AWP EVENT OUTLINE

EVENT TITLE
Embracing the Body: A Journey of Illness and Celebration

EVENT DESCRIPTION
Throughout our lives, we encounter various health challenges and gender expectations on our bodies that test our physical and emotional well-being. However, there is beauty to be found in celebrating our bodies. This panel of poets shares and discusses poetry of resilience and celebration of our bodies to find meaning and perspective. The panel explores the transformative power of writing that honors the courage it takes to embrace the diversity of our bodies.

EVENT CATEGORY
Readings

EVENT ORGANIZER AND MODERATOR
Maria Miranda Maloney


EVENT PARTICIPANTS

Laura Cesarco Eglin

Laura Cesarco Eglin is a poet and translator from Uruguay. She is the author of six collections of poetry, including the chapbooks *Between Gone and Leaving—Home* (dancing girl press, 2023) and *Time/Tempo: The Idea of Breath* (PRESS 254, 2022). Her poems and translations (from the Spanish, Portuguese, Portuñol, and Galician), have appeared in many journals such as *Asymptote, Figure 1, Eleven Eleven, Puerto del Sol, Copper Nickel, SRPR, Arsenic Lobster, International Poetry Review, Tupelo Quarterly, Columbia Poetry Review, Timber*, and more. Cesarco Eglin is the translator of *Claus and the Scorpion* by the Galician author Lara Dopazo Ruibal (co•im•press, 2022), longlisted for both the 2023 PEN Award in Poetry in Translation and the 2023 National Translation Award in Poetry. She is also the translator of *Of Death. Minimal Odes* by the Brazilian author Hilda Hilst (co•im•press), which was the winner of the 2019 Best Translated Book Award. Cesarco Eglin is the publisher of Veliz Books and teaches creative writing at the University of Houston-Downtown.
Elisa A. Garza

Elisa A. Garza is a poet and editor from Houston, Texas, with family roots in South Texas. Her full-length collection, Regalos, is forthcoming in 2025 from Lamar University Literary Press and was a finalist for the National Poetry Series. Her most recent chapbook, Between the Light / entre la claridad is in a second edition from Mouthfeel Press. Elisa has been awarded a Literature Fellowship from the Texas Commission on the Arts and the Emerging Writer Award from the Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Foundation. Before her cancer diagnosis, she taught writing, literature, and ethnic studies to students from elementary through senior citizens in public schools, universities, and community programs.

Katherine Hoerth

Katherine Hoerth is the author of five poetry collections, including Flare Stacks in Full Bloom (Texas Review Press, 2022), which won the 2023 Summerlee Book Prize. She is the recipient of the 2021 Poetry of the Plains Prize from North Dakota State University Press for Prairie Madness (North Dakota State University Press, 2021) and the 2015 Helen C. Smith Prize from the Texas Institute of Letters for the best book of poetry in Texas for Goddess Wears Cowboy Boots (Lamar University Literary Press, 2014). Her work has been published in numerous literary magazines including Literary Imagination (Oxford University Press), Valparaiso Review, and Southwestern American Literature. She is an associate professor at Lamar University and director of Lamar University Literary Press. She is currently working on a new poetry manuscript exploring infertility, pregnancy, and motherhood through an ecofeminist lens.

Carolina Monsiváis

Originally from El Paso, Texas, Carolina Monsiváis is a poet and historian currently residing in McAllen, Texas. She is a founding organizing member of Poets and Against Walls and is also a member of the Macondo Writers’ Workshop. She is the author of the poetry collections Somewhere Between Houston and El Paso (Wings Press) and Descent (Mouthfeel Press). Monsiváis is a graduate of New Mexico State University (MFA) and the University of Texas at El Paso (PhD). In August 2023, she joined the history department as an Assistant Professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

OPENING REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ITEMS

Each panelist brings a different perspective, writing the cancerous body in fusion with nature, writing about infertility from the ecofeminist perspective, writing about the body as a home for the speaker of many languages living far from the homeland, and writing about the body as a vessel for personal, political, and historical grief. By sharing our writing and insights, we hope to foster connection and support within communities.
PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS

Laura Cesaro Eglin: The body is an integral part of the self. It’s the patriarchy that has naturalized opposing the body to the soul or the mind, and, in fact, the body is usually relegated to the part with less value of the two elements in this binary. But language, my obsession and my everything, is expressed through the body, it is a bodily experience, just as much as it is part of my mind. How can you write, speak, express yourself without the body? And also, how to explore this world, the self, others, without the body? Impossible.

Elisa A. Garza: My writing project has been a way to process my illness, an aggressive breast cancer diagnosis and two recurrences over years of non-stop treatment. I started writing about this by using the sonnet form to contain my emotional response during the writing process but stretched the boundaries of the sonnet to better highlight the imagery and rhythms of cancer treatment side effects. Another part of my coping with illness and treatment and recurrence has been a daily walk along the local bayou, which led me to write sonnets and poems that fused my body’s response to cancer with observations of what was happening in the natural world, pushing my work into ecofeminist and postcolonial themes.

Katherine Hoerth: The old feminist adage of “the personal is political” has fueled my most recent poetry. We live in the age of the Anthropocene, so the destruction and the degradation of the environment is in the forefront of both my writing and my mind. Personally, the past decade of my life has been filled with the tension between infertility and fertility, the “natural” body and the “medicalized” body, nature vs. science. In 2022, I underwent IVF treatments, the first of which resulted in only nonviable embryos. The second resulted in my newborn son. He is the result of ineffable struggle, loss, and ultimately, joy. It’s undeniable that the female body has further been politicized in the post-Roe era. Our cultural discourse is terrible at talking about infertility, miscarriage, abortion—these subjects are taboo, but they’re also a reality for so many people. My recent poetry addresses that taboo and sheds light on my personal experience within this complex political discourse to humanize these difficult journeys and create beauty from truth.

Carolina Monsiváis: For this project, I am intertwining two parts of myself, the poet and the historian, in order to write a poetic history of both my grief over losing my brother to suicide and of how I remember him. The process includes looking within and even around to find snippets of his life. In this way both the body and home become an archive. As I make my way through the writing, I realize that within that other losses also became entangled. Such as, histories of violence, displacement, or even triumph that were ignored or erased.

MODERATOR QUESTION

How can one navigate the challenge of celebrating life and the body during illness to maintain a positive outlook and foster resilience?
RESPONSE OF EACH PARTICIPANT TO MODERATOR QUESTIONS

Laura Cesarco Eglin:

We are always resisting, and our bodies are part of this resistance. Also, I find that poetry is how I participate in the world, in society, and it’s with my physical body and with poetry as a body that I think and live. Illness is something that happens in our bodies, but our minds participate in that too, of course. But also, we can’t divorce what happens in our bodies with the place and the society we live in. For example, having melanoma and other kinds of cancer, or any illness is tied to the way we live, stress, the grind culture, unhealthy food available, corporations and countries contributing to the climate crisis, violence, etc. Amidst all that, I am here, in my bodies (physical and poetry) to experience it, to question values, conceptions, etc. and to live differently. That’s the beauty of our bodies, they never shut up.

Elisa A. Garza:

That is the challenge, to see a damaged body as one with potential, especially when I have labeled it as a betrayer from the start, as in the first poem that I read, “The Body Betrays.” One positive has been the opportunity to slow down, to experience one day at a time and to experience the small joys that you don’t always notice in the business of life. When I was working on this project, and thinking about how to end or close off this group of poems, I saw the last poem I read, “Without End,” as a way to start celebrating, because in this poem, the immune system has an opportunity to redeem itself by restoring its function, returning to the work that it failed to do when my cancer began.

After two and a half years of cancer treatment, it is a relief to view a future, even a short one, without treatment, and hopefully without cancer. I am currently on a break from treatment that will hopefully be extended. On my regular schedule, I would be at treatment right now. Cancer is always there, could still be there, but I can celebrate now, no treatment, no cancer right now. My celebration is to be alive, in a body that mostly still works, with a mind that enables me to write and connect with others who are seeking to cope with similar health struggles.

Katherine Hoerth:

In infertility circles, we have a saying: “Showing up is hope enough.” When you’re in the thick of it, it’s impossible sometimes to celebrate your body when you feel like it’s let you down in such a fundamental way. Keeping hopeful and positive just doesn’t feel genuine. This is a sentiment I try to imbue in my poetry.
Carolina Monsiváis:

I focus on rituals and practice in order to move through the pain and transform it. By drawing from this loss and histories of loss, I am hoping to illuminate how there is strength in our ability to grieve and remember. There is a sense of empowerment in being able to take control of a narrative where they were either told they did not belong or were simply omitted.
LEARNING TO LIVE

Of all that which I forgot and forget
and has forgotten me in return
what hurts the most is
how to feel and recognize
when I am actually feeling.

Somewhere it’s still tangled
like seaweed conjures itself up
plural: every time it’s algae.

It’s easy when I see the red and feel
the wet gush out of my sliced thumb,
just a bit, just enough
to show me it hurts and I press
my thumb hard because streaming
is so close to too much and too soon.

But feelings aren’t instant. They take
so long to be and sometimes
it is over 24 hours, one day and its dream,
to know that something is flowing out
inside and by then it’s so thick and wild
flooding is inevitable. It’s difficult
to be ready, to know what to do, to not
have time to articulate into the right
words that I know are drowning and drown
any return of what just happened, what might
continue to come out alive.
A VOICED LABIODENTAL FRICATIVE FOR LOVE

Say the word just right
where the teeth in all tenderness
sink softly into the inner side
of the lower lip and hold
while vibration moves rooted statements
from their beds. Mornings
are the beginnings most clear
for you to leave your mouth
slightly open just as you practice
sliding your teeth from their landing
place with the end of a word on
the tip of silence
brimming until it bursts your tongue.

from the chapbook *Life, One Not Attached to Conditionals* (Thirty West Publishing House, 2020)

MELANOMA’S LINES

I’m afraid to touch the new
scar, in case it deepens
or hurts me as much
as cancer did.

I practice getting closer—
the art of trying
becomes training, and I become
persistent or brave, and you
call it stubborn. But I know
how to listen to what’s not ready,
too raw for open to be welcoming:
I was opened with a knife and felt
blood run over my chest.
Run-over—the feeling
of emotional exhaustion
as a side effect of too much.

I smelled myself being burned.
Cauterized, they said, as if I
didn’t know how to detect euphemisms.

One scar, then another;
that’s two lines already:
a couplet written in five months,
a couplet that promises
to be the beginning of a lifetime
of poetry.

MELANOMA: THE POLITICS OF MY SKIN

One moment of quiet and I’ll be
able to think about stitches
without my skin crawling out
from under me, away,
like leather on my body,
as if it were not itself
a body that feels and is so vocal.
I have not learned that language enough
to call myself
a native speaker: I haven’t lived there all my life—
there is still apart, and what is my life but this
here: skin, mine, having its revolution,
demanding a seat at the table
and talking as equals, as different and part,
as necessary
as alive.

GROWING OLD AS WELCOME

*The wrinkles of the ocean* move like those on your face because they’re real. You are you and the years it took to get here, knowing that *the horizon curdles*. But if instead it’s oranges that you look like, we wouldn’t be talking about lines; we’d talk about the places where the poem nests. All this to say that you and the ocean and oranges are necessary to keep the horizon from being a dead straight line.

* Phrases in italics are from Maureen Thorson’s *Applies to Oranges* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2011)

I also read the following poems that have not been published:

- OF BONES AND OTHER ASPIRATIONS
- ATTEMPTS AT MEASURING
- SHORT OF BREATH
Elisa A. Garza:

The Body Betrays

One cell starts humming off key,  
just enough, then others join,  
soon a chorus of vibrations,  

a fresh voice, and the body listens.  

Oh so subtly, the new choir,  
their debut song, persuades, persuades.  

Singing softly, they settle and they grow  
in number, in harmony. They belong.  

Emboldened, cells roam, move beyond  
the cluster in their concert hall,  
teaching others new sounds,  

colonizing, spreading song into lymph,  
creating a vascular tune  
unchallenged. This, you see, is how.  

first appeared in The Bayou Review  
Elisa A. Garza

Relationship Status: Complicated

This poem has not been published.  
Elisa A. Garza
Radiation Bestiary

This poem has not been published.
Elisa A. Garza

Seeking

If I were to hike
the bloody trails of my body
like a conservation biologist,
seeking invasive species
to mark, would I see
beyond the scarred holes
of previous uproots?
The empty cave
of my womb is too dry
for anything to grow again,
but the flattened and scorched
clearing of my right breast
is a fresh mar on the landscape.
How can I locate the roots
of the cancer that grows
deep under the loamy flesh,
beyond the burn’s reach?
Like a fungus
that abides in the soil,
following minute pathways,
leaching into crevices
of least resistance,
undetected,
my cancer waits,
my cancer watches,
ready to tendril into new
untouched regions
of my body, to integrate
into the landscape
until removing it
will require sacrificing
many native species.
first appeared in *Rogue Agent*
Elisa A. Garza

**The Least**

This poem has not been published.
Elisa A. Garza

**Without End**
The idea of the infinite I use in this poem is an idea expressed by the poet ire’ne lara silva.

This poem has not been published.
Elisa A. Garza
Katherine Hoerth:

The Grapefruit Tree
February 2021, Rio Grande Valley

I feel the phantom heaviness of her
tugging at my branches, though it’s been
weeks since she and all her sisters fell.

The memory is frost-blurred in my roots:
the shock of polar wind between my leaves,
the crystalizing ice, the branches’ ache,
and then the loosening, the letting go,
the sudden thump, the weightlessness that followed.

How can I go on? Impossible.
I sit with this, the scent of so much loss
lingering through March as rinds and fruit
become a heap of humus at my roots.
This should be the season of their growing,
round like bellies, swelling ruby red,
peels becoming golden in the summer,
each fruit a universe of seeds and tartness,

all fallen to the frozen ground this season
at the hands of February’s freeze.
And there are groves of us, of grapefruit trees,
weeping in silence in the aftermath,
brittle and brown, refusing spring’s amends.
This fall, we’ll offer nothing for the harvest.

The gulf breeze urges me to rise again
from this bed, to bathe in morning sunlight,
dress in emerald leaves, and spritz myself
with the dulcet scent of citrus blossoms.

How can I do that, God—to try again
with such a weight still heavy in my heartwood?
Carolina Monsiváis:

(Will be published in the Coming year)
To Remain in the Borderlands

“Living in the borderlands means you fight hard to…
Resist the pull of the gun barrel
The rope crushing the hollow of your throat.”
   Gloria Anzaldua

I.

Living in the borderlands meant mujeres
sold swallows of mescal in defiance
of dry laws. It meant officers with dried
blood clinging to boots sharpened edges
gathered in groups and pushed through
the doors holding warrants with misspelled
names. They scuffed through homes
filled with men’s absence after breath
was crushed from throats and slights
imagined or invented postmortem
were snuffed with a grin, a gun, or
a rope.

II.

The poet wonders at such directness,
say it slant. Do not share an obvious
story of threads woven into ropes
used to murder men, change history.

The historian asks, what is the issue here?
It happened. All the slanting and angling

coated this teleological history
of democracy and triumph with dust.

Light enough to brush aside and ignore.
Histories remain hidden in wall spaces,

under beds, beneath homes. Can a poet
even use teleological in a poem?

III.

To live in the borderlands means we must
resist the narrative that nature designed itself

for some men’s great fortunes, to be divided
where borders exist and render us foreign

again and again. Resist the story that threads
naturally wove themselves into ropes that

bullets eased into brown bodies and
hollowed screams, breaths and stories.

We fight to resist the silence haunting
crushed throats, where voice perches

and love’s touch should signal the
closing of eyes, the relaxed tilting

of head. I wonder how did my grandfather
who traversed the border’s length resist

the rope, when my brother could not
break the gun barrel’s gaze?

IV.

To remain in the borderlands means
we must resist gifting them our last

words our absence or the forgetting
of ropes tightening. These are not our

last breath or days here. In the borderlands
we gathered ourselves and crushed

splayed glass covering the floor
of a gutted hotel. A ranger’s rotting

monument. Walls that witnessed last
breaths heave against overgrown trees

display scrawled graffiti and the words
“Fuck Trump.” Everywhere monuments
topple. These are not our last breaths or
days here. Our remembering tightens around
this teleological master narrative.

It gasps last screams
fears its last days

without a rope
or even the threat of guns.