- My first encounter with the story of Bobby Chacon
- Background on Bobby Chacon
  - biographical
  - boxing career
- Background on Valorie Ginn
  - biographical
- Context for Bobby & Val's relationship
- Reading of "Predicament"

**Iris Jamahl Dunkle:**

When I was young, I knew almost immediately that I wanted to be a writer. But while I was growing up in the 1970s and 80s in rural, Northern California, I was rarely assigned women writers to read in class. Having grown up in the West, I’ve always been drawn to writers who wrote about the West. So, when I was assigned books by Jack London, John Steinbeck, and William Stenger, I was mesmerized by how they wrote about the land on which I lived. Judging by their depictions of the West, as well as those presented in film and on television, however, someone like me, a woman, had little to do with the West, and we certainly had never received much acclaim for writing about it.

My Grandmother grew up in the panhandle of Oklahoma and she and her family were forced to leave their farm when dust storms destroyed their crops. It was a tough journey, one that would scar my grandmother with its trauma for the rest of her life. My grandmother was proud of her survival, but she didn’t want to talk about it, and she most certainly didn’t want others to tell her story for her, incorrectly.

When I was in high school, we were assigned John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. After I read it, I rushed home to call my grandmother to tell her about it. “Grandma, did you know they wrote a book about us?” Do you know what
For a long time, I was confused by my grandmother’s reaction. Why was she so upset about this great author’s work? How had Steinbeck gotten it wrong? In my schooling up to that point, I had been trained to prioritize the published fictional account written by Steinbeck (a man) over my grandmother’s firsthand (and of course more accurate) real life experience. I had no idea how right my grandmother’s reaction was.

When I first stumbled upon and read Sanora Babb’s novel, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, a book she wrote about Dust Bowl refugees in the late 1930s while she was volunteering with the Farm Security Association that ran the camps, I was overwhelmed with emotion. I found mention of her book while I was watching Ken Burn’s award-winning documentary, *The Dust Bowl* where he features extensive excerpts from Babb’s notes and reports and showcases Babb’s unique knowledge about the Dust Bowl and its victims. Burns introduces Babb as someone who, like the refugees, had grown up in the affected area (No Man’s Land). Due to this, she was deeply committed to “establish a trust and respect” with the refugees “that extended both ways.”

Here was a story that humanized the experiences of those who had suffered through the worst natural disaster America had ever faced. A version where we got to know the characters before the worst days of their lives when they had to flee to California to find work. Where we saw the lives of women and children through their own eyes. And where we saw Black and Filipino workers in the fields and organizing strikes side by side with the whites. Here was a story that told a version of the Dust Bowl story that aligned with the one my grandmother had told me.

Babb was a writer who reported the human truth. As her friend, the poet Ann Sanford wrote about her work, she “represents the truth about life, even in its rough beauty.” Soon after I finished reading *Whose Names Are Unknown*, I became fascinated with Babb and knew that she had to be my next biographical subject. I decided to write my first biography, *Charmian Kittredge London: Trailblazer, Author, Adventurer*, about Jack London’s wife, an amazing woman who’d disregarded gender norms, when I found out that she had helped write many of her husband’s novels and had never been given credit for her work. My biography was used as a source for a remodel of the museum at Jack London
State Historic Park, housed in Charmian’s previous home, The House of Happy Walls. Now, when young girls visit the park they will be introduced to two writers: Jack London and Charmian Kittredge London. This physical representation of my work has motivated me to commit my career to unearthing the stories of women that have been forgotten or misremembered. The more I learn, the more I research, the more I realize how many women have been erased.

Janice N. Harrington:

I’ve published three biographies: *Primitive: The Art and Life of Horace H. Pippin*, a biography in poems about a World War I soldier and the premier African American folk artist of the 1930s and 1940s, and two children’s biographies, one about Charles H. Turner, a pioneering Black entomologist, and another about Charles S. Parker, an African American botanist and biology professor.

In writing *Primitive*, rather than attempting a pure biography, I shaped a hybrid text. I wrote poems based on biographical and historical facts, but the book is always, always a work of imagination: I use magic realism to speculate on what might have happened, and write ekphrastic poems that use Pippin’s paintings to comment broadly on his emotional life and the racial history of the 30s and 40s, and to reach beyond facts (for example a poem about a picture that Pippin, who died in 1946, painted of Barack Obama). Several poems break the biographical frame and show connections between Pippin’s life and my own.

Is *Primitive* a biography in poems? Yes. But it is not a rote retelling. For readers seeking historical information about Pippin, the book provides epigraphs, timelines, and extensive backmatter, but I approached the poems not as a historian or a journalist but always as a poet. *Primitive* is a poetic interpretation of the life and art of Horace H. Pippin using his art, war diaries, autobiography, and a variety of archival sources.

Courtney Faye Taylor:

- my general work and interests: Black girlhood/womanhood, both historically and contemporarily. A conversation with the past and present.
- how I came to the subject of Latasha Harlins and the LA uprising
- using hybrid form to navigate the lives of other Black women/girls, in order to tell/understand my life
• share one poem from the collection

**Moderator Questions and Responses:**

1. *How do you define biography? Is it possible to recreate a life?*

   **Iris Jamahl Dunkle:**
   - GREEK: Bios ‘life’ graphia ‘writing’
   - Biography is the story of a person told by someone else.
   - A story because it is a narrative, not a list of facts.
   - A biography can have multiple authors and it can be about something other than a human being: cities, deities, or diseases, Virginia Woolf wrote a biography about Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dog Flush
   - Biography is like an autopsy, posthumous scrutiny.
   - The subject of a biography, like that of a portrait, should seem to be alive, breathing, present in all totality, there-ness, and authenticity of their being.
   - In the past biography has privileged the already known. This goes back to the definition of archive in ancient Greek - Arkhe. Modern biography can be revolutionary - can take back the voices that have been silenced or misremembered.

2. *What challenges or unsolvable problems have you faced in trying to recover lost lives?*

   **Eloisa Amezcua:**
   - No amount of research will paint the full picture of someone's life or every aspect of someone's life
     - Bobby’s public-facing career meant there is a specific type of context in which to situate other aspects of his life
     - Very little in the public record about Valorie Ginn
   - The difference between biography and other genres, specifically poetry
     - Where is there overlap between the two and where do they differ
     - What creative liberties will you allow yourself to take; how will you justify these (first to yourself, then to the reader)
3. **What archives have you drawn on your projects? What strategies do you use when archival evidence you’re looking for comes up short or does not exist?**

**Courtney Faye Taylor:**
- discussing the books, films, sources I used to write *Concentrate*, how one text led me to another, organic nature of creative research
- writing into the gaps, using questions, embracing the lack in archives

4. **How have you erased yourself from the portrait that you’ve built of your biographical subject? Is the author’s self-portrait always inside of the biography?**

**Janice Harrington:**
Did I erase myself from Pippin’s portrait? No. Historical research, archives, biographical detail . . . and yet . . . *Primitive* still reflects the thinking of one particular twenty-first century middle-class Black woman. For example let’s look at one poem, “Shrapnel”:

```plaintext
SHRAPNEL
Serrated / steel,
Ballistic / trajectories,
Death //
As small as // a splinter.

Pieces /
Too small / to cull,
Cut free, or count.

Half / men / half / metal,
Perfect twentieth-century/ machines
```

Pippin and the Black soldiers of World War I would never have thought of themselves as machines. They were determined to prove that they were men and that they had the courage to face the enemy. They felt incredible pride. The Black poetry of World War I is patriotic, celebratory, and filled with racial uplift and pride. My poems reflect a life removed from war, influenced by American wars from the 1960s through our own present.
Choosing what parts of Pippin’s biography to highlight, what relationships to present, what sources to use or omit—all those decisions make me the ghost, the Wizard of Oz behind the biographical curtain.

Re-reading *Primitive*, I sometimes feel as if Pippin slipped past my words and images. I see the poet and what the poet constructed from Pippin’s life. But what I most wanted I did accomplish: to change the meaning of “primitive” and rewrite it with irony, and to build a bridge of words to Pippin’s art and life and the work of other under-known African American artists.

5. *What are the ethics of entering or writing about a life that is outside your own?*

**Q&A SESSION:**

At the end of the event, there will be time for a 10-15-minute Q&A session.